

Open Door

magazine

Portals to
Infinity

NEW AUTHORS

**FROST &
FIRELIGHT**

SICKLE

MOON

THANK YOU!

Welcome to our WINTER ISSUE! Frost & Firelight seamlessly melds two contrasting yet enchanting facets of this season: the invigorating chill of frost, symbolizing cleansing, and the comforting warmth and safety emanating from a crackling fire. Interpretations of the prompt vary widely, spanning from internal turmoil to a direct observation of the outside world. Some gravitated solely towards the allure of the fire, while others embraced the icy touch of frost. There were also those writers who immersed themselves in both elements simultaneously. What does Frost & Firelight evoke for you? And as always, remember... "YOUR WORDS MATTER!"

Thank you for continuing to share our magazine with your friends and family and allowing our audience to keep growing. We are so incredibly thankful for each one of you!

Kassie & Mel



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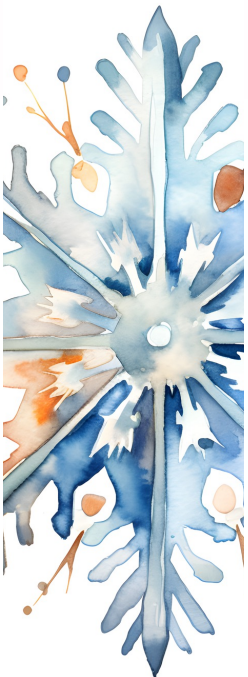
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Frost & Firelight



FROST & FIRELIGHT

Maria Thérèse Williams
United Kingdom

<https://www.facebook.com/RoamingReflections>

https://www.instagram.com/roaming_reflections

<https://www.youtube.com/MariaGrooves>

I bask in the hug of my woolen blanket
And absorb the glow from the firelight
The crispness of the frost awakens my thoughts
And the warmth from the flames help them thaw

The trees, unclothed, seem to gather around
They feel no shame to be bare in front of me
They seem to breathe in the warmth of the flames
Whilst reserving judgement on my thoughts

The flames dance as if hypnotherapy
And the frost near their feet melts away
Sparks from the fire join the stars in the sky
And I bask in the beauty of the day.



SNOWSCAPE

Adrienne Stevenson
Ottawa, Canada

<https://twitter.com/ajs4t>

<https://adriennestevenson.ca/>

<https://www.facebook.com/adriennestevensonwriter/>

mercury hovers around freezing point
days grow shorter as the sun recedes

in undecided winter light
mist can't make up its mind

to be snow or rain, frost or dew
chill wind whips, mist coalesces

snowflakes the size of locusts
blaze out of the streetlight

cloud around cars and trucks
like swarms of angry bees

alight softly like fireflies, sparkle
as they touch the frozen road

long, longer dark blue shadows
stretch
across golden fields of snow

closer, dimples and pocks
make tiny moguls for elfin skiers

delicate ice devils dance wildly
on greying road surface—hell is cold
indeed

human cocoons huddled in firelight
await a signal to release emergent
souls

—it won't arrive for many months

THE COMING OF WINTER

Christian Ward
London, United Kingdom

When the sky turns
the colour of glowing coals,
the leaves are cover models
showing off shades of pomegranate,
beetroot, pumpkin and terracotta,
and everything is planning
on emerging as a spring postcard,
this is not the time to be a blank page.
Embrace the silence of frost,
the language of snow. Make every
wintery landscape your play.
Be the flame in the hearth. Let all
embrace the warmth as the light dims
and the days shrink and shrink and shrink.

WINTER DEER

Judy DeCroce
New York, United States

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BCSC7GZD?ref=cm_sw_r_cp_ud_dp_NK26XGC7WEC6KB0C99E0

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/judydecroce/>

by the softer snow
stepping gently then more surely

moving shadows darken
pulsing in the wind

see how they walk bending
avoiding what may be hidden

and from the window we catch a stare
a pause

their eyes through the greyness
still, we don't envy each other

it means very little
interrupting the wild





FROST
Neal Whitman
California, United States

tucked under a quilt
by firelight we take turns
reciting R. Frost

GONE MISSING
Carl "Papa" Palmer
Washington, United States

<https://www.facebook.com/carlpapa.palmer.1>

As the new day awaits its morning sun,
the blank page for my poem also waits.


In stillness I listen for an inner voice,
only to hear a deep silence in my soul.

Ends end from where beginnings begin,
but before I can end it I have to begin it.

All I need is that one elusive key word
to massage this pain of self-made hell,

this page containing only a promise of
what may be worthy to be called poetry.

As the sun sets, my page and I sit,
still waiting for what's gone missing.



THE NIGHT I MET CHUCK MOULTON

Stephen Barile

Fresno, California, United States

"A grizzly bear with bad teeth who rode a motorcycle."

~Jon Veinberg

Well after dark, the sky was brighter
Against the shadows in the woods.

We stood around staring into the fire,
Drinking beer from aluminum cans

Dave kept cool in the creek nearby.
We took turns walking down there,

Retrieving a couple of cold ones.
Dave wanted to see if Chuck, the poet,

His friend from the Tower District
Was camping up here, near the road.

We walked in a mysterious night.
The mountain stars lit our path

In the Ponderosa and Cedar forest
Fixed and motionless in the dark.

We passed the first of flat ground,
A stand of trees, a water spigot,

And a Forest Service outhouse.
We walked downhill on the dirt road

Near the fringe of a meadow of sedges.
The second flat, and *burnt-earth* area

Where migrating Indigenous people
Had campfires over the centuries

Traversing the Sierra to trade.
Near the horse corral, and third flat,

In the dark background of trees,
A Promethean bonfire lit the blackness.

A holy fire, purifying and wrathful.
A pile of wood to feed the craving.

The silhouette of a European motorcycle,
Somebody was leaning against it.

As we got closer, Dave yelled out.
Chuck jumped up and acknowledged us.

His loud, low, and menacing gruff voice.
Great big, with a long bushy moustache,

Coke-bottle glasses mirrored the flames
While he drank whiskey from a metal cup.

His motorcycle reflected the flames
From the chrome exhaust-pipe.

Three of us stood before his campfire,
When he was the first to speak:

"Hell is full of fire," he said,
As if he had firsthand familiarity.

"In Dante's *Inferno*, Hell is icy cold,
Saved for the worst sinners."

We declined several offers to share
The whiskey he called "hooch."

And he told us firefighting stories,
Of great conflagration in the woods.

Heroic struggles to fight flames
With a chain-saw, shovel and *Pulaski*.

"Indigenous people used wildland fire,
Naturally caused or otherwise,

To encourage growth in oak trees,
To increase their food supply of acorns."

Pops and snaps from burning snags
Were projectiles; red-hot smoking embers.

Continued →

THE NIGHT I MET CHUCK MOULTON continued...

"Fire is the breath of life," he said.
The smoke seemed to be following me.

"An expression of spiritual energy.
All things derive from and return to fire.

For the purification and destruction
Of evil forces."

He knew who he was.
Midnight, we headed back for Dave's camp.

All of Chuck's *hooch* was gone,
The wood pile diminished considerably.

Shooting stars were falling in the sky.
Starlight had grown brighter

Like the *mother-of-pearl* buttons
On the fringe of a Native woman's gown

As she danced around the campfire,
Reflecting the firelight.



BEAUTIFUL WINTER SCENE

Mark Hudson
United States

On the day after my birthday,
the sky was cold and gray.
Cold enough for winter clothes,
but we haven't yet had much snow.

I looked outside my window,
and noticed people below.
A scene like Norman Rockwell,
a vision so pleasant for me to tell.

On the ground as I looked down,
was a mother and child on the ground.
The child himself was rather young,
young enough to think it was fun.

The mother was showing him love,
by bending down and putting on gloves.
On tiny little hands, very small,
the mother bent down; she was tall.

She kneeled on the sidewalk,
to put on gloves and I would gawk.
Seeing this precious moment of living,
reminded me of upcoming Thanksgiving.

To me, this scene brought me joy,
this mother caring for this little boy.
Was I once like this kid before?
My mother is not on Earth no more.

I live on my own, perhaps it is best,
I'm too old to create a new nest.
But I'm in love with the human race,
everybody out there has a face.

Is it too late to stop all the hate?
Can love return to all who wait?
Now is the time to create a new fate.

ICARUS' CHIN
Nadine Hitchiner
Germany

<https://www.instagram.com/nadinehitchiner.writer>
<https://twitter.com/nadinekwriter>
<https://www.cathexisnorthwestpress.com/product-page/practising-ascending>

Morning begins unevenly:
love for love, fire by fire,

on which
my hands glass-blow

their Arctic bulb -
from where
I see Icarus'

chin. My indifference told
to one more cully:

once, my girlhood leaned in
on the train and asked:

"quicksilver, cadmium,
or gas?"—noon begins
much like

bees that bumble,
only when there is rain.

Only, that the rain's hereditary
to itself and if not,

it is ekphrastic
to the flame.

IN THE EYES OF A FIREPLACE
Duane Anderson
La Vista, Nebraska, United States

Here I am, sitting in your family room,
just waiting my time to be useful again,
waiting for spring and summer to end
and for the colder days to arrive,

that time of the year when you
open the doors to my mouth,
placing firewood on my teeth,
while opening my chimney flu,

for even though I enjoy a good smoke,
I don't want to disrupt your enjoyment
as you sit inside, but at the same time,
wanting to let the world know that I exist

as my smoke travels up my chimney
and outside for others to enjoy its fragrance.
My flame, a picture for your eyes as it flickers.
My flame, eager to keep you warm.

Keep me lit each evening
as I entertain you,
you and I, two good friends
enjoying our winter intimacy together.



MY PAL GUS

Michael Ball

United States

<https://michaelball.com/>

God's pumpkins, a plethora of poultry,
and my pet goose hailed from a farm
at Foxes Hollow. I named my goose
Gus, after Cinderella's mouse friend.

Granddad figured rightly I'd like a goose.
His chums down to Foxes Hollow raised
cows and pigs and many feathered edibles
— hundreds of turkeys and ducks and
thousands of chickens, none of which
shut up and all of which left filth during
each walk and after every squawk.
But Gus was a charming, soft singleton.

Our in-town gardens were not adequate
for pumpkins overwatered for bragging
rights, not pies, gourds round as those
who frequent all-you-can-eat buffets.

The farmers found it fitting a friend's
grandson should get a pet goose, as
their own sons had. We made a deal.
I'd feed and care for Gus all summer
then bring him to the farm in fall,
when I returned from my distant city.
Come Thanksgiving, I'd visit and play
with my fuzzy-become-feathery friend.

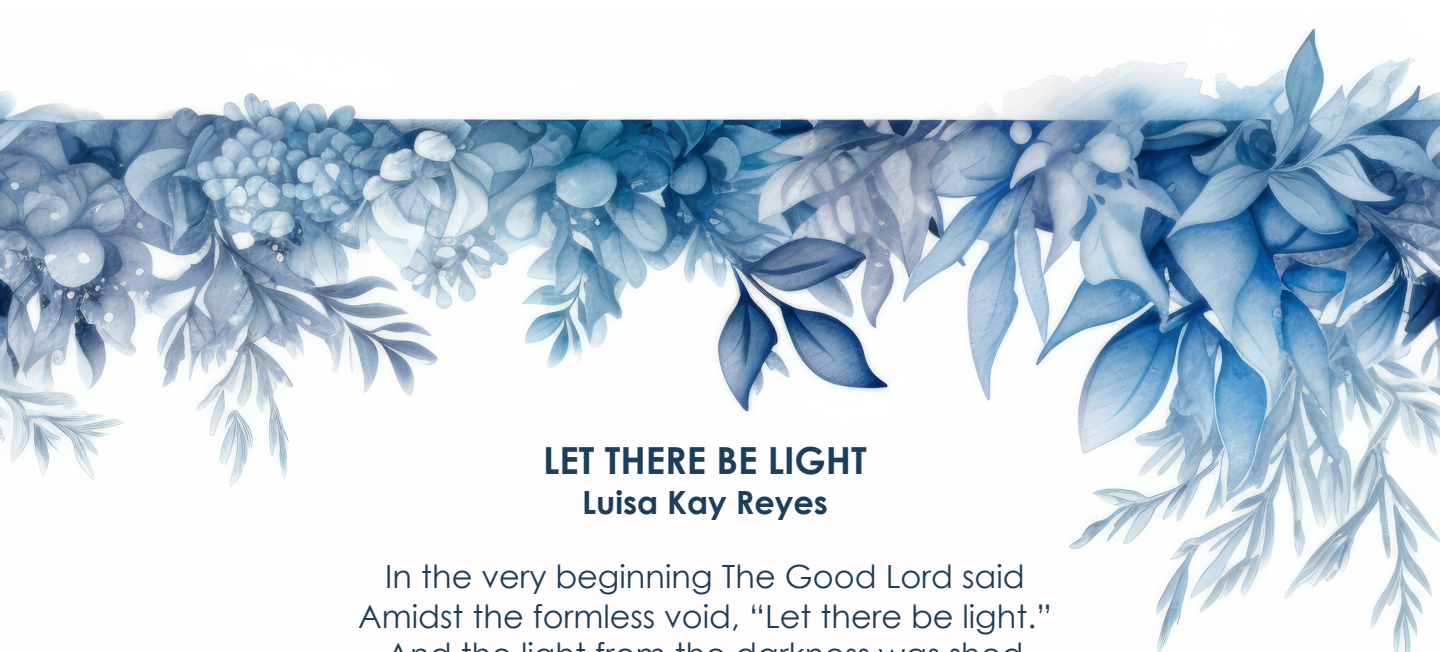
Gus was a Disney cartoon, following me,
the guy who talked to, fed and stroked him.
His endearing mannerism was tilting
his yellow head, honking once while
looking at me through the closest eye.



I last saw Gus, bobbling his too plump
body on splayed webbed feet, as fast
as he could go, chasing Granddad's Ford.
He didn't even come close to the bumper.
There was enough sense of betrayal
to go around for both boy and bird.

I was little-boy sad as he chased me,
but still eager to see full-grown Gus
come the next school vacation. Then,
with the last fields of dried corn stalks
standing, soon to be cut into silage, frost
and November arrived. Reunion too.

When Granddad called to plan a visit,
the farmer was surprised but chipper.
That old man noted cheerfully that
Gus (he recalled and used his name)
had provided the family a fine feast —
big enough for all but not yet tough.



LET THERE BE LIGHT

Luisa Kay Reyes

In the very beginning The Good Lord said
Amidst the formless void, "Let there be light."
And the light from the darkness was shed
Pleasing Almighty God with its sight.

Although His Good Word is a light to our path
The darkness for several held some sway
Who blithely ignored the tragic aftermath
Of keeping kind virtue always at bay.

Thus it appeared that the light was forever gone
With the warmth and the glow of a candle
Being the only hint of a Heavenly echelon
Faith could keep from the stealthy vandal.

But then a single star on Christmas night
Revealed to all that The Light of the World
As it shone brightly with all of its might
Had come to show The Truth was unfurled.

For The Light of Life as a baby was born
As Christ came to help us live in the light
With His Great Light the earth to adorn
Pledging, "Let there be light", to hold upright.

SEASON

Erin Ratigan

Texas, United States

https://www.instagram.com/erin_rat_again

A cramped house
filled with heat,
the guttural
growling exuberance
of children,
and at the window
the snow murmurs
"Come to greet me."

BURNING DESIRE

Cathy Hollister

Tennessee, United States

<https://www.cathyhollister.com/>

when dawn fires the sky
blazing rays, pure and straight
shoot beyond water's edge
to fill the ocean surface with
rippling ruby waves

then light seeks its own.
in the cold morn,
it narrows its gaze,
finds its purpose as
it burns away the
frosty illusion of wealth,
claimed by privilege.

waves of trendy fashion and expensive shoes
trip on the shoals and chase
the endless, useless
cycles of "I want" that produce only

ragged shards of excess,
littering the lonely beach
sparkling baubles steer a futile course to
carry the burdens of opulence.

ensnared by glittering promises that
decay as all things must,
the foolish revel in possessions,
unaware of the inevitable tides,

currents in time that
join forces with the purifying dawn
revealing the artistry in the weathered driftwood,
the power in the rugged cliffs,
the beauty in drifting dunes,
the perfection in a
single grain of sand

THE BEATING FROST

Savannah Martinez

<https://www.instagram.com/crierpsycho/>

Crackling pines-
Bending from the white kiss of Winter
Show us how to survive, this chilling freeze

Mothers and daughters, Fathers and sons
Hold on tight to their scarves,
Dreaming of the hot cyder yet to come

The vibrant hustle and bustle of the city
A mere landscape on oil canvas
Streaked with a blur of color, dappled in white
Somehow finds a way to continue, like the beating heart of a dragon
In this wilding set back of nature

Yet what people don't know,
Amidst the window shopping and merrymaking of yore

Is that
I was the frost,
And you the firelight
That ever glow in my heart

As I grew, from a sapling into a budding tree
I noticed that while others would shed their layers, coming of the seasons
I was left with a still, crystal pain
The freezing of my own heart

I accepted, as most do, who learn how to adapt,
That life was not made for all; if anything, it was I nature was against

With every mistake I made, another blossom would wither, and every person I helped
Another chip of my ice palace
Would crumble away

The only explanation I found, was that I must be the cause-
The very cause of Winter herself;

Continued →

THE BEATING FROST continued...

But as time carried on, a spark so brilliant flew from the nest
Leaving behind the fire so safe
-And seeking out its own story
A story of Fates to behold;

Years ahead now, and I've come to see
That Winter is not just a curse
But the gentle stand still, until nature comes back to life

And although cold winds will always try to snare us, breaking down our hope
Till one by one we freeze
A chill so deep, forcing us to forget the glory of the sun

I will stand through it, unafraid
Knowing that with just a simple gesture of your hand
Upon my own, I shall feel the warmth once again
A love so magnificent-
And know I'm not alone

Something so delicate, like these dreams we share;
My heart beats, with each carol in the air
And as the yuletide creeps upon us near,
I'll cherish every moment with you
In this frosty wonderland, my love
My dear



LAKESIDE BIRD FEEDER, FIRST DAY

D.R. James

Saugatuck, MI, United States

https://www.amazon.com/stores/D.-R.-James/author/B00IW6KT3W?ref=ap_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true
https://www.amazon.com/This-Aint-High-School-Anymore/dp/B099C14N6G/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=david+james+this+aint+high+school&qid=1631546122&s=books&sr=1-1

It should've taken only that scouting,
squawking jay to get the word out.

Framed in a pane, on a perch,
he was posed, a post card, puffed

against the frosty cold. His stylish
scarf feathers flicked an impatient face,

and his scruffy topknot signaled
who knew who in the neighborhood:

"*Easy Supreme and SunflowerMélange*
swinging free off this deck!" See, he'd need

some wirier guys to stir it up, to urge
the tiny silo to flowing so he could

swoop in, scoop out the run-off: "Anyone
game enough to give it a go?" But, no.

And now, not a single soul for supper.

WHO CAN?

Shampa Saha

The night was a shivering one
Put out, were all lanterns!
Only an aged beggar,
With his torn rag,
Walking along the frozen road,
To search for a shelter!
A piece of bread without butter,
Might be his only longing!
That's why he was begging!

The frosty night stretched her veil
To avail all the warmth,
From the earth,
To gift the death like cold!
But the old promised his little grand
daughter,
To bring laughter
As a bread to her hunger!

No light, no warmth,
With all his lost strength,
The old soul was walking alone!
No moon was there,
No firelight,
No hope was there,
And no more fight!

Only a piece of food and warmth,
The man and his little one's search,
Was yet to be filled,
Before he be killed
In the frosty night,
With chilled bite!
Please bring him some spring!
Can someone bring them to that brim?

WINTER 2000

for Dusan

Kate Potter

To think this season might come at me sideways
beguiling my heart with an autumn untouched
by ice

to think that winter might actually warm some
part of me, notwithstanding daunting drifts
of blowing white

I'm trying not to make this sound like a love poem
and you are making it hard. You have slipped
between the lines

already, and have started a fire. Suddenly I'm mad about
February, crazy for comforters and flannel sheets
clementines

and steaming tea, hats and gloves and breath we see
I won't even mind if March goes out
like a lion

as long as I can
lie in
with you.





MY HOUSE
Robyn Braun, PhD, MFA
Edmonton, Canada

ONCE UPON THE TIME...

Karuna Mistry
United Kingdom

<https://karunacreations.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.instagram.com/karunamistrypoetry/>

Once the clock is in, the cold goes out
Once the cold goes out, the weather turns in
Once the weather turns in, the seasons churn out
Once the seasons churn out, ageing begins
Once ageing begins, life snuffs out
Once life snuffs out, the shovels dig in
Once the shovels dig in, the clock times out
...the cold enters, the weather turns,
and the seasons yearn for a life thereafter



STILL, STILL, STILL

for Mark

Cora McCann Liderbach

West River Road snakes upward
through a soundless panorama
of white—maples, evergreens
silhouetted against a cream and
pewter sky. Thick powder frosts
rooftops—fondant on a wedding
cake. Lights glimmer like candles
atop porch, fence, lamppost. We
crunch uphill, boots sturdy,
hands double-gloved, glasses
fogged—chatting, chuckling,
weighing the week, wordlessly
huffing, sinking into stillness—
my favorite hour of these winter days
with you.

TIME BETWEEN

Gail Grycel
United States

<https://www.instagram.com/windleaner>
<https://www.facebook.com/GailGrycel>

It was as if the Fall leaves hadn't had time to parade themselves around New England.

The usual flamboyancy faltered and fizzled under the affliction of some silent foreboding. They nosedived. Perhaps with fragile glances across their veins, they cast themselves through cavalier warm breezes into November, then December.

But the cold bite came in time for the light's return. Time's edge chilled with frostbite. Every naked branch lowered under the cutting freeze spitting snow, ice, sleet.

Like the leaves, once the dark pushed past its mark, in rushed the glow—hibernating daydreams softening the crust, slowly breaking free.

Even snow is too timid to assert itself into the year end's shiver, and the nostalgia of warmer winters past haunts like a Dicken's ghoul—

who am I?
gasping for the burning coal's flicker through the woodstove's glass front, heaving against the bitter frost of what needs to cycle, release, clear.

AT NIGHTFALL, LATE JANUARY

Morgan Neering
France

<https://www.instagram.com/mneering>

There's a hush that has fallen over the city, coating it in white the frost has gathered on my windowsill the earth seems frozen, frosty frigid and cold.

I haven't seen the sun in days and everything I love is dead or dying like the trees that line the way home and there are Christmas lights left up overstaying their welcome And the city's too cold tonight all my friends are home with the lights off but this is a good world I hope that if there is a God he has not forgotten us at nightfall, this late January.



SANCTUARY

Buffly Aakaash

East Calais, Vermont, United States

<https://www.buffyaakaashpoetry.com/>

When winter springs through equinox we gather
by the fire, spewing out lyrics and memories,
irreverence for the status quo squabbling over spoils.
I revel in the cold that brings me to this burning.

I awake to fewer roosters and remember last night's dinner,
a frenzy beside the kitchen with killings in cold blood,
knives flashing, carcasses flying, comforts of grilling flesh,
hovering by my nose and challenging my inclinations.

That night I wrap my cold hand around sleek silky teats,
my other at rest atop her arched back while she ruminates,
rolling thumbs against fingers expressing sweet elixir
swallowed in whirls and whirs against the milking pail.

By day I gather goat muck to feed our leafy greens,
the pastoral vanguard fresh from walking herds around me,
curious inquisitors probing the theft of their inner workings,
while circling above dandy hawks in love with love reply.

Cycling into spring chickweed blankets urban onslaughts,
folks like flowers frozen by city streets and concrete sidewalks.
From garden green warmth and medicine, things we planted,
make pilgrimage to all our bellies, the oceans of our bodies.

When equinox lurches toward summer we gather in the woods
axe in hand, spirit calling our every swing to rouse a new king
from the decay of dying time, as the aging monarch draped
in tatters of finery is deposited in the flames of April's final fire.

I revel in the cold that brings me to this burning.

TINSEL

David Olsen
Kidlington, United Kingdom
<https://www.davidolsenpoetry.net/>

Mother cast an artist's critical eye
at each silver fir, viewing from all angles,
assessing symmetry and shape.

At home, she wound strings of lights
round the tree, replaced burnt-out bulbs,
stood back to scan for balance,
precisely placed each strand of tinsel.

For gifts, in those lean years, she sewed
shirts from fabric remnants – bolt ends –
from Capwell's bargain basement.

While taking down the tree in January,
she smoothed every strand of tinsel,
laid them all in tissue for next year.

SNOWFLAKES

Lynn White
North Wales, United Kingdom
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063706441633>
<https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com/>

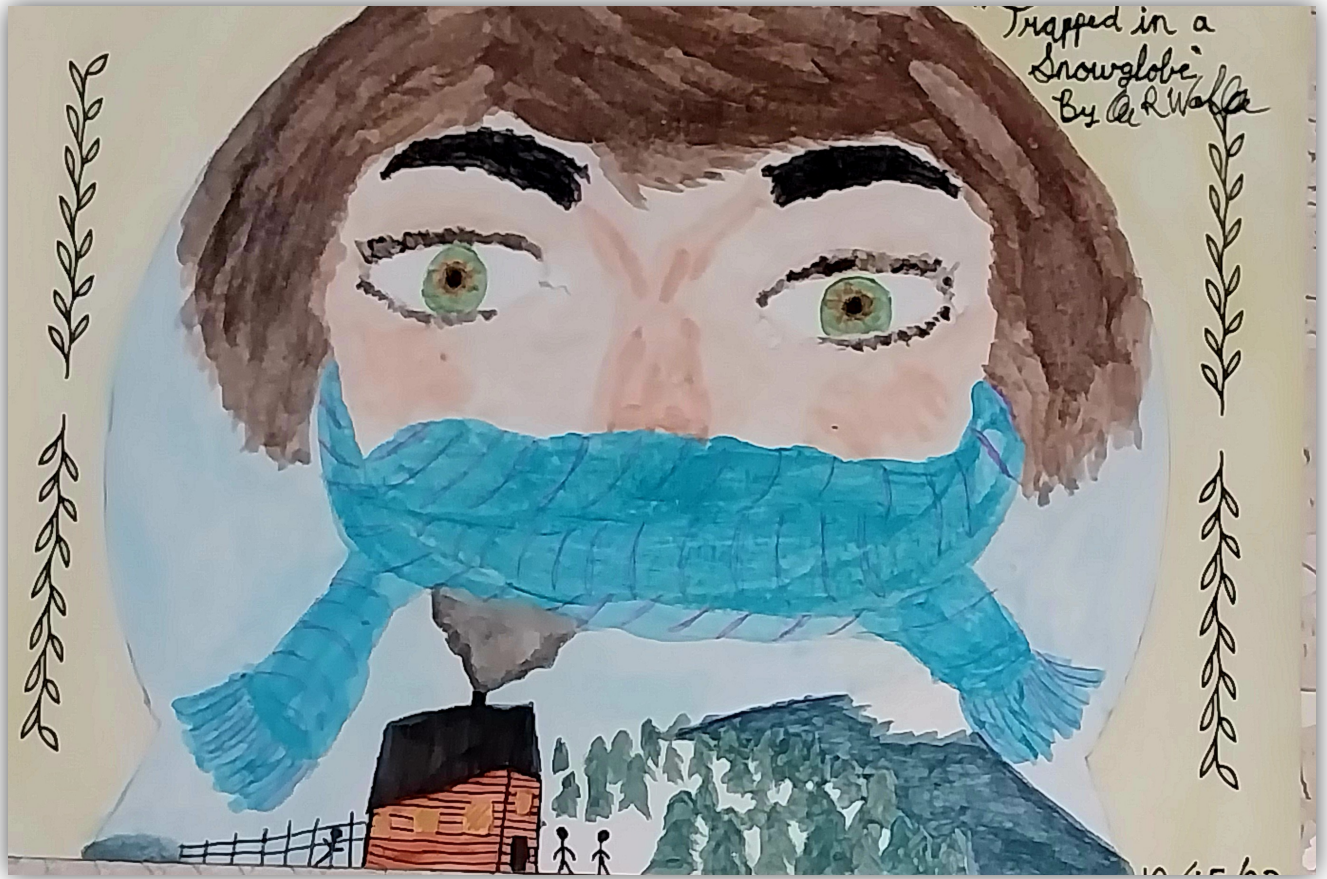
Look out there now to see
the shape of them falling
before they melt away,

the angles and shadows,
of their singular perfection,
while their shape remains.

Don't wait too long.
They make a brief visit only
before they'll be frozen in time.

And then even the solid will melt away.
And drip into a memory.





THE ROMANCE OF SNOW

Ava Wolfe

United States

https://www.instagram.com/avaryann_writingandart

I reside twixt mountains.
Sky, prithee, bear snow!
Aptly, I pray, hear me heavens,
Snow's absence makes me smote.
When will the boughs
be lavished with the weight
of romantic ice again?

NIGHT

Theresa M. Lapensée

Without alcohol, 11:30pm in late December hits different
The noise I used to climb into and thought I was gliding through
Is what it is

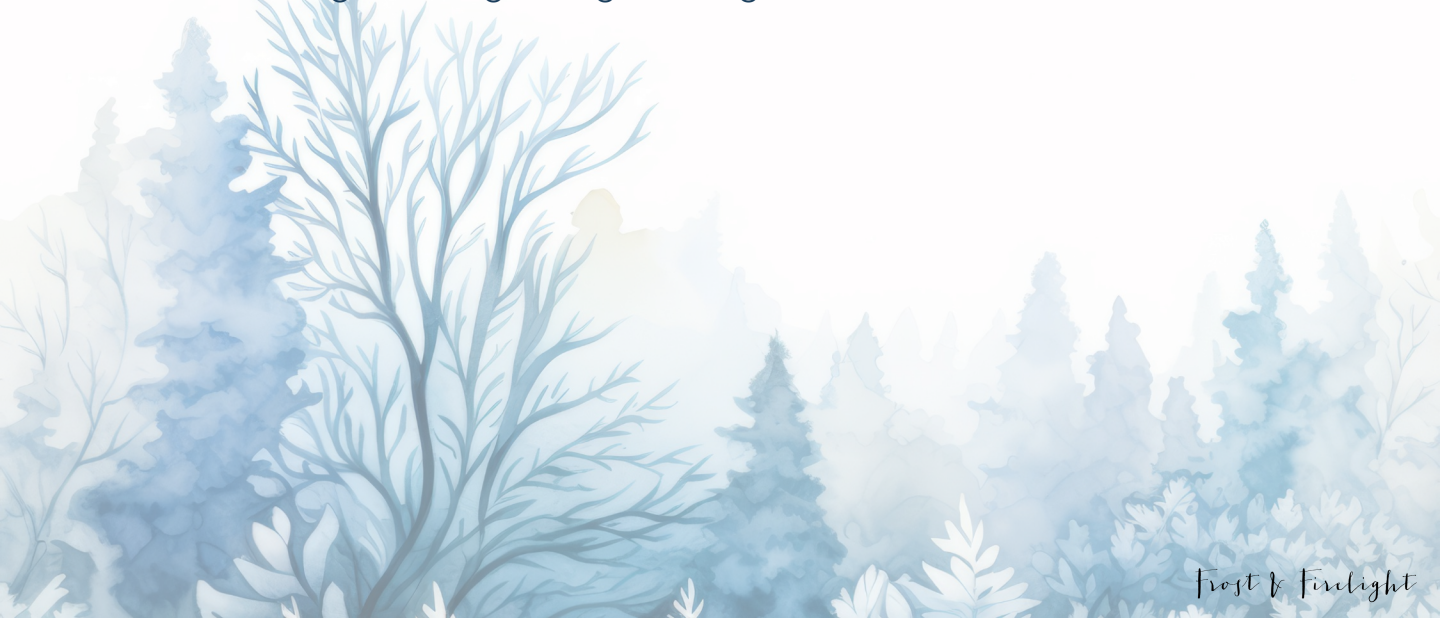
How many drinks and how much sex and how many boys and how much shopping
or travel or money or cheating until the feelings I don't want to carry simply up and
vanish?

There is a light layer of snow on the ground, and I can see tiny, individual
snowflakes falling by the streetlight

Sitting in my car
Spying my glasses clad reflection
It's quiet and cold
The kind of cold I used to crave when sleeping off the day after the night before
The kind of cold that makes jeans sting against thighs
Walking in somewhere warm for the night

I wonder if I love the summer heat so much because I was born in this month that is
so long and cold?
Who wants to hit the world when the cold is rushing in?

Some nights you just want to listen to 90s music, realistically reminisce about high
school
say a silent hallelujah that you can now look in the mirror and breathe
no more reaching to change the girl looking back



FROST

Heidi Gilles

United States

https://www.instagram.com/the_heart_pages

with
autumn's
final act -
the evening air
blends,
into the chill
of the early
morning -
with the birds
still singing,
the leaves
and branches,
prepare
themselves,
for what is
to come -
and, like a shield
of protection,
from the winter
days ahead -
the limbs
glisten,
in the bright
of the
sunrise
frost

DESCENT OF THE ANGELS

John Muro

Three-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize as well as the Best of the Net Award

Guilford, Connecticut, United States

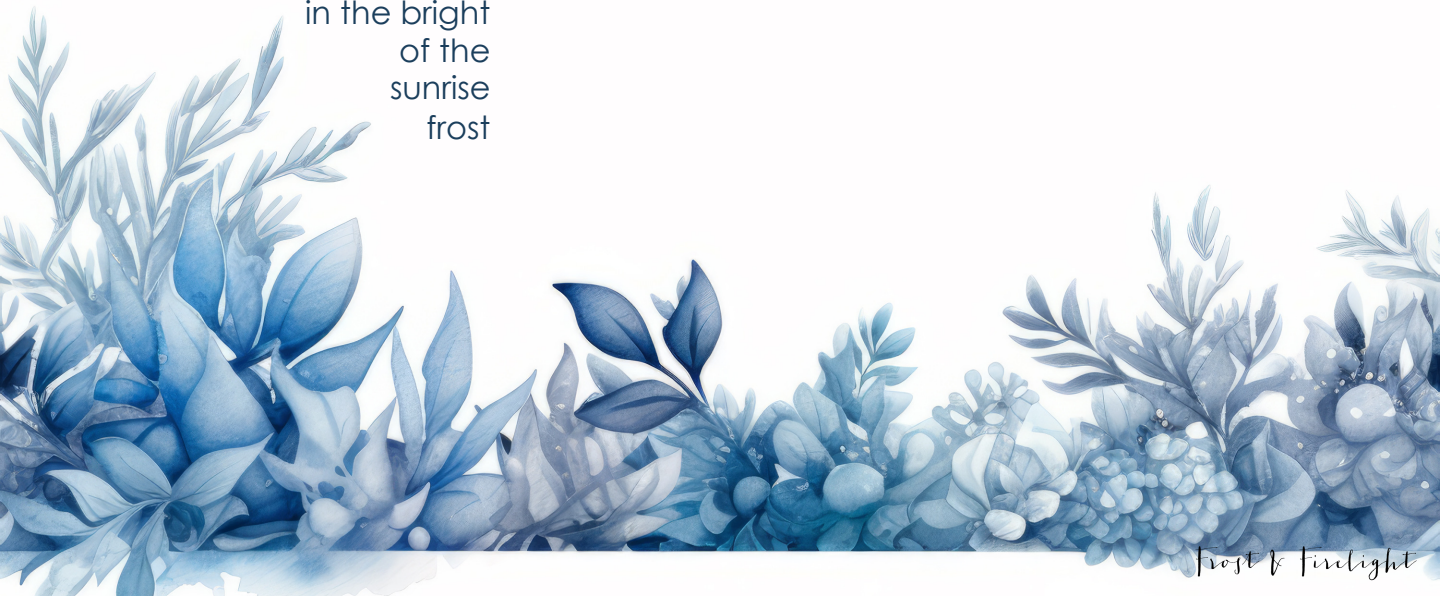
Curious how the early winter light distorted
the stained-glass windows; how green-blue
panes assumed a liquid look

and the pilasters that I mistook
as something more than ornament –
lending the chapel's support

to heavenly hosts come to look
after us. Their mystical descent
would, on winter days, offer comfort,

often wondering what words they spoke –
faint praise or hushed admonishments –
while holding gilded clarions and an ornate book.

In time, discerned they had come to apportion
justice. Consoling the many, saving few.



EARLY WINTER MOON

Antoni Ooto
New York, United States

When clouds and sky almost forget their place,
shifting shadows cross the snow.

Solstice without anchor surrounds
the glow of a frosty sugar-moon...

whetting the appetite
of a child lying on a sled staring up,
as time opens.



WE WHO WINTER INSIDE

Megan Jagt
Minnesota, United States

You tell me you hate winter because it's so freezing cold
But I think you're just scared of being found all alone
While people hide in their cozy, warm abodes
Trading sunlight for fires encased in wood and stones

And this is the time of the hard found introvert
Finding comfort in silence and old worn-out sweatshirts
Curled by the window during winter weather alerts
And staying inside, away from the those who would hurt

And society gathers in these small lit pockets
That we make from our homes, and choose the world to omit
Building a sheltered community of our people, well-knit
While the wind blows at the door, turning voices to critics

But the lone wolf stays safe, curled up in their den
As the winter brings snowstorms and blizzards and then
All of the people go home just to hide
And we introverts are found, already sheltered inside



BURNING COLD

Patrizia Fanucchi

Snow cold ice
a walk
I tried to talk
a wall
of ice
glittering folds of snow
a wonderland!
dull eyes
warmth and joy died.

People – at the top of the hill.
the toboggan, the fear, the daring
excitement – thrill flying down
down the hill – a friend, chatter

Then
the girls, the fun
I was not part of. The ice
the isolation
the betrayal of what was special
the pain.

The toboggan whizzing past
he and the others, the laughter

the cold
alone
at the top of the hill.

Pride
we left together

swallowed
the
snap
flee
tears, talk

Will it ever be the same again?

WINTERS PEAK

Russell E. Willis
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Parched wind swirls
Moonlight in a million fragments
Carpets frozen glade
Smoke flees chimney
Shepherding impossible fireflies
 To the stars
Cedar felt in the mask
 Shielded by a mask
 Cinnamon and
 Hints of mince
Meet in the senses
Numbered extremities
 Insulated core
Muted awareness
 Of sharp reality
 Life and
 Risk to life
 Shared as
 Beauty
Fierce darkness and
Cold light lay siege to
Framed tableaus of warmth
 Cradling surviving life
 As the shepherd
 Cradles a lamb
Plucked from the wilderness
Bitter cold and candlelight
Buttress the frosted panes
Bearing brittle peace

EPIPHANY

For Father Lopez

Keith Melton
United States

Sunlight
In window glass
The aching of my gloom in pieces --
Again I hear the voices.
Ego, I surrender; stillness, I recant

Epiphany
Hallows my skin and exults in the scatter
And the Muse of God is re-painting
The sorrowful rooms
Of my heart with hues of ochre and bronze.

Redemption
A legacy from tattered flesh
My stowaway soul
Transcendental
In this leaven of faith, its gram weight

Nimble
And gathered
Its dappled light a splinter of husking gold.
The whirl of death
Defeated, its firelight brimming, remembering

Distance
With a radiant gleam.
The shape of being, promised, transparent
Delivered
A whisper that guides all mystery, home.

TO
Lakshman Bulusu
New Jersey, United States
https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/127227.Bulusu_Lakshman

sun's abundant freedom of gold threads
moon's matchless shine of silver
child's curiosity about seeing his reflection in water's surface
a dancer's elegant steps in grace
Mother nature's indulgence in making our earth's fertility
generosity of a benevolent heart
the warmth of a firelight in from a frost
threads binding friendship unto persistence
desire of beloved's embrace

be it frost & firelight or any other, there's pairing that's immaculate

SNOW (II)
Bridget Houlihan
Pennsylvania, United States
<https://www.instagram.com/bconee0>

Out my window the snowflakes dance.
From my tower I watch them fleet,
float,
fly -
on the frosty back of the Western Wind.
Their mistress is fickle and cold, not caring where they blow.
Chaos
wonderful, unchecked, to the ground below.

RICH SCROOGE

In Memory of Alastair Sims

Vern Fein

Illinois, United States

<https://www.instagram.com/poetplain>

In A Christmas Carol, Dickens described the holidays as "a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of other people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

Did you ever wonder what Scrooge did after he converted?
Invited God right into his heart and turned it around.

And some fancy ghosts scared him into Christmas.
Indeed, he really knew how to do Christmas well.

Raised Bob Cratchit's salary yearly. Hot coals and punch all winter.
Uncle Scrooge blessed Tiny Tim by paying for his schooling.

Found a high-level apprenticeship for Peter and attended Martha's wedding.
Drank tea and befriended dear Mrs. Cratchit.

Located the "marvelous, wonderful" boy and apprenticed him as a butcher.
Gold crowns for Mrs. Dilber, Christmas presents for her kids.

Sent Fred's Sally to seamstress school. Loaned Fred money to build his business.
Visited Old Joe. Helped him remodel and hire the charlady.

Waltzed every Christmas till he couldn't, then sat on the couch and clapped.
Ate Christmas dinner with "his sister's boy" every year, fat turkey and all.

Railed against Poor Workhouses and wretched prison conditions.
Poured money into Ignorance and Want all his days.

Placed a tombstone above the Fezziwigs:
They danced life the best of all.

Sought out Alice and made peace with her.
Met her every need and were friends to the end.

Why could Old Scrooge, who always got more bread
for everyone from then on, do all of this for humanity?

Because he had money 'till he died.
May we privileged do as well.

DEATH BY FIRE, AND STILL THIS SKIN BRUISES

Kait Quinn

United States

<https://www.instagram.com/kaitquinnpoetry>

Death was a glacial touch, knob of ginger
lodged like a thumb in my cavern throat.
All the tender sweetness—syruped
cherries, grilled peaches, sugared plums
—could not bite the bitter, cool the burn.

Death by fire, and still this skin bruises
like asters blooming through October
blizzard. Ten years, and still my bones
rattle frigid; irises woodsmoke in a steel
gray sky.

Is this vulnerable enough? Are these holes
from which these words bleed exposed
just enough? God, I am bored of writing
this heartache I've let encase me for nearly
two decades. Let it burst

into snowflakes to bury old tracks, brown blood,
any proof your palms ever singed the strawberry
milk backs of my thighs. I am engraved,
like Sylvia's reeds, in ice. I am beneath
that water, tracks of December white, thick

lake eyes I mean to crack, and I will not pull
you under but release you from my pupil, squeeze
saltwater pools from your lungs. I will toss you
to the sun, return your blue buffeted skin to
its firm apricot flush. You will be grateful to be free

of January's grip, to find fertile mirth beneath
spring's thaw. But July will slap your cheek
like a campfire, and you will beg for December's
contusions. You will think of me when the willow
bends emerald, marcescent under winter's descent.



SCATTERED FROST ON WINDOW PANES

Kathy Jo Bryant
United States

Flickering firelight, dances with shadows,
Mugs of soup, send steam in curls,
Scattered frost, decorates the window panes
Snow will pile, in windswept, whirls.

Nippy breezes, make you shiver,
Comforters on beds, are stacked,
You can see your breath, in clouds, form,
Forest creatures, in snow, are tracked.

Winter treasures, all around you,
Take you to a magic, realm,
Like a storybook for children,
'Twill amaze you, and overwhelm!

THE KNOCKING

Laurie Kuntz

<https://lauriekuntz.myportfolio.com/home-1>

You are inside now,
a blizzard of loneliness
whispers through the keyhole.
Sadness locks in like the sleeping
cat on a windowsill.
You can't remember where you were
When that door slammed
the heart out of you.
Inside and out,
it is the same cold front,
the door cannot close against—
but there comes a knocking,
there always comes a knocking,
that is why we have doors: inside, out, slam
There comes a knocking—

Open up.

HEAVEN AND HELL

Claudia Wysocky
United States

<https://www.instagram.com/clau.diawysocky/>

Silence fills the air,
as I sit, alone,
among endless rows of graves.

I wish for heartbeats,
for laughter,
for tears.

I miss the noise.

But I know that I can't have it.

I can hear the footsteps of the living,
but there's no sound for me.

Silence surrounds me,
as I lay in my own void,
a void of life,
eternal and silent.

I will never know happiness again.

But I accept it,
lying here, alone,
among endless rows of graves.

It was fun being dead for a while,
to feel the quiet
and the peace.

I thought hell would have fire and brimstone,
but I guess that's only what they tell us.

I'm moving on now,
accepting my reality.
And I know that one day,
I'll find my meaning,
In the cold abyss.

But for now, all I have is silence,
a silence that never ends.

And I bet there's fire in heaven.

BEYOND MEMORY

Patricia Hemminger

One tends to forget how large
the room seemed. How cold in winter.
How intricate the iced glass panes.
How the flames rose and fell
like dancers in the grate.

One tends to forget how birdsong
broke the dawn. How sunrise
streaked like blood across the sky.

One tends to forget how brittle
branches etched the road,
leading back beyond memory.

How did your hair become so grey,
so long, when they carried you
from the house in your white nightgown?





SEARCHING

Alwyn Gornall
United Kingdom

<https://www.facebook.com/alwyn.gornall>

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The crunch of my step

echoes

as I push through the ice capped snow,
wandering through the winter of our love;
searching for the path where your footsteps show.

Winter's blanket of hoar frost

sparkling

our love in the morning light.
I touch it, trying to feel the warmth of you;
searching for a sign of you, however slight.

Spring's heart-beat echoes with love's promise;

birdsong

sings your voice in the trees.
I see your face in the crowds;
searching for the sound of you, carried on the breeze.

I yearn for summer's warming flame,

praying

it will thaw your love,
and you will come back to me;
still searching; needing the burning of your love.



WINTER ARRIVED OVERNIGHT

Miranda von Salis
United States

Winter arrived overnight:
a sudden snow on tiptoe.
The winds working their way through the valley;
Whistling at windows
and we woke to the fanfare of your arrival -
to the world amended.

Our tires crunched down plow-forgotten hills,
across streams muted under ice.
The plow, for now, furrows along the main road,
leaving levees as if to help it hold its banks.
We cross that black river,
silent too but for the grit of salt.

The darkness swells,
but along the road are houses with candles in each window,
sentinels at attention, following us with their flickering eyes.
We can see town ahead, the lights of Christmas still bright
as though they were the torches of Hecate herself
guiding through life's crossroads.



A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS

Lindsey Lamar

Texas, United States

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<https://www.lindseywritesbooks.com/better-off-guilty>

Caught in the reflection of the shadowed mirror,
My eyes reflect the darker game of chance.

7-7-7-8

My finger pulls down the screen for another go,
Because it only cost a cent. And what's a cent to me?

The spare piece of my brain slips into the boxes like a soldier,
Maneuvering edited realities that exist so effortlessly inside this
Glass cage that we're in. Padlocked by a combination,
That I already know.

One that would release me from the labyrinth
But I'm too close to finding the trophy.
So, my eyes skip in waiting,
For the numbers that control my fate.

This bit of me
That I've given to the game,
Dances in digital frames
In ways that I never could.
In cyan illumination,
I see an avatar that looks
Like everything I could
Morph into.

Only if I earn it,
Only if I keep playing.

My focus darts to follow my reflection across the scoreboard.
Will this new piece of me
That I gave to the world
Win the game?

continued →

A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS continued...

Will people watch me?
Will they like me enough to
Applaud with two taps on the glass window
When I win the game?
My thumbs pull again.

7-6-7-7

I place another fraction of myself into the machine.
This is not a problem because,
I know when to stop.

Nobody has ever won.
But I will be the first.

My life disappears in the block of blue light,
through several turns of the clock.
My memory hazed to the math,
I don't know how much I've spent.

Was I hypnotized for just a minute
Or was it a year?

It was only a penny for my thoughts.
But that might be too expensive now,
For I have none left of my own.



SIDEREAL **Il Neuva**

Our story starts in novelty
The glove you salvaged in a pile of snow
Days blur into months and years
It stays in your pockets
Warm enough for the veins to waltz in your chest
Could enough to make the memory a mirage,

How can you see if you cover your eyes?

November breeze sinks its icy fang
Sweet nocturnes melt in my tongue
I drink the flute for two, it warms my throat,
I sip what you sip, the mellow tunes transcend,

And the night begins again.

Amber starbursts flicker in your eyes
Firecrackers in the woods
Two motorbikes sit abreast,
Beetle's wings, so lithe and paper-thin,

Buzz overhead, lost in a perpetual spin.

Hand on your shoulder, your breaths fanning mine,
A ship anchored to its berth,
Foot by foot, we make a beeline,
And breathe in the vesper's mirth.

Momentous,
Mysterious,

How do you name a feeling?
What is a question if the answer is here?



THE FIERY FIGURE SKATER

C.L Barley
United Kingdom

<https://chloebarleywrites.wixsite.com/lassiewithapen>
<https://www.instagram.com/c.l.barley>

Deep in a forest, between the crisp trees
There exists a lagoon, frozen and serene,
All iced and glacial, with no hint of green.
Winter arrived, all the critters had gone,
Unknown and hidden to all except one.

The girl is an ice skater, world-renowned,
A simple girl, with a simple desire
To enthrall the world with her inner fire.
All those who witness are caught in a trance—
Famed for her beauty and fiery ice dance.

Heat radiates from the blades of her skates
Causing depressions where the ice has shed
Her pale skin ignites a crimson-red
Her hair, a whirlwind fury, flames disguised
Passionate, and blazing—fire humanized.

Day after day, out there you will find her.
On the ice, soul burning—fiery, aglow,
Her body lies in the waters below.
Restlessly twirling—Around, and Around
Grinning and spinning above where she drowned.

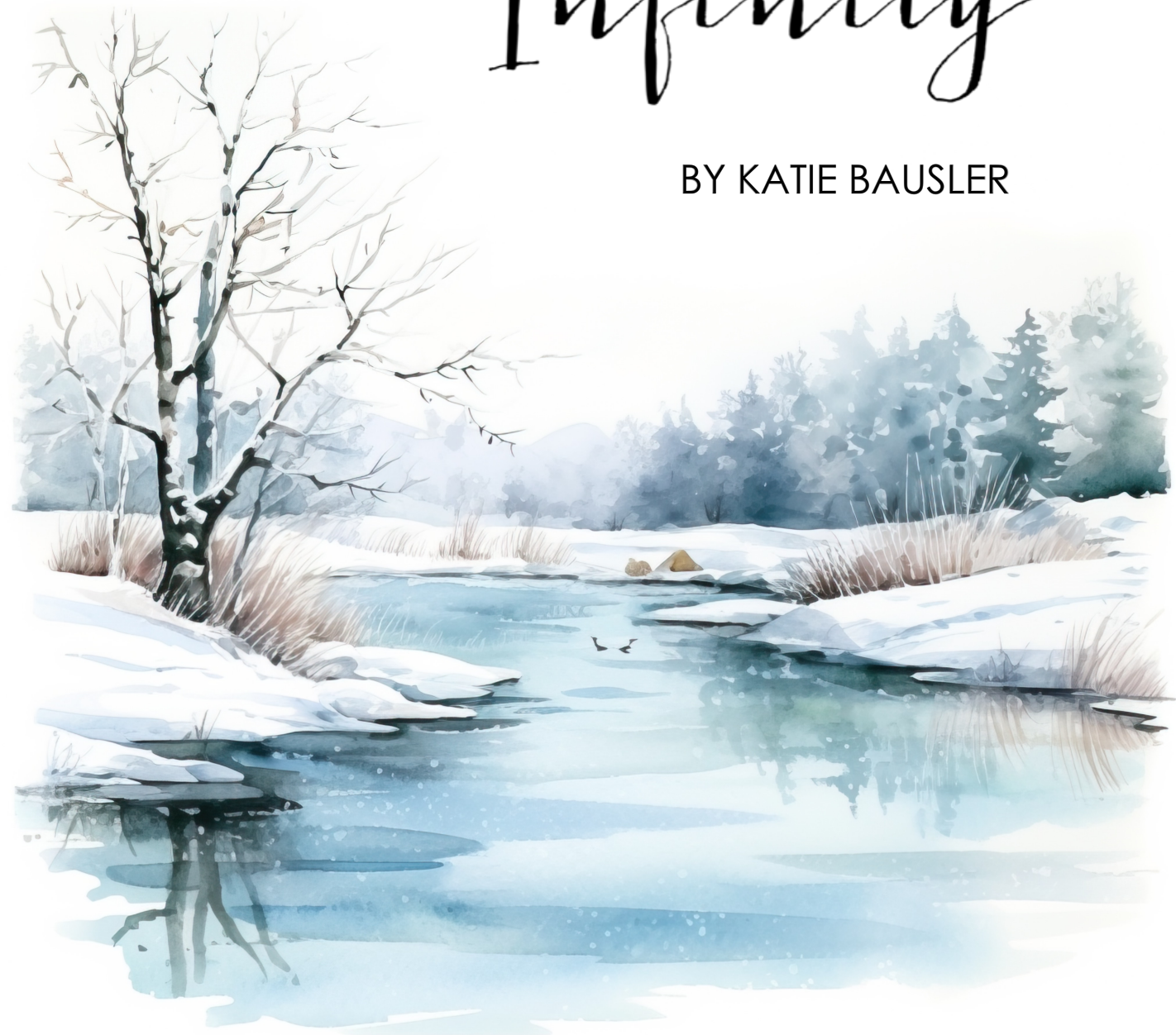
In time the seasons began to turn hot—
The ice melted in that very same spot.
Her body still lay—untouched by rot.
Her unblemished skin—still slender and white
Flaming, auburn hair, glistening with light.

Yet still, she skates—that well-known routine,
With burning passion, a beautiful scene.
But now she dances, no longer alone
When the snow begins to fall on the groves,
People worldwide all gather in droves.

As no one could think of an honor greater,
Than dancing in the resting place of
the fiery figure skater.

Portals to Infinity

BY KATIE BAUSLER



"A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity."

- Kierkegaard

Through the open window in my parent's apartment, you can hear waves breaking in from the home of sealions. My father, Dave, marvels over a horizon he imagines, "stretches all the way to Australia." Just down the street, turquoise water erodes sandstone cliffs on a steep shore break. Wet suited bodies on surfboards transcend the weight of the world. That brief lightness of being makes their day.

Confined to her bed is my mother, Bobbie, the love of Dave's life. My mother is a wisp of her former non-stop energized self, cheek bones taugth, collarbones bulging and hip bones pointing. The blues of her irises visible through translucent closed lids, no longer able to tolerate light. She's all but lost the energy to speak. But mom clutches my hand, tightly. "Say something Bobbie," urges dad. "Stay with us," she says softly.

More than a generation ago we sacrificed living close to our families in California for exponentially fewer people and life on the edge of stunning wilderness in Alaska. While we gained world class skiing and hiking in our back yard, we lost being near our parents as their grandchildren grew up. I missed mom's big hugs and her zeal catching me up on the latest family drama or neighborhood gossip. Most of all, I missed her sixth sense of knowing what I was feeling or thinking.

Not long after she retired at the age of 80, Bobbie began repeating herself, asking the same question you'd just answered. That Christmas Eve, she tottered down the stairs at the last of fifty-years of boozy parties hosted by her sister and brother-in-law. She tripped and smashed her head on a marble entry way. The resulting brain damage aggravated those first signs of Alzheimer's.

Ten years later, caregivers feed and change her round the clock. Dave's initial "job" was to hold her hand, eyes shining with unconditional love, hip to hip on the living room couch. For years they'd end their evenings falling asleep to the TV, mouths hanging open in unison. My siblings dubbed them "kids on the couch."

My parents slept together every night of their marriage. Bobbie's caregiver, Marlina, gently turns her skeletal frame on her side, pillows along the guard rail of her hospital bed. Dad's single bed sidles up to her. "I'm right here Bobbie," he reassures, taking her knobby hand. "Mmmm," she whispers.

I raise my iphone and capture the image of their white-haired heads, face to face as they fall into another night, holding hands. Despite Bobbie's precipitous decline, the comfort of connection as they sleep is the one thing left of their six decades of devotion.

My five younger siblings and I thought our mother had eyes in the back of her head, maybe

even antennae. She always knew what we were up to, her sixth sense on perennial high alert. In our high school years my brothers and I would venture from our suburban home to the coast. Gathered around beach bonfires we'd drink cheap wine and smoke pot. Then wend our way home in the family Chevy van on winding, foggy roads.

When I crept into the kitchen after midnight, mom would shuffle out of the bedroom tying a red synthetic robe around her waist, weary eyes the color of blue easter eggs looking right through me. "You know I can't sleep until you come home." And then the zinger. "No one is immortal."

For Bobbie 'life is short' was more than a philosophy. It was a way of life, I think due to at the age of 13, losing her own mother to breast cancer. From the neighbor kid clutching a pal's waist on a rickety bike to a race car driver on TV, mom pronounced them, "holding on for dear life." At 90, she clung to her motto, despite inhabiting a body longing to let go. Her caregivers were sure Bobbie's was sticking around for Dave. "Your mom won't leave your dad," declared Anita in her distinct Filipino accent.

Bobbie and Dave met over pasta in a leafy courtyard in Rome, Italy. It was a group blind date for architects from Boston working on designs for the University of Baghdad. Dave was a single landscape architect dating an Italian girl. But as soon as they met, my parents-to-be fell into a lifelong romance.

I thought of my parents at an outdoor wedding near our Southeast Alaskan home in the largest temperate rainforest in the world. Our kids grew up with the couple and we consider them extended family. The occasion brought together first loves, true loves and loves that didn't work out. The bride and groom stood face to face, hands intertwined, framed by alder branches shaped into a heart, the backdrop a wave-less jade ocean, home to salmon, whales, and sealions. Conifer covered uninhabited islands dotted the horizon, shrouded in billowing mist. "It's like looking at a portal to infinity," declared my husband.

I wished my mother's passing through such a portal. I knew her body would soon weaken to the point that it could no longer sustain the strength of her spirit. And wondered if her soul would rise to the echo of the waves crashing into the bluffs down the street from my parent's apartment.

I thought of the values of her Catholic upbringing that would stay with her children and grandchildren, to love your neighbor as yourself and treat others the way you want to be treated. She had the most respect for people she deemed, "the salt of the earth", "a very good and honest person" according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary. The phrase originates from the Gospel of Matthew, encouraging Jesus' disciples to spread his guiding words like salt.

All my immediate family live along salt water, my sisters and parents in San Diego, a brother in Aptos, California, two brothers in the Hawaiian Islands, and me in the coastal capital of

Alaska. Our home is on a forested fjord where alpine mountains rise from sea level. I feel like we live in heaven on earth. When asked our religion I say we attend the Church of GOD, for Great Outdoors.

A forty-five-minute drive north of our house is a place where the Catholic Church meets our Church of GOD. In the 1930's the diocese set aside a slice of scenic coastline for religious retreats. A brief causeway was built linking the land to a verdant island no larger than a neighborhood park. A stone chapel was erected in the middle of the island with rocks from the adjacent coves. The Shrine of St. Therese is now a non-denominational and coveted sanctuary for the local community and visitors from all over the world.

At sunrise the light on the peaks on the horizon resemble a juicy summer nectarine. At sunset, the island is soaked in hues of tangerine. On a clear evening you can see the stars and hear the guttural breaths of humpback whales in the coves rising to the surface for a hit of oxygen. The same humpback whales that fast and mate the winter away where my brother John takes his daily swim in Maui return here in summer.

At the winter solstice, my husband Karl, son Kanaan and I spent the night at one of the Shrine's retreat cabins. My son and I entered the empty chapel and lit two votive candles. "Mom, Christmas Eve is three days from now" I said, "We lit candles to guide your flight to heaven."

The next morning the three of us climbed to the top of a bluff to a shelter housing three adjoined metal chairs. I imagine the chairs represent the Catholic Trinity, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. We took our seats and looked out over small swells rolling into a cove. "Your life span is like a molecule of water," mused Karl. "You're out there, somewhere with the other molecules. Every once in a while, you get to ride the crest of a wave and mingle with more oxygen, then turn into white water and dissipate."

At sunrise on December 24, 2022, my mother's soul left her body near the southern-most tip of California. Looking on as she took her last guttural breaths was her caregiver, Mari, praying. At her side was my father, sleeping.

Three thousand miles north on the west coast of North America, Bobbie's granddaughter picked me up in her Subaru that snowy morning. Kaitlyn and I made the half hour drive along the coast to the Shrine.

A few months prior, on our daughter's thirty-sixth birthday, I lie on my side, spooning my mother's tranquil shell. As my head rests on her bony shoulder, I look on the shiny blonde hair and calm eyes of her granddaughter, a nurse practitioner, sitting at the bedside, holding her grandmother's hand. Bobbie pulls Kaitlyn's hand up to her own face and holds it there. I'm crying.

My daughter assures me that it is time to let my mother go.

"I'm not crying about mom leaving," I reply. "I'm crying because I love you so much."

Kaitlyn parked in the wooded lot and walked along ice encased rocks on the shore lining the causeway. To our left was the cove her brother, dad and I had gazed on two days before. It is also the place where a handful of surfers don the thickest wetsuits, they can find to ride a swell that only arrives in winter.

"Out at the shrine," Kanaan texted that morning. He'd driven straight out there after working a night shift as a weather observer at the airport. It was below freezing and windy, the right conditions to surf the wind swell.

My youngest sister, Kristina, lives in La Jolla and oversaw our mother's end of life care. She is also a surfer who loves sneaking out on good days for a ride or two at the beach down the road from her home. As our mother's body and mind were in their last stages of deterioration, Kristi whispered in mom's ear. "When you go to heaven you can be with us anytime. You'll be a guardian angel, riding on your grandson's shoulder as he surfs in a wave."

Kaitlyn and I headed down to the cove spanning out to the ocean. In the middle of the cove were a few people in hooded wetsuits, bellies on surfboards, outnumbered by a pod of local sealions. We waved and quickly recognized Kanaan by his dense winter auburn beard. A smooth wave rose up. Bobbie's grandson rode it to the rocky shore with a big smile on his face. "Yeah," I hooted from our perch on the jetty. He gingerly climbed the slippery bank to his sister and I. My kids shared a tearful hug, Kanaan in his rubbery black wetsuit and Kaitlyn in her royal blue ski jacket and handknit striped hat.

The chilled surfer headed down the causeway to the thankfully heated restrooms to trade the wetsuit for dry clothes. Then the three of us climbed the gravel trail to the chapel, adorned with a wreath of fresh boughs dusted with fresh snow. We swung open the cold, heavy door to the warm, cozy interior. Again, we had the place to ourselves. Christmas trees gilded with twinkle lights flanked the altar over a creche with the baby Jesus and his parents, the Wise Men looking on, along with candles bearing the names of passed on community members.

The three of us took a seat in the front pew. Shoulder to shoulder with my children under the cedar rafters, we looked up at arched windows framing the tops of spruce and hemlock trees. I closed my eyes, breathed deep, and sensed a calming spirit. My mother was free.

Katie B's Ski Newsletter
<https://katieb.substack.com/>

Active Voice 49 Writers Podcast Host and Producer
<https://49writers.org/active-voice>

Sickle Moon

BY MIHAELA MELNIC



When the dusk seeps through the ivy on the red-walled house,
where in the daytime fairies sing and at night the spirits howl,
the mulled wine unchains the tongues as the Moon rises in the sky.

The cold, erratic like a servant escaped from his master's home,
creeps inside the house, the bodies, propping right into the bones
as the fire entwines its tongues, flickering into the coal.

There were two soldiers in days gone, but who remembers their names?
Whatever they had fought for, is as mysterious as life itself.
Peace on Earth is mere legend and, oh, so vain is every war...

The road unravels at their feet stretching out like yarned wool
through cypresses as sharp and tall as a king's guards in a fort
with their ridges piercing deeply into the soft platinum clouds.

Their coats flutter in the wind as they rhythmically walk.
They're two bridegrooms who are rushing to their young, virginal spouses.
Ah, if only they could make it to the shrine of blissful love...

As the night grows darker and ancient and the snow bites at their heels,
on the horizon, a dim light lures them on a path of risk.
Solitary, the Moon grins in the firmament of pitch.

Like sirens before the glances of greedy sailors lost at sea
the cemetery's gate is singing in the gusts of winter's breath.
If only a merciful entity had locked it and thrown off the key...

The two soldiers, strong in spirit, mesmerized, slip their shapes in
roaming through the tombs and halting by a marble baldaquin.
The night's cloak envelopes them like the blurred mind wraps wild dreams.

Still aware of cold and hunger and of the craters in their boots
they pay homage to a fallen general; a gesture quite dutiful.
The Sickle Moon surveilles the graveyard through twisted branches of bare trees.

Stomping their feet upon the soil, they blow steam into their fists
when their Fate, a lunatic, uninvited, creeps right in.
Unpredictable life is, like God's wrath or his divine kiss.

Fate never batters with a bat, nor with lightning she strikes.
She binds mankind to herself with a knot hard to untie.
With a scale she is endowed; she weighs, measures and pays off.

As life awaits them beyond the gates, an iron nail clings to a shoe;
a nail just as thick and long as those of Christ upon his cross.
The Moon shivers in the sky and from off her head removes the crown.

"Hammer it here, into this grave!" Intones the mouth of one of them.
The same old game, a mindless dare, meant to weave sacred with profane.
The cypresses moan in the wind trembling like sick men caught in seizures.

Without lingering in thinking, the one returning home a hero,
finds and collects the largest stone as Fate comes closer to his bones.
Like women widowed of their spouses, the willows chant lugubrious dirges.

Even the pines wail, so does the moss. Trees' roots stretch out beyond control
seeking for lymph outside the source like moribund gasping for air.
A tree log fails to bar his way. If only ghosts tied him in place...

The soldier kneels upon the ground, flaps of his coat spread all around.
With a cursed blow he sends the nail right to the nucleus of the grave.
And so wild his heartbeat is, like a tribe of ghouls in feast...

One clean stroke, the nail is fixed. "Now," he thinks, "up on my feet!"
But something seems to hold him back. The Moon and stars behold upset.
Lost in the labyrinth of his lungs, his breath quivers and then halts.

A snake bounces around his heart, throughout his ribs, stirring his brains.
His blood thickens in his veins, the ice pearls his forehead.
His thoughts unhinge themselves from reasoning. Emptiness and silence reign.

Something pulls him to the abyss. All his hair suddenly whitens.
His mind rewinds all his life up to the days in his mother's lap.
The Sickle Moon up in the sky tries to recover a wounded star.

He spends his last breath seeing clearly his mother's face, his unborn children,
hoping that Hell has its own Heaven to make the afterlife worth living.
The Moon motherly skims his forehead and sends the dying star his way.

The reckless hero falls sideways: a coat's flap in the grave was nailed.
The other soldier, distraught, wonders if Fate strikes those who wield weapons.
The astral queen bitterly grins while pouring onto them her gleam.

A beastly roar poisons the air; they were two brothers, one was elder;
two lion cubs playing with death but, Time is insane, and he loves Fate.
The night is black, they were naïve, and now Fate lurks around his feet.

He glances at the firmament and sees the Moon tolling the bell;
another star has passed away. Pain echoes in the outer space.
A shiver runs along his spine either for fear or cold. He's damned...

If only the ghosts frightened them off...
If only they stumbled upon a log...
If only the gates had a thousand padlocks...

Life and Death walk hand in hand until the hourglasses break.
In the red house the fire wanes. The walls are tinged with reminiscence.
Two brothers had left peace for war but only one returns home.

What will he carry on his lips? Where is the glory in all this?
How could he face his parent's grief? His heart is overthrown by guilt.
At the altar his real bride will be Repentance for a lifetime.

He puts his hand upon his gun. The queen of skies, locked inside, mourns.
The stars are purple in their aching. The soldier's heart is a lump of tar.
"How can I bare this weight in life?" The Sickle Moon averts her glance.

"If at night you search for Eden, when the sky is clear and smooth,
myriads of stars you'll see... They are my iron nails, be sure."
This is engraved on a holy tomb.

But if you wander through the mist during your life's most bitter dream,
you'll come across a shapeless mound with only a bullet as headstone.
The cross is missing but the sky spreads over it a merciful shroud.

Mihaela Melnic, born in Romania, lives and writes in Rome, Italy. She is the author of the poetry collection *Layers of Rust and Life* (2023, Inspired Press), co-author of the poetry and short fiction book *Evermore* (2021, 17Numa Press). Her work has been published in various literary venues and anthologies.

Links to her publications can be found at her website: <https://telluricverse.wordpress.com/>



SNOW CAPPED WINTER GARDEN
Rod Raglin

*I am the least of light
deep quiet you fall into
dark ever lurking
at the edge
of shallow day.*

“What do you think Mr. Bennett will do for Christmas?” my daughter asked.

“I don’t know, Meredith.”

“Last year he just sat there. He seemed so sad,” Merri said. “Do you think he misses Mrs. Bennett?”

Matt Bennett was our elderly neighbour. His wife died recently, I don’t remember exactly when, we didn’t know them well.

That was until my seven-year-old daughter struck up an unlikely friendship when she recruited him to help save some ancient evergreens that had a special significance to her from being chopped down.

Last year, at Merri’s insistence, he came for Christmas dinner with my mom, my partner’s parents, her brother, his wife and two kids. She was right, Mr. Bennett seemed sad and uncomfortable.

“He left right after dinner,” Merri said, “before Momma Joyce and Uncle Frank started fighting.”

I want Merri to establish traditions and to get to know her relatives, but Joyce’s family was challenging. They seemed to bring out the worst in each other, especially at Christmas – especially after a few drinks.

“Why don’t you invite him again this year?”

Merri clapped her hands. “Thanks, Mom. I’ll help with the extra work.”

“Maybe his attendance will improve the behaviour of the others.”

“I’m going over and ask him right now.”

“It’s still more than a month away,” I said, but she was out the back door heading over to invite her friend.

Twenty minutes later Meredith returned with a long face. “Mr. Bennett says thanks, but he’s got other plans. He’s going to call you.”

“What other plans?”

“How should I know.”

“Hey! Watch the tone, young lady.”

“He says he’s not a Christmas person. How weird is that?”

"I hope you didn't give Mr. Bennett any of the attitude I'm getting."

"I'm going to my room."

"Good idea, and don't–"

Slam!

Brat! Joyce says we don't want to break our daughter's spirit, but some days...

Later that evening, Matt called.

"I understand you're not a Christmas person," I said.

"I didn't mess up any plans, did I? Merri seemed upset."

"Not at all, Christmas dinner will proceed regardless – unfortunately," I said

Matt chuckled. "From when I was a kid, it was always a time I dreaded filled with drunkenness, broken promises and unfulfilled expectations." He sighed, then continued, "My wife didn't share my intense aversion to the Holiday Season but she wasn't a Christmas person either. We attended the odd event but never did any decorating, nor did we exchange the obligatory gifts."

It sounded like Mr. Bennett had an unhappy childhood, but even though I didn't, I could relate. Christmas was always anticlimactic. It never lived up to its hype.

"Now there's the environmental aspect that has to be considered," I said, referring to the raw materials consumed from the production of non-essential gifts, the garbage generated from packaging them, and the additional carbon monoxide pumped into the atmosphere by all those delivery trucks and additional trips to the mall.

"I can understand the religious appeal–"

"Not a factor in this household," I said. Joyce was brought up Catholic, a church that considered our marriage "the approval of deviant behaviour". Her family was never supportive of her being gay. She referred to their attitude as "don't ask, don't tell". After we got married and had Meredith, I reached out to them because I wanted for my daughter's sake. She could judge them later. I always hoped it would get better. I was beginning to run out of hope –and patience.

"Well, okay then," Matt said. He sounded like he'd come to a conclusion. "I'm thinking of hosting a non-secular event prior to Christmas so it doesn't interfere with anyone's plans. I'd like to involve Merri in the planning if she's interested and it's okay with you?"

"What kind of event?"

"Something celebrating the winter solstice."

"That sounds like fun," I said. "Let me know if I can help."

"I'll mention it to Merri the next time she pops in and see if she's on board."

A week later, Meredith returned from her Saturday afternoon walk with Mr. Bennett.

THE LEAST OF LIGHT – ROD RAGLIN

“Do you know what the winter solstice is, Mom?” she asked.

“The shortest day of the year,” I said.

“Mr. Bennett wants to celebrate it instead of coming for Christmas. He asked me if I wanted to help.”

“Do you?”

“It doesn’t sound like much fun. He says no gifts, no turkey dinner, no Christmas tree.”

“No turkey?”

“A turkey shouldn’t have to die so we can celebrate.”

“I guess that goes for a tree as well,” I said. “What has he asked you to do?”

“Go on the internet and come up with ideas and a name for the party.”

“I could help, maybe make masks?” As an art teacher at Emily Carr Institute, my mind was already racing with creative ideas.

“Masks? It’s not Halloween, Mom.”

I took a deep breath. “Maybe do the research.”

Later that evening, I recruited Joyce to help Merri with some research.

“Meredith is getting excited about The Least of Light party,” Joyce said after tucking her into bed.

“The Least of Light?”

“That’s what she’s decided to call it,” Joyce said. “It all sounds kind of weird.”

“Weird?”

“A bonfire, torches, dancing, chasing back the darkness... you know, pagan.”

“As opposed to?”

“Well, Christian.”

“Are you serious, Joyce?” I was astounded.

Joyce shrugged. “I’m going to watch the news.”

*I am sharp, brittle cold,
silver clarity,
frost rime dazzling
dust of diamonds.*

Two weeks before the event, Matt called to say the venue for the Least of Light had changed. It would be held at his cottage in Yarrow, a small rural hamlet an hour and a half

drive from Vancouver. One of the reasons was Merri's growing enthusiasm and insistent on a bonfire, open fires being banned within the city.

"I've got two acres of meadow behind the old place that backs up to the forested slopes of Vedder Mountain. It's a more appropriate setting for the celebration considering the emphasis is on nature," Matt said.

"And we'll get the full benefit of the darkness," I said.

"I hope you'll come early, stay for dinner, participate in the festivities Merri's planned and then stay overnight. There's plenty of room for the three of you."

"Can we bring anything for dinner?"

"Thank you, Mikayla, but I've made all the arrangements."

Joyce was not happy about the change of venue or the sleepover.

"The winter solstice falls on a Thursday," she said. "Classes at the college may be over for you, but I'll have to take two days off work, and Meredith two days from school."

"You can take some of the sick days you've got coming and the missed time won't make a difference to Meredith considering they're already giving her extra work, so she won't be bored to death."

"But why? Why are you so excited about this event? We already have a winter festival; one we've been celebrating all our lives. It's called Christmas."

"And how's that been for you? For either of us with all the emotional baggage the day brings with it. We're a gay couple, Joyce, co-parenting a child we had using intrauterine insemination. We're hardly candidates for a Norman Rockwell family Christmas portrait." I was going to add that Christmas with the family was something I endured rather than enjoyed, but instead said, "It's not replacing Christmas, we'll still have the family for dinner."

"It's too bad you couldn't show half the enthusiasm for that event as you are for this one."

Let it go, I told myself. "So, you'll take the time off?"

"Or never hear the end of it."

Damn right.

Unlike my partner, I'd been infected by Merri's enthusiasm and the promise of the new event. Something about its essence resonated within me.

The Sunday before, Merri invited Matt over to help make biodegradable, edible ornaments to hang on the trees and bushes around the Yarrow property.

"So the birds and wild animals can celebrate as well," Merri said.

I'd assembled all the ingredients and necessary items on the kitchen table and while Joyce

watched the hockey game in the living room, the three of us rolled up our sleeves and got busy making star-shaped ornaments with a birdseed mixture and mucky pinecones slathered in peanut butter garnished with granola. They'd make a colourful, nutritious treat for any courageous bird that had decided not to migrate.

"Thanks for your help, Mr. Bennett," Merri said, as she saw him out.

"Thanks for including me," Matt said. "It was fun."

*I am naked boughs,
aching bones,
the sun's false promise.*

Early the morning of the twenty-first, we packed the SUV with everything we needed for the sleepover and the festivities. Matt had headed out the previous day to prepare the cabin for our stay. It was a glorious cold, clear day with the sun sparkling off a light dusting of snow that had fallen during the night.

"This cottage better have good insulation," Joyce grumped. "It's always at least five degrees colder up the valley."

"If you're afraid of getting frostbite, don't come." For the last two weeks Joyce had been a bitch about the event and I'd had it. "You can stay here by yourself or go visit your homophobic parents."

"I'm just saying—"

"Just saying my ass! Either get on board or get out of the car. Now!"

"Stop fighting!" Merri was close to tears. "You're ruining The Least of Light."

Neither of us liked to upset our daughter so we both immediately shut up.

"I apologize, Meredith," I said.

"Sorry," Joyce mumbled. "But I hope these icy country roads are salted—"

The fury building inside of me must have manifested on my face because Joyce wisely didn't complete the sentence.

"I'm sure they'll be okay," she said, as we pulled away.

It was an hour on the freeway before we exited onto a rural road flanked by frozen ditches and frosted fields. Maybe it was the fight, or the combination of Merri's unbridled excitement and the astonishingly beautiful landscape that greeted us, but Joyce's mood began to improve, albeit reluctantly.

*I am empty streets,
frozen landscapes,
fields forgotten.*

Just beyond the three blocks that were downtown Yarrow, we turned left as instructed. The pavement became gravel and the road ended at small house that appeared solid though somewhat neglected. Waiting on the wide veranda holding a steaming drink and wearing a quilted ski jacket and a wool toque was our host.

After unpacking, we gathered up the edible decorations, placed them in a wheelbarrow Matt had commandeered from a neighbour and bundled against the cold, headed out over the frozen tufts of long grass to find suitable places to hang them. Matt, a little unsteady on the terrain, hung back with Joyce, while Merri led the way.

"This is a great spot, Mom!" Merri snatched up a pinecone from the batch, reached up and hung it from a sapling. "Perfect!"

It was only early afternoon and already night was extending its long-shadowed tendrils. The pale sun, low in the west, gave little warmth imprisoned as it was in a nimbus of ice crystals. It took an hour to deplete our supplies and none too soon as Merri's fingers and nose were red with cold.

"Look!" Merri exclaimed. She pointed to a low bush where an unremarkable flock of chickadees were already enjoying a seed star.

As a parent, I live to see my child happy and the look of joy on my daughter's face said this was one of those moments.

"I planned for an early dinner." Matt said, "so the night's festivities wouldn't run too late."

While Joyce and Merri set the table, I helped put out the food that had been warming in the oven.

"This smells delicious," I said. A heavenly scent of lemon and coconut wafted up from the aluminum trays.

"I got this from Veggie Chau, not far from where we live in the city," Matt said. "It's all plant-based, vegan food that supposedly will enhance your wellbeing, nourish your body and mind, and provide a sense of peace."

"I hope it tastes good," Merri said, eyeing it skeptically.

"Try it and see if you like it." I dished out some on her plate.

"It looks like white spaghetti."

Indeed, it did. Thick round rice noodles nestled in a coconut-lemon sauce with colourful shredded vegetables, bean curd and topped with coconut flakes and roasted peanuts.

A hesitant Merri put a small fork full in her mouth. "It's good!"

I saw Matt sigh with relief.

Joyce on the other hand was not impressed and filled up mostly on taro chips and spring rolls dipped in peanut sauce.

THE LEAST OF LIGHT – ROD RAGLIN

For dessert, there was raspberry vegan cheesecake, the simulated cheese made from blended cashews, coconut milk, maple syrup and lemon zest.

"I wanted it to be a complete departure from the traditional Holiday fare," Matt said, somewhat apologetically, though he needn't have. Except for Joyce, whose palate was not at all adventuresome, the rest of his guests had enjoyed it.

After dinner, Merri handed everyone slips of paper and a felt pen.

"What's this for?" Joyce asked.

"You write a wish on it, to throw in the fire."

"How about a resolution?"

"Sure, just don't tell anyone or it won't come true."

I am rituals enacted

prayers murmured

muted voices singing

shadows dancing.

Matt insisted we leave the dishes, so once again we bundled up and headed into the cold.

It was just after five, the sun had set, and the remnants of day glow were rapidly dissipating as the longest night took hold. In the wheelbarrow, Merri and I loaded up the dozen lanterns she'd made, sticking coloured tissue paper and leaves she'd foraged on walks with Matt onto Mason jars with white school glue. I lit the tea candle at the bottom of each one with a propane barbecue lighter and Merri handed Matt and Joyce a lantern. Then I presented the half masks I'd made from paper mâché: a rabbit with long ears for Merri, a deer with antlers for Joyce, a bear for Matt and a fox for myself.

"Put on your masks," Merri announced. "Let The Least of Light Celebration begin."

With that, our tiny procession headed out, Merri in the lead placing the extra lanterns to light the path for those who followed until we arrived at the giant mound of wood braced by two shipping palettes – the bonfire that when ignited would chase back the darkness.

Guiding Merri's hand, we reached down and ignited the paper at the base of the pile with the propane lighter, then stood back.

The flames at first seemed reluctant as if the night willed them to go out, but gradually they took hold. The darkness fought back, welling up, pressing in. The fire faltered then flared. The shadows lashed out, recoiled, darted and dashed but the light prevailed and with a roar, the flames rushed up illuminating the meadow and beyond.

Merri jumped up and down clapping her hands. "Light! Light! Light!"

The flames were mesmerizing, unlocking something primordial. My arms began to swing, my body to sway.

“Your wishes!” Merri shouted. “Throw them in the fire!”

Matt and Joyce stepped forward and fed their slips of paper to the flames. I took Merri's hand and approached carefully.

The light was intense, the warmth welcoming. Our wishes fell at the base, smoldered, curled, burst into flame and were raised up into the night sky along with a shower of sparks and embers. Still holding hands, we began to walk, then skip, then dance around the perimeter of the blaze. The night became a swirling kaleidoscope of fierce colour colliding and intertwining.

As it began to recede, we slowed and stopped. I picked up my daughter and together we stared into the embers. Then we all followed the flicking lantern-lit path back to the house.

“Are you tired, Merri?” asked Matt. We were gathered around the table drinking hot cocoa.

“No, are you?”

“Meredith!”

Matt smiled.

Joyce shrugged.

“By that response, I'd say it's time for bed,” I said.

Merri yawned, got up, walked over to Matt and kissed him on the cheek. “Thanks, Mr. Bennett, it was the best.”

“For me too, Merri,” Matt said, his eyes looking teary. “For me too.”

“What did you wish for, Mikky?” Joyce asked. We were in bed snuggled under a huge eiderdown.

“I can't tell you or it won't come true,”

My wish was for a long, happy and fulfilling life for my daughter. Given the accelerating rate of climate change, I doubted that would be possible. Change was challenging and took time, but here we were celebrating something new. Something with a lighter footprint on the earth – and the psyche.

“I wished to be a better person for you and Meredith,” Joyce said.

“I appreciate the sentiment, honey.” Too bad she couldn't have kept it to herself, then maybe it would have come true.

“What did you think of the dinner?” Joyce asked.

“Delicious.”

“It was certainly different from your mom's sour cream and butter mashed potatoes and syrupy sweet potatoes with marshmallows.”

“Drenched in full-fat turkey gravy,” I added.

“It’s not all bad is it, Christmas with your mom and my family?”

“Not all bad.”

“Maybe I’ll suggest to Frank to go easy on the rye this year.”

“Maybe we could offer only wine and beer?”

“Maybe.”

*I am fading memories
mourning
dwindling light
loathing
growing night.*

My sleep was fitful. The night’s events and my response to them had left me keyed up. Early in the morning, still pitch dark, I heard someone walking around downstairs. I got up, checked on Merri, then saw a light in the kitchen and went to investigate.

Matt, fully dressed in his ski jacket and wool toque, was pouring himself a cup of coffee.

“Can’t sleep, Matt?”

He smiled. “Thought I’d put the final touches on *The Least of Light* by watching the sun return.”

“Mind if I join you?”

“Why not, but bundle up, it’s cold out there.”

I went back to our room to dress.

“Mom?” Meredith called me from her bedroom. “What are you doing?”

“Going to watch the sunrise with Matt.”

“Can I come?”

Matt smiled when he saw Meredith would be joining us. “Pour yourself some coffee, Mikayla. Sunrise is in fifteen minutes.”

On the front porch, we sat in silence on a rickety wicker patio sofa, huddled side by side with Merri in the middle. With a large Afghan Matt had supplied draped over us, we looked with anticipation to the east. Slowly light appeared on the lip of the horizon and the world began to take notice. The stars began to wink out, birds twittered, a coyote yipped, the breeze rustled the dry leaves on the porch.

“Well, what do you think about *The Least of Light*, Merri?” Matt said.

"I loved it!"

"And what about your mom?" he asked.

"Me too. The way it's all connected, the Earth the sky, eternal cycles."

"Yes," Matt said, "but what makes it special is the people you share them with."

*I am long
still longer with more to come
I am peace
you fall into
surrender celebrated.*

Rod Raglin is a Canadian journalist, photographer and self-published author of 13 novels, two plays and a collection of short stories. His short fiction has been published in several online publications and aired nationally on CBC radio. He's been a prize winner in Vancouver West End Writers' Poetry Competition. He lives in Vancouver, BC, where he is the publisher and editor of an online community newspaper.

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Winter Fire

BY NADJA MARIL

Jeff opened the kitchen door, stepped outside to admire the snow and breathed in the scent of scrub pines. A stack of split wood sat stacked in the rack, enough to last the week. He selected two large pieces and called to his wife Betsy as he walked inside, "Thought you'd like a fire."

Imagining a romantic tryst reminiscent of the early years together when they'd first built the house, Betsy walked upstairs to grab a quilt. The coffee table was too heavy for her to move. Better to wait, she thought, and let Jeff do it later.

That night after a dinner of wild mushroom stew, they contemplated the flames. Snap, the wood crackled and split. A few ashes spilled on to the floor. Jeff pushed them back with the brass shovel.

"It's been a long time," she said, pulling him close. His cheeks were stubbly and scratched her face, but she didn't mind. The intimacy felt good. He helped pull off her sweater.

Together, they repositioned the coffee table against the wall and spread the quilt on top of the worn oriental rug. "My grandmother made this quilt," Betsy said, "Back in the days when people had time to make things. Imagine the days she must have spent, piecing together all these little red and blue rectangles of cloth with tiny stitches."

They turned off the one remaining lamp and gazed through frost covered windows into the night. Turning towards each other, their faces illuminated by firelight, they peeled off their clothes and let the heat of the hearth and the touch of fingers and tongues warm their skin.

Jeff closed his eyes and stroked Betsy's smooth shoulders, imagining the way she looked the first night they'd made love. Firelight was kind, but if he'd opened his eyes a crack he'd see the folds of wrinkled skin, the sagging flesh, the scars that came with growing old and was certain he looked the same.

Betsy patted his protruding belly. He'd once been a slim man. "A fuel engine," she said. "It doesn't matter I love you just the same."

She struggled to catch her breath, crushed beneath his weight, back pressed against the floor. She giggled at the wet spot on the printed cotton, as he helped her sit up. The patchwork edges were starting to fray.

Together they sat on the couch, holding hands. "Should I bring in a little more wood?" Jeff offered.

"No," Betsy said, "Don't bother. It's almost time to call it a day, plus the grandkids arrive tomorrow. Just think, with all this snow what fun we'll have. Forts and snowmen."

"Oh, I forgot. I've been forgetting a lot lately and it scares me."

WINTER FIRE – NADJA MARIL

Her lips pressed against his and she stroked his cheek. “I can remember for both of us,” she said.

Together they watched the logs burn down into glowing embers and smoke drifting up the chimney, dissipating into the star filled sky.



Nadja Maril is a former magazine editor and journalist living in Annapolis, Maryland. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the Stonecoast Program at the University of Southern Maine and her short stories, poetry, and essays have been published in dozens of literary magazines that include *Change Seven*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *The Compressed Journal of Creative Arts*. She is a Contributing editor to Old Scratch Press and more of her work can be accessed at [Nadjamaril.com](https://nadjamaril.com).

<https://nadjamaril.com/>

The Hard Winter

FLASH CHAPTER FROM THE FLASH NOVELLA "HAP
AND SHINER"

BY MICHAEL LOYD GRAY



THE HARD WINTER – MICHAEL LOYD GRAY

Just past Kalamazoo, there's a small town and Shiner eyeballs glowing houses planted alongside the dark highway. Whenever he got focused like that, and graveyard quiet, I knew trouble was brewing, like when we abruptly stole the truck the day before in Detroit.

The town was called Paw Paw, and he pulls onto the shoulder for a better look at a house up a rise. It was set back among trees. We could see lights from other houses, but they were a good half mile down the road.

"I reckon that's the one," Shiner says, excitement rising in his voice.

"The one for what?"

"For dinner and gas money, stupid."

I look at the house, light pouring from its large front window, the drapes open, but I don't see anybody. Shiner got out and I thought of just staying in the truck, but he stops and stares at me, waiting until I got out and fell into line like a good little soldier.

It was so Shiner to just knock on the damn door, shove a gun in the face of the old man who answered, and barge right past him. Shiner made the old man's wife, a tiny, gray-haired gal, make us cheeseburgers and fries slathered in lots of ketchup. We ate quickly, the old folks cowering in a corner of the kitchen. When he was done, Shiner robbed them, but it wasn't much of a take.

Shiner leaned in and whispered in my ear. I can't say I was surprised by it.

"But they're just old folks, man," I say, glancing over at them. "Senior citizens, for fuck's sake."

"They've got eyes and mouths, don't they?"

Shiner gives that look like a drill boring into me and then disappears out the back door. It shuts loudly, like the bang of a gun. I look back at these two scared-shitless old people huddled together, clutching each other on their knees, shaking and tears running down their gray faces. They remind me of my own grandparents, and I pull my gun and fire two shots through their front window. They automatically keel over, flopping like fish on a dock.

Their old eyes plead for mercy, and I fire a third shot at the window, for Shiner's benefit. One – or both -- of the old folks had shit their britches and the smell was awful. It filled the room, and I nearly threw up. When I caught up to Shiner, he smoked a cigarette real casual-like.

"Well, numbnuts?" he says.

"Well, what?"

THE HARD WINTER – MICHAEL LOYD GRAY

I look down at the ground a moment and I think he took that as guilt, confirmation.

“Okay, then,” he says.

The wind came up. It was strong. A chill is in the air and it feels like it could snow. Shiner walks ahead of me in the tall grass, like nothing happened at all, and I thought briefly of just ending it there, maybe see if I could find the exit to this waking nightmare. I even put my hand on the butt of my gun. But I hadn't worked up enough nerve yet. I suppose I still believed in salvation.

As we merged with the stream of traffic, I glanced once over my shoulder at the house, light pouring out the shattered front window. I could see someone looking out. I couldn't tell which of the old folks it was. It didn't matter. Their faces were already fading.

But I thought, they really need to fix that window before the hard winter sets in.

“Michael Loyd Gray's prose unspools with the unmistakable cadence of a storyteller.”

-Stuart Dybek

My stories have appeared in *Alligator Juniper*, *Arkansas Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Litro Magazine*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *FictionWeek*, *New Plains Journal*, *Westchester Review*, *Flashpoint!*, *Black River Syllabary*, *Verdad*, *Palooka*, *Hektoen International*, *Potomac Review*, *Home Planet News*, *SORTES*, *The Zodiac Review*, *Literary Heist*, *Evening Street Press & Review*, *Two Thirds North*, *JONAH Magazine*, *Press Pause*, *El Portal*, *Shark Reef*, *Cholla Needles*, *The Waiting Room*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Flare Journal*, *Wrath Bearing Tree*, and *Johnny America*.

I'm the author of six published novels. My novel *The Armageddon Two-Step*, winner of a Book Excellence Award, was released in December 2019. My novel *Well Deserved* won the 2008 Sol Books Prose Series Prize and my novel *Not Famous Anymore* garnered a support grant from the Elizabeth George Foundation in 2009. My novel *Exile on Kalamazoo Street* was released in 2013 and I have co-authored the stage version. My novel *The Canary*, which reveals the final days of Amelia Earhart, was released in 2011. *King Biscuit*, my Young Adult novel, was released in 2012. I am the winner of the 2005 *Alligator Juniper Fiction Prize* and 2005 *The Writers Place Award for Fiction*.

I earned a MFA in English in 1996 from Western Michigan University, where I was a Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society scholar (3.93 GPA). I was also a fiction editor for *Third Coast*, the WMU literary magazine. At WMU, I studied with MacArthur Fellow Stuart Dybek, Writer in Residence at Northwestern University, and John Smolens, former head of the MFA program at Northern Michigan University. I earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Illinois, where I studied with Flannery O'Connor Award winner Daniel Curley. For ten years, I was a staff writer for newspapers in Arizona and Illinois.

Ancient Romance

BY ANTHONY ACRI



THE BOOK OF TUSCAN WONDERS.

I -WINTER

The OPERA OF CIRCE.

1.

7 December '45 AUC.

For a thousand years before the fall of Remus, an Italic peoples ran, played, built, killed, married, buried, begat children, did eat, cooked, salvaged, nailed, cheated, shit, effected, hunted, raped, had been raped, loved, and kissed, and prayed to amorphous animal woodland Goddesses, on the fertile lands of south-central Italia, and came to be known as the Etruscan nationality.

A group rather Spanish in look and temperament, they, We lived on the wheat fields and the grape yielding patches of the center of the abundant peninsula, long before immigrants from the east and the south would eventually merge with them and recreate them into two wholly new and distinct races, all from the Turks and the Greeks. We Italics I cone said as a precious over read boy, Were the eons who lost that vulgar, awful Trojan war, as I can only imagine boyhood me said, that a Greek would ever, EVER go tow war over a woman. There be a Apocryphal story, that means history as truth and not over boiled like Minestra and pork bones to its gelatin wonderfulness by Imperious Turk clerks, once a Roman read, well, bar the horses door there is no story they wont make themselves the stars there of, as we Italians have a true story since the dais of the Villanova's that the Romans will either blot out with their arts of Plagiarism , or, will make us all into Hey Boys, criminals and clowns, as the ruling class is like to do to those who will not dance on tables for Romulus one time counterfeit coins with his dead brothers face upon them. Counterfeit, plagiarism, do you dear reader at the hallowed halls of boring Aeschylus , do you see the theme thus far of my simple booklet of Italic wives' talks and folktales, where I dare say, the truth oath lie.

So, speaking of which, there is a story, that Aeneas, the Trojan survivor, , now conscript father of the Romani, and poppa Roma, when he was as a poet named here Erba said in an earliest Italic Iliad, when he carrying his own grandfather of the great city of Romae, was carrying him past the inferno that was Ilium, by then, carrying his father in a sweetest and Trieste act of patriotism in its truest realist scenes, at least as seen in Publius Erba's national epic, Aneo est. Dido, the doomed romance Italians so love, better than marriage Id guess, he was taken aback by the vengeance and Semitic horrors of the Greeks.

There were children then being cut in half, they are good at this, as any lame child in parts of Sparta are left to die in the weeds and are like little birds eaten by strait cats, and chipped at until mere bone by vulture birds, women raped by crying faggots, unsure of what exactly to do, in this case they are doomed by the Romans who can jump in gamely and fortified to take their pussy tributes, the story, more of a joke, does go, that carrying his poppa, Aneo

looks upon the dyeing city, the jewel of Anatolia, the womb of later Rome, and stand a moment in the Illusys conceived of brilliant strategy, but when does strangely become a war crime...? It depends who wins, of course, we Italians are allergic to sanctimony, bless our hearts, even the Romans want no part of cant and canto.

That is more eastern Mediterranean, more leftists of the middle sea, as Jews and Greek and Assyrians must be seen always as the most beset of sorts, and any jokes about them are verboten if not illegal, but always always in bawdiest state, although get on a saturnalia cordial, a holly day just ended, and see what they think of their Sicilian in-laws always on their wives side, and the comely gals of Italy have besotted them since before Trashon left our part of Anatolia, and not spun on by some killing field and giant hobby horse of mythic history.

He looked over the scene of death and destruction, as his dying father was held by him as a perfect example of the stooges of war and how paid and how much and why, but he did with son at his leg and destined was the son of the morning star Venere, Venus is our goddess of leaves and wine making Vines, so figure out how in heel she became a goddess to replaced Aphrodite when in fact she was the goddess of the fruitful multiplicities of Italian vineyards, who can encode the Roman mind and its militaristic gaiety...?, the son of destiny, the man of steel they call him in their own besotted lyrics, and as usual not getting the point, looked back at the destruction that berthed him and the liter Romans.

He saw at the parapets and tunnels of the good fer nothing king boy, Paris Prince of playboys, and duke of dicks, The smirking Princeling now without a throne to piss from, there was the comely sight of Venus' rival in the middle school of Parnassus, Elea, what was the would be Queen's name, that's what we call her, the concubine of isotropy the Pandora of a thousand broken jars, the face that launched a thousand drag queens across the River Styx, there she was in all her whorish, allure, ringleet solitariness, One could I take it see where Turkish Paris was deposited and beguiled by this slut as he was, to the detriment of his race, although some now think, this isn't assuredly in Omer's sonnets of warfare and chosen race hood, some think she was not the innocent Isolde she preens, and more a Medea with unsnapped Bra, and she was sent as much as anything to Paris the Prince, who never stopped sleeping with others now THERE your sonnets Homie, as a false flag, or pair of panties, to ensnare the pitiful doofus Parry into a cause for war, as the Greeks have always been more fearful of their left flank than their right. A callus Bellum, that could fake orgasms.

And seeing the statuesque goddess in flesh she was said to be and have been, seeing this, that first Father of the Romans whose paltry publishing houses and pro-councils are looking for a connection back to in one war sonnet after the other looked at her and said, Well, Son, showing the defiance between this first Roman and the flags of sword around him, I guess it as worth it. I dare say as start lecturing, dialoging and speaking this book out to my trusted Vestal Grace, that I have in a few pages done the Iliad one better by telling the effects of that god awful war more succinctly and more enhanced than those awful books adored by

women and Greek teachers, who share a similar love of war as poetic, as long as it is always somewhere else.

2. No match for either's able arrogance, the original Italians were eventually coming led into the brutal continuation of a Trojan war of which they had had no real memories, OR MUCH WOULD CARE ABOUT. Aha, but the eastern Mediterranean, if known for anything, besides its spreading of syphilis, it is known for a strange androgyny and a type of clannishness insane even by Italian warriors' nations.

Instead of a devotion to the tribe, or the clan, as has been done in nations gouging back to the hazy days of prehistory, instead these types seem to find an affinity to all like them, and invent chosen people and master race attitudes, down to a strange love of "the fathers" kind of thing which has as its genius back to the steppes horse grooms, from which we Italian came before even they had organized into Persian swamps.

Despite the use of this sort of chosen vernacular, the Romans however, they are quite the keener eyed of invaders to Italy, as they become self described Italian Spartan, in that, famously, they will kill a brother for the purple, if need be, so all know that, and act accordingly to that, as race, to a Roman, means almost nothing, as all is based in first person singular.

3. Racing towards Saturnalia, the major holiday of the year, as even German sing of Hercules and even Jews, who disdain any holiday not writ down for them by some baby killing bigot God, who is so ancient he can discern the average Jew from the average Syrian, I take it his is German as the barbarians do have and hold a dislike of Darkies, that even the Romans cant come near, but they from father Aeno, I genius are good enough to be hated by their Thors and aligning gods with piss colored hair.

Each 10 December as Saturnalia, beckons, the remainders of the army of Canniolinus, ancient Italian word for the Dogwood trees that droop over the rushing Tyber, come about and alive again as they recall dun remember and even Homage and DEVOTION TO THE LONG DEAD RADCAIL, WHICH HERE IN Italy, will always be more admired by the women and the girls and even the men than any SAINT or war hero who cried or made others cry sacramental blood and legendary from their eyes.

So, this early Saturnalia night is no different than am, any I've seen before. Tyberius Canniolinus was no stranger to the hallowed halls of Tuscan finery and put upon defect, like the kind who will work for any party at ant time to feel superiors to the goons and the plebes and the shit they eye as undesirables that are out there waiting to be corrected in their Latin, posture and beliefs and all, a s schoolmarms at heart always seem to be. Tonight, with the month-long celebrations of the Father Saturn's Zaniness as pit in religious rite, as Lead becomes our sacrament and beans are fed with a kind of macaroon cocked in pots, to feed the ghost of wintertime, and as cats are allowed to go wherever they pales, and don't dare be caught killing a wolf at this time, sacred to us born Italic rustlers than the needs of cattleman and more northern Aryan types and their heinous love of Vacca, an animal in

which we most use , if at all for their properties of their various sacs and secretions, called now a Vaccine, if even that, the Pig is first animal in the Hesperian Boot I place here as Sybil through the Hell , purgatory and shining Olympus of our Italian masterwork, as to this day, even, the word against and barely parceled when it as this, in days long gone, before the invasions of Italy boo all from Vikings looking for wine women and song, to Greek oppressors, to Jewish merchants looking to weaponries mixed marriage, and after all, how mixed is that coupling , an Italian and a Jew, my god, can one imagine the woman in what is called laughably now Roman dress and the sissy Jewish merchant with his only response of yes dear yes dear yes dear... until the ends of time , or his own life, which ever may come first.

And outside the portico of this temple of Vesta, where I reside as chief dish washer and Pontiff, meaning, no matter hat any Greek tells you, means bridge maker, as I ferry the souls of Italic, who are not ever as devoted to the invisible cities of heaven as are some devoted child molesters of various churches. As the Greeks are always there too explain other peoples cultures to you as best as they can without ever touching on the distain all hold Greeks in, except maybe barbarians who are always looking for various states of drag to recalled their beaver pelts with, outside the windows tonight, we use glass an arabesque form of see through light crackling, prisms, whist the Romans have merely holes in the brick mud dried wall, which can be boarded up with wooden shutters whilst the rains come barreling in, a shutter island I call the Romans. But, also so rare is glass in Rome, why I am not sure, maybe they'd be better at it if thought it could when cracked be sued a s shiv in their virtuous highway man works and days, but alas, it is so rare in Tyberia as we call that swamp once, meaning where the river pools in muddy stream, and who would have thought that would ever be come a new Bagdad, for Aplu's sake, who'd have think any of this as I write away with this, a cramp on Gracie hand, I think that's what she said. Anyway, a harshness in her fingers has caused the more voluptuary and curvy sister Vestal, Dominica, Gods daughter, an idea atrocious to the local Jews when not chasing every Italian Paula they might find on the Titan streetwise street sides, has taken over as I have become devoted as much as to anything but and since the forced marches of Quo Il magnifico, Quotas the great, barely recalled, like his previous Italian tragedy, ours are infinitely better than that Greek shit about Mommy Fuckers and father rapists, because ours are somehow amazingly for our temperament Politian and thus true.

As I recite this to Doma, she is, I deign to embarrasses she some, a cutie pie as the boys of the town here would say, as some even have come to this church, a sane and wonderful place In Italy, the circuses all are full and the churches closed, but wide open moored, showing again censorship is something used by a cretin or a criminals who is layering it on thick. And as any Italian worth his mortar would so tell you, laying it on thick is the worse thing one can do when building a wall that you hope doesn't come down, but then, some hope for just that, as Praetorian are always open to working both sides of the imperial street.

And, outside I can hear the combination of religious dirge and yet festive, Fasti, glee and merriment, as even as high up north as Tuscany, a certain southern vitality and a love of dancing and bullfighting, from again the Sicily's down that way, a sea peoples who barged into that ass of Europe Spain, a certain colorful dancing girl already admired by the

sometimes pretend to be much more dower Romans is alive and vicious out there. It is strange in a funereal procession which is all in all what this is, but such is life in the middle kingdom of the Middle Sea.

To tell the story of Canniolinus, the Dog catcher, as an earlier senate called him, is too political too expansive, too tragic and too sad to bring up in a books ostensibly about the Sabine and Sammentine calendars of ordinary time as I have assured the clerical at the Book mart in Egypt this would be, but mostly he asked if I would have the 100 drachmas used as a requiem to get any passel of page into their bibliotheca, assuring I guess, that the words and deeds of the poor and the non Greek ever bother their still up mosaics and stained glass to their tabernacle of Alexander as a Macedonian, , thus Gypsy, but white interloper, screech in ermine and fir, and could I commence about all of that, but in death as he was in life as a Pharos as son of Osiris and Horus was what this queen of the middle earth, always dreamed to have been, anyway, as he slashed through life, screeching out dance steps from the Homeric odes I mentioning before.

4. I assured the Alexandrian clerks, that as a provost now, a s opposed to when I was a soldier, money is no concern to me now, as it's a better con that even being in the Military, and no longer are the crowns made of Italic grasses and hay, but a vulgar love of chimes and gold and a pimp's dream has takon hold. The collected old men and granddaughters making noises and trying to either avoid or take on the evil spirits that the rich think will never come for insulated they, they speak I hear from the sacristy, them sing and dance of Canniolinus, ah, poor devoted, man, poor martyr to the ways and means of aldermen and mayors and clowns of the Prince as they are. I may get to that story much later, if at all, but someone should say it and it would serve the Greek, we Italians call them Greeks, after the Neapolitan word for cross as they stupidly thought crucifying their Prisoners of War enemies in Italy, as war criminals, as if in war someone is not, it again depends who wins, they call out and scrabble and ding and bell and peal for the ghost of Canniolinus who they pray sis somehow avoided Hell as a chancre might, as the while of Italy falls into the hands of the turgid and the venial and their mixed marriage wives, and dinners of bad clams and unstressed port, as even a butcher Shoppe is beyond their core competences.

I will tell much tell the story as the bells ring and rung and girls screech and dance and pin wheels spin in the background of the Tuscan night. After his cries against the Senate, again, it is from the ancient word for Pig farmer, showing the connections of all political movements, no matter what is said by the homilies of power.

After he failed as he was destined to do that now mausoleum of old men that dares call itself a senate, that convalesce home that dares think itself as assembly of Princeling, after he lost as he would, as I think, though a boy then, he knew he would, he went up against the thugs of power, after he was accused by the dungeon that dares call itself a Parliament, he was taken by his enemy Silly Sesevine, the weed eater from Amelia , I think it as, a clerk of power, took it upon himself to dislodge a senator in that House of Tyrant longer than this counter jumper ever was, and called him all those wonderful words used by the venial, conspiracy, enemy of the state, traitor et al, and once dead, the always thinking and performing fatso

senator in the silk and yellow sashes of power we Tuscans wore as opposed to the now bloody redder, wine colored Indigo of Romans who like so much took the senate for themselves , and now play at the athletic club of politics and the restricted clubs of legislations.

Sissy, a s even his friends called him, knowing what he was and what he was not when he pushed war with Rome as our inevitable ends, and was right in more ways than one, and as he called anyone who thought him Mad, that they in fact were Mad, if you mentioned he was a bribe taker, no the mother in law of power would tell you, no YOU were a bribe taker, very schoolyard and clever from the fat balloter that eh was, a half marriage half son, he had a foot in each camp and thus was the worst of both worlds. When they took the body of Canniolinus from the old Morgue on his shield, literally, and took it and tied and nailed the corpus to a cross, sued more by Romans then we, bit as a brace to carry him through the streets of Larentium, as a figure of power wielding, within hours of this, he was taken down by the poor and the weak who never get to go to dinners of Bad Shrimp, and collected in a pieta of condolence, as the people turned and thus Sissy and his cohorts ran like hell back to the senate and hid as riots communized. Ah, the parade of hacks and fat men, they never ever learn, and Sissy, though survived was never irritant again, and a silk and plaster Tyberius is held up and sways in the cold Truancy winter winds of night.

Anthony Acri is a cartoonist, illustrator and a social critic, in the terms of Croce or Vidal, who lives in the suburbia of Pittsburgh Pa, with his sister and brother and are all that is left of a family of Italians who had coddled, and both warned him of the quagmire that he was going to be dealing in and with as a boy.

Anthony Acri www.antoniusradiocomix.blogspot.com

Featured Authors



Mark Jonathan Harris



<https://markjharriswrites.com/>

Mark Jonathan Harris is a Los Angeles writer/filmmaker who has received multiple honors for both his children's novels and many documentaries. Among the films he has written, produced and/or directed are: **Huelga!**, the landmark documentary about Cesar Chavez and the Delano grape strike (1967); **The Redwoods**, which won an Oscar for Best Short Documentary and helped establish a redwood national park (1968); **The Long Way Home**, a film about the period immediately following the Holocaust, which won the Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary in 1997; and **Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport**, which won the Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary in 2000 and was selected by the U.S. Library of Congress for permanent preservation in the National Film Registry.

His five children's novels received wide recognition, including the FOCAL Award for best children's book about California for **Come the Morning** in 1990. In 2016, he co-wrote and co-directed **Breaking Point: The War for Democracy in Ukraine**, which won eight awards at eleven international film festivals, including Best of Show at the Accolade Global Film Competition. His 2019 documentary **Foster** was nominated for Best Documentary Screenplay by the Writers Guild of America. For many years he taught filmmaking at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, where he was a Distinguished Professor. **Misfits**, his first collection of short stories, extends his exploration of the themes of his prize-winning films and children's novels.

MARK JONATHAN HARRIS – AUTHOR FEATURE

<https://www.amazon.com/Misfits-Mark-Jonathan-Harris/dp/1639889892/>

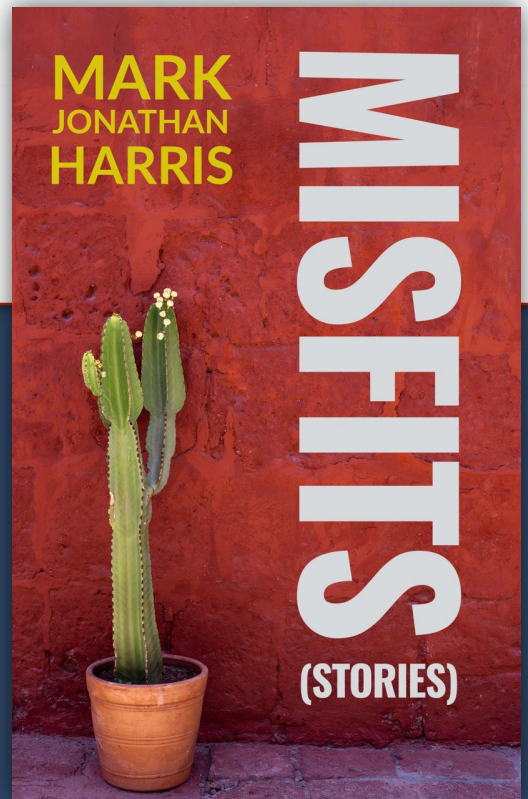
How do you connect with others when you always feel out of place?

Following a kaleidoscopic array of characters adrift in a precarious world, *Misfits* grapples with the challenges of contemporary life, including climate change, inequality, uncertainty, and pain.

A depressed accountant stumbles on a teenage eco-terrorist in a parking garage; a middle-aged psychiatrist buys a drink for a seductive young artist during a flight delay; an out-of-work journalist recruits Chicano gangbangers to help a desperate tennis partner; a troubled biologist runs into J. Robert Oppenheimer in a Santa Fe hotel.

These fraught encounters all have unexpected and startling consequences. Despite their differences in age, background, and circumstance, the characters in *Misfits* share a common sense of dislocation and alienation. They struggle to find a sense of belonging and connection, but ultimately discover unexpected sources of resilience and hope.

With its evocative portrayal of Los Angeles as a microcosm of contemporary society, *Misfits* offers a compelling exploration of the human condition in an unpredictable and rapidly changing world.



David Olsen

David Olsen's fourth and fifth full-length poetry collections, *Nocturnes* (2021) and *The Lost Language of Shadows* (2022), are from Dempsey & Windle. *After Hopper & Lange* (2021) is from Oversteps Books. *Unfolding Origami* (2015) won the Cinnamon Press Poetry Collection Award, and *Past Imperfect* (2019) is also from Cinnamon Press. Poetry chapbooks from US publishers include *Exit Wounds* (2017), *Sailing to Atlantis* (2013), *New World Elegies* (2011), and *Greatest Hits* (2001).

David has placed work with more than 100 magazine and anthology titles in the US, UK, and five other countries.



<https://www.davidolsenpoetry.net/>

<https://www.dempseyandwindle.com/davidolsen.html>

A poet, playwright, and short-fiction writer with a BA in chemistry from University of California-Berkeley and an MA in English and creative writing from San Francisco State University, David was formerly an energy economist, management consultant, and performing arts critic. He has lived in Oxford, England, since 2002.

DAVID OLSEN – AUTHOR FEATURE

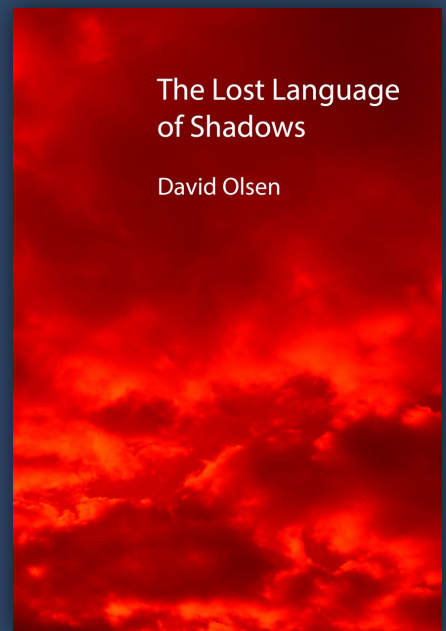
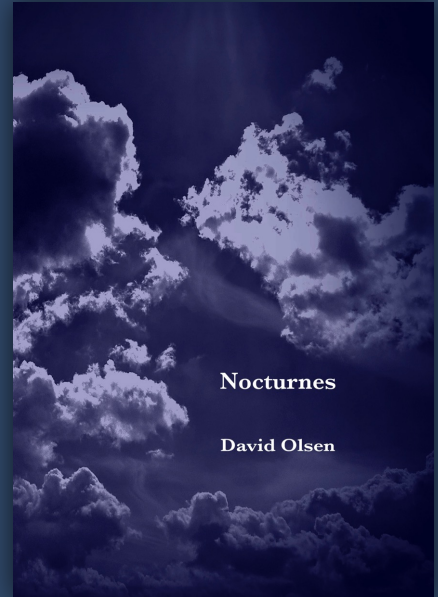
Poem titles from *Nocturnes*:

'Echo in C# Minor'
'Becoming the Words'
'Blue Light'
'Blur'
'Gelato'
'Interval or Final Curtain'
'*Le coeur de la France en feu*'

Poem titles from *The Lost Language of Shadows*:

'Uncharted'
'Checking for Mail'
'Fettuccine Alfredo'
'Double Bill'
'The Balcony'
'Petri Dish'

<https://www.dempseyandwindle.com/davidolsen.html>



PETRI DISH

Nutrients abound in a petri dish.

A few introduced microbes
multiply by dividing.

Thriving in ideal ambience,
numbers rise by powers of two,
spread across available space.

Growth reaches the edge,
but still organisms pile up,
each stratum striving to survive,
all individuals competing
for dwindling resources.

Meanwhile, excreted waste
accumulates where there's
nowhere safe to isolate it;
toxic remains sicken and kill
succeeding generations.

The once-rich culture dies.

ECHO IN C# MINOR

I meant to sing my life in C major,
according to a sprightly Mozart score,
with playful improvisations
and plentiful grace notes –

a song with variations on a theme
conveying a sense of progression
toward a satisfying journey's end
at the resolved tonic C.

But as intentions inscribed in the lines
of the left palm are realized on the right,
a life as lived diverges from the plan.
Destiny's a smirking illusion.

The echo of my song returns, transposed
to C-sharp minor. Its mood is more somber
while accounting for wound and grief.
My simple song is becoming an aria

blending comic and tragic parts,
whose harmonies and discords
are complex and enriching threads
of interwoven light and dark.

Mihaela Melnic



Mihaela Melnic lives and writes in Rome, Italy, where her prose and poetry take different shapes with every new life experience.

Her first approach to writing poetry occurred in 2011 and since beginning to submit her work in 2019, many of her writings have appeared in various anthologies and literary venues internationally.

She is the author of the poetry collection *Layers of Rust and Life* (2023, Impspired Press) and co-author of the poetry and short fiction book *Evermore* (2021, 17Numa Press).

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/1915819318>

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press.com/](https://telluricverse.wordpress.com/)

<https://www.amazon.it/dp/1915819318>

MIHAELA MELNIC – AUTHOR FEATURE

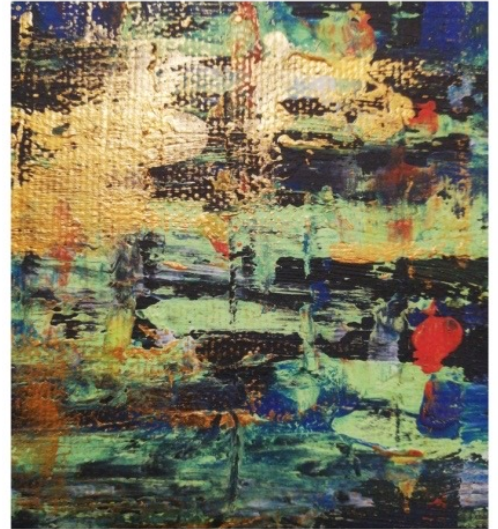
<https://www.amazon.it/dp/1915819318>

In *Layers of Rust and Life*, Mihaela Melnic unveils touchstones of intimacy that whisper exquisite secrets to us. The juxtaposition of grace with the common is an astonishing revelation of what is humanly possible and wonderful.

-Giulio Magrini, author of *The Color of Dirt*

Life with no mask, make-up or show-off attitude, a break from the monotonous shallow trends that often dilute the *raison d'être* of the Human Race, poetry birthed, breathing and singing survival over the centuries to come – *Layers of Rust and Life* by Mihaela Melnic is the written Art describing the naked truth of being Human and living life by remaining the authentic self at its best. Lovely poetry by a deep and free soul!

-Vatsala Radhakesoon, author of *Thirty Seashells*



LAYERS OF RUST AND LIFE

MIHAELA MELNIC

ABOUT ME, ABOUT YOU

If I were to tell you a story
it would unravel in a time between
stealing flowers
and stealing books.

It would be about me
or about you.

About a thief between two thefts
that learns the secret
to making a succulent
living out of mud.

NAMES

I don't know why these walls were built
or when the first hand seized the first brick.

I don't know who intertwined the fence links
nor who topped them with barbed wire.

I don't know with what heart they did it,
following whose orders,

but I see on these walls many names
written with the blood of those crushed against them;

their intermittent breaths
must have punched hard the air.

TAK Erzinger

TAK Erzinger is an American/Swiss poet and artist with a Colombian background.

Her poetry has been featured by journals at Indiana University, Cornell University, McMaster University, the University of Baltimore and more. Erzinger's poetry collection "At the Foot of the Mountain," (Floricanto Press 2021), won the University of Indianapolis, Etchings Press Whirling Prize for 2021 for best nature poetry book and was a finalist at The International Book Awards 2022. It was also a finalist at the Willow Run Book Awards and Eyelands Book Awards. Her poetry collection "Tourist" (Sea Crow Press 2023) was released in April. Erzinger was awarded a spot by the Art Centre Padula, Artist in Residency Programme and attended in summer 2023.

She lives on the foothills of the Alps in Switzerland with her husband and two cats.



<https://takerzinger.wixsite.com/poet>

<http://instagram.com/takerzinger>

<http://twitter.com/ErzTak>

<http://facebook.com/poetryvagabond>

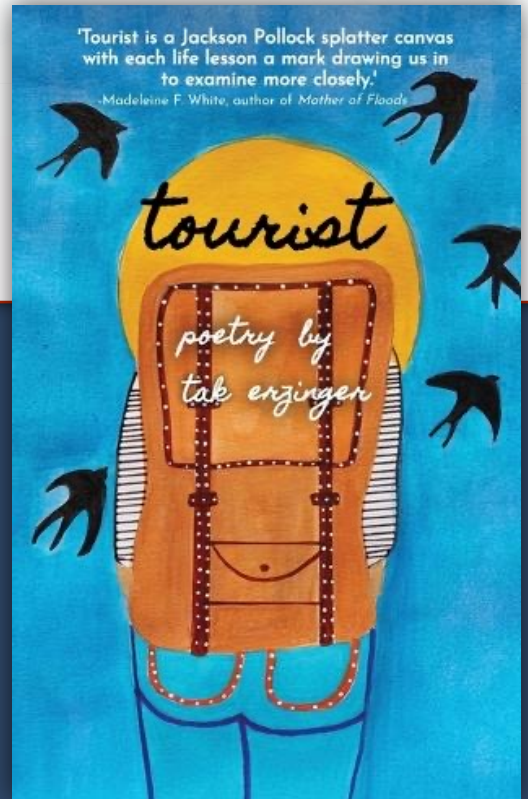
TAK ERZINGER – AUTHOR FEATURE

<https://www.waterstones.com/book/tourist/tak-erzinger/9798986567655>

The poetry collection *Tourist* encompasses a journey that unburdens the weight of past guilt and trauma. During this voyage spanning multiple cultures and stages in life, the importance of following one's inner voice and embracing one's own path is discovered. Revelations are made in the middle of the night, during a pandemic, in the heart of the forest, at the seaside and in food, snapshots of past and present. Through the wonder and surprise of nature the search for identity is explored, surrendering to what cannot be changed and confronting the mercurial temperament of relationships and how they are perceived, one poem at a time.

I draw my inspiration from a combination of sources: personal experiences, nature, art nouveau and literature. Nature because I live in a rural setting in a small village in the foothills of the Alps, Churfirten in Switzerland. Part of my weekly routine is to go walking in the forest that leads out of where I live. Art nouveau because its central idea is focused on bringing nature back to modern life an idea that I find very appealing, and I personally strive for. My early life was full of displacement, and I lacked a sense of place, a sense of home. It was not until I moved to Switzerland that I found my forever home and that happened to be in the heart of nature. It was the first time that I ever truly felt safe and calm. It was here that I could finally begin to develop myself as an artist and writer surrounded by nature and love. It is in the natural world where I feel the most at home, the most at peace.

https://hiplatina.com/latina-poetry-collections-2023/?fbclid=IwAR3bNs92lqQgdN2AhkKh2L-IS-RgtfL2E5pWwyQYxpHFDSpbh0saGwpa_V8



TAK ERZINGER – AUTHOR FEATURE

Amplexus*

What was it that led them
thus – round mounds of green
like tiny hills, *beasts with
two backs*. I envision them,
smooth bodies slick with wet,
the male clinging to her
smaller frame. Above,
the moon unfurling rivulets of light
their shadows cast along the way,
twines and twangs, huddled in
a soldier's march.

I stop and wonder,
a witness above the pond.
They're gone now, only clouds
of pearls beneath the surface:
life, translucent eggs. We are barren,
no part of us to be left behind –
we hold on to each other anyway,
time against flesh, its universal.
But here, those spawns will emerge
despite remorse or love.

Cyclical. Persistent. We fade away.

**Amplexus the mating embrace of
frogs and toads*

Lenguaje Resonante | Echoing Language

*Yo hablo, yo hablo así, you hablo así, en mi
corozón...*

When I began to speak, I parroted
Mariposas instead of *butterflies*
and they appeared to be tropical
but I realized I was landlocked and
it was winter with dusty snowflakes
taking over from an unknown place
but in me it was hot, *patacone* crumbs
clung to my salted lips and a sunspot
in a photo held me closer to her
but language and places have changed
days so faraway from palm trees and
Caribbean waves recede with miles
and miles of exile, my empty mouth
open and trembling a ghost of words
veiling a forgotten culture
everywhere colours I can no longer
describe, it's all bled together now
into a spring day— migrating
I've returned, listening at night
feeling my turning tongue inside me
I awaken that vernacular through
song and sound again and again before
I sleep and from abroad I stitch memories
and echo words under my skin
slowly misplaced phrases return
softly revealing their delicate wings.

Our Co-Creators



Kassie J Runyan



I've always had an affinity for reading and writing. I heard that every good reader is also a good writer. If that's true, then I'm in luck. I was always the odd kid walking down the hallway while reading a book... which may also explain my clumsiness... or had book(s) hidden in various places around the house, just in case I had a spare minute while I was supposed to be doing chores. Nothing has really changed all that much. My writing started in much the same way. Here and there, scribbled into notebooks, starting when I was younger. With the start of my first novel when I was 18. It was almost an escape from the real world at a time in my life where I needed it most. Eventually life got in the way and I put down the novel for over 10 years, picking it back up in my early 30's and finishing it. Poetry is my 'magazine writing.' When I have an emotion or an idea and I have to get it on paper but didn't have time to work it into a book, it came out as a song or a poem. That makes this endeavor with Mel even more special. It's something that we both love to write and read, and we get to help build others up while also getting some wonderful things to read. Best of both worlds!

I have three poetry collections out currently, as well as my debut novel, "The Death and Life of John Doe" All available wherever books are sold! These are for sale along with other reader/writer gifts on my website at [KassieJRunyan.com](https://www.KassieJRunyan.com)

<https://www.KassieJRunyan.com>

<https://www.Facebook.com/kassiejrunyan>

<https://www.Instagram.com/kirunyan>

<https://www.Twitter.com/kassandrerrunyan>

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvSEcLEfE196OE_Ya2LNNN3kjFp82Kt2

VERSE & CHORUS

in the silence of the frosty night
where flakes descend like whispers
a solitary fire asserts its grace
against the muted landscape
flames flicker in a dance
silent rebellion against the frozen tableau
a paradoxical warmth defying the cold's grip

**a fire in the storm, a cross of elements
burning amidst the stillness, a non-rhyming testament
a melding dance, unburdened by rules
a narrative unfolding in the quiet, unspoken fools**

outside a world enshrouded in tranquil white
inside, the fire's glow projects shadowed stories
an intimate dialogue between heat and cold
a story with elements endurance, unadorned

**a fire in the storm, a cross of elements
burning amidst the stillness, a non-rhyming testament
a melding dance, unburdened by rules
a narrative unfolding in the quiet, unspoken fools**

let the fire persist, as the flakes float down
a union of frozen warmth, defiance without end
the heart of the winter's tale, a lesson is earned
the strength of the fire in, in the silence, discerned.

**a fire in the storm, a cross of elements
burning amidst the stillness, a non-rhyming testament
a melding dance, unburdened by rules
a narrative unfolding in the quiet, unspoken fools**

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF JOHN DOE – KASSIE J RUNYAN

<https://www.kassiejrunyan.com/thedeathandlifeofjohndoe>

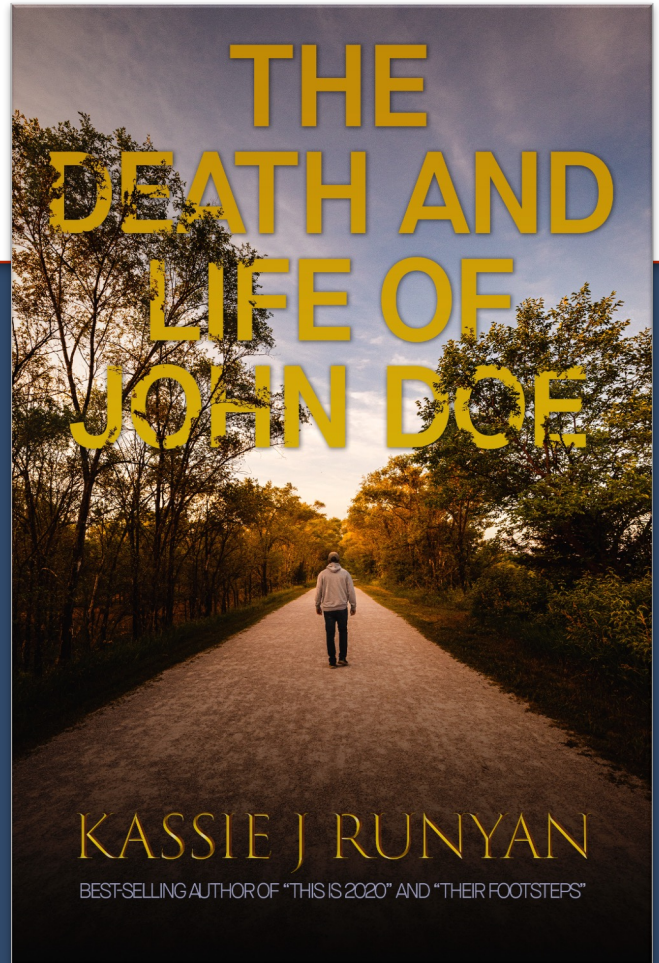
From best-selling poet of "This is 2020" and "Their Footsteps," Kassie J Runyan, comes her debut novel, "The Death and Life of John Doe," which takes a deep look into trauma, the human psyche, and the struggle of living on the street.

Our nameless nomad walks out the front door of his suburban home, leaving his life behind. Not knowing what it is he's looking for... or what it is he's running from. He closes the door and walks into a world full of the pain and joy that waits for him with each step. He keeps moving forward; driven by a desire to find a reason for his life and to discover his forgotten past. What he wasn't prepared for were the dreams.

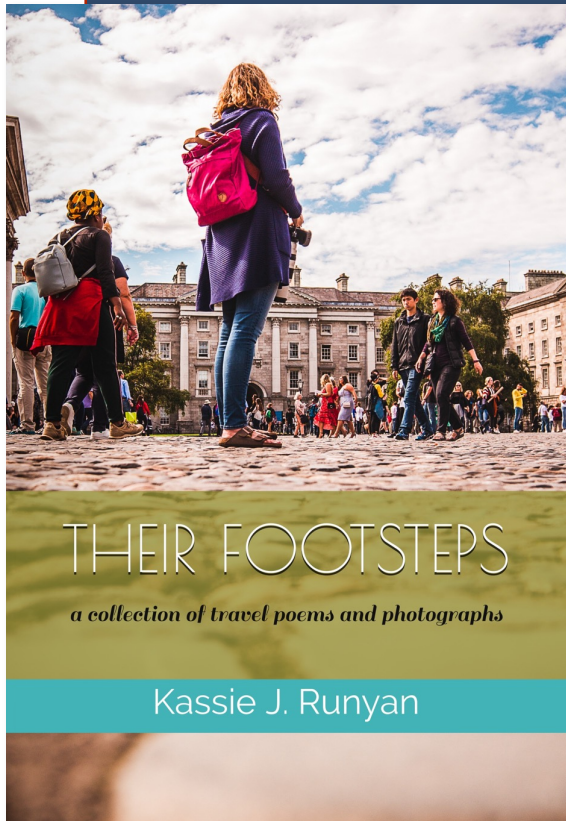
What is your name?

"The Death and Life of John Doe is a mesmerizing book that takes you on a cross-country journey and makes you question your own perception. "

- Joni Rachell, Author



KASSIE J RUNYAN – CO-CREATOR



<https://www.amazon.com/Their-Footsteps-collection-travel-photographs/dp/1735514020/>

<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1735514004/>



Mel Haagman

I am a special needs teacher from the UK. I live by the sea and love nothing more than walking along the beach with a coffee from my favourite café. I have always loved reading and writing poetry and I am so excited to begin a new venture with Kassie on OpenDoor Poetry magazine.

I have written three books. My first book, 'Open Heart Poetry' was self-published in 2019. This book of poems aims to break the stigma attached to living with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. The first part focusses heavily on mental health and the second part contains more relatable, light-hearted poetry about a range of everyday life subjects.

My second book, Lexical Lockdown: Poems about Binge-Watching, Exercise Mishaps, Fridge-Surfing and other Pandemical Pursuits was written throughout the UK lockdown. It is written in a diary format, chronologically capturing the daily updates from the pandemic in rhyme as well as the difficulties we all faced being in lockdown. It is written in a raw, honest and at times comical way. Lexical lockdown will be a historical keepsake that accurately portrays the challenging times we have faced and are still facing.



<https://www.Facebook.com/girlontheedge90>

<https://www.Instagram.com/girlontheedge90>

<https://www.Twitter.com/girlontheedge1>

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjh8b4Y7gSFGKe_wzPKZH8lw

LOST IN MIND: FOUND AT HEART – MELANIE HAAGMAN

<https://www.amazon.com/Lost-Mind-Found-At-Heart/dp/191491354X/>

<https://www.facebook.com/Girlontheedge90/>

Lost in Mind; Found at Heart really did write itself. Every time I feel a strong emotion, whether it be a negative or a positive one, I find nothing more therapeutic and satisfying than writing a poem about it and of course they have always got to rhyme!

Poetry for me is an innate coping mechanism to deal with whatever life throws at me. I do my best to try and write honestly and always aim to end with an uplifting line. This book reflects that no matter how hard things get, when we are truthful and transparent with our emotions, we can make meaningful connections with others who will in turn help us to get through. As well as learning how to get back up when we fall and realizing that this is how we learn, develop, and grow.

It has never been more important to speak out about mental health and the similar struggles that we are facing. I hope that these poems can help others to know that they aren't alone with their feelings. This book is divided into subsections to quickly help you find the perfect poem to get you through the day. Whether you need advice, a little injection of humour, a poem about feelings, down-days, or even friendship! I hope that you can laugh, cry, smile, relate to and most importantly enjoy this book.



MEL HAAGMAN – CO-CREATOR

Lexical Lockdown

*Poems about binge-watching, exercise mishaps,
fridge-surfing and other pandemical pursuits*



Melanie Haagman

<https://www.amazon.com/Lexical-Lockdown-binge-watching-fridge-surfing-pandemical-ebook/dp/B08D6RPYY7/>

<https://www.amazon.com/Open-Heart-Poetry-Melanie-Haagman/dp/1527238407/>

Open Heart Poetry



By Melanie Haagman



**CALLING POETS, AUTHORS, SONGWRITERS,
ARTIST, AND WRITERS! WE WOULD
LOVE FOR YOU TO
SUBMIT AN ARTICLE, POEM,
CREATION, SHORT STORY,
PAINTING, NEW BOOK FEATURE
- AND AUTHOR FEATURES!**

SPRING ISSUE = LABYRINTH

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