

## [The Write Place at the Write Time](#)

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Announcements](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Poetry](#)

["Our Stories" non-fiction](#)

[Writers' Craft Box](#)

[Submission Guidelines](#)

[Feedback & Questions](#)

[Artists' Gallery](#)

[Indie Bookstores](#)

[Literary Arts Patrons](#)

[Scrapbook of Seven Years](#)

[Archives](#)

[Inscribing Industry Blog](#)

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ermit" by Patti Dietrick; <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pattidietrick/>

About this image: "As we are exploring the universal archetypes that appear in storytelling in this issue, we chose "The Hermit" as it reflects the solitude and introspective aspects of the winter season. Once we chose the image, the photographer informed us that it was part of a self-portrait series conveying Tarot archetypes, bringing to mind the Jungian tradition of exploring the internal archetypes of the mind. Storytelling and psychology often go hand in hand when examining different facets of the self. The Hermit is said to bring light and offer wisdom. It can signify being removed from the chaos of daily life and pondering spiritual/religious matters in peaceful seclusion. As creating poetry is a solitary, introspective and meditative practice, we thought it fitting above this section." —Editorial Staff

### **Celestial Constant**

by Richa Gupta

An eddying sprinkle of glistening stars  
 spread the tapestry of the midnight sky,  
 reminiscent of the swirls of a tempestuous maelstrom  
 that rages in the depths of the turbulent, cerulean sea  
 Revolving eerily, her eye following its slothful path  
 as the innumerable stars shot their predetermined arc  
 One in much too many, yet contributing to the aura  
 of enigma emanating as tendrils from its outlying depths  
 Her lust burst forth in golden glitters,  
 as did her unappeasable longing to join the swirling spirits  
 that elicited such wonder from the earthlings below  
 whilst she was left neglected, lying enmeshed  
 in the chaotic chasm of solitude  
 Bereft of kinship, yet glowing with her own, individual  
 light, a distinct hue, infinite shades brighter  
 than her powerful counterparts, whose sole components  
 were lost in the sheer power of the hypnotic billows of astral beauty  
 She stood alone, then regarding her identity with a celestial pride,  
 whose lust calmed as she basked in the cries of delight  
 that escaped from the crimson lips of humanity  
 She was deemed the North Star, for she stayed passionately attached  
 to the fabric of the ever moving, so very unreliable galaxies,  
 and gleamed as a beacon of hope, of an everlasting promise,  
 that come rain or shine, merriment or inconsolable woe,  
 she would remain, free from the unending variations  
 that characterized the spiraling heavens

Bio- Richa Gupta is a sixteen-year-old girl living in Bangalore, India. Very interested in poetry and creative writing, Richa has been published and is forthcoming in several literary journals, including *New Plains Review*, *Foliage Oak Literary Magazine*, *Poetry Quarterly* and *Off the Coast*. Richa enjoys playing western classical piano, singing Hindustani vocal, and immersing herself in the works of poets and writers.

### **Garage Sale**

by Elizabeth Johnston

When my man leaves me for another  
(tired, ancient story—  
her flaxen hair  
and moonlit face,  
his parrot voice  
and tramping pace)—  
I put all up for barter,  
must not loiter in these haunts.  
My heart's turned goblin dark  
and sore.

Morning and evening I cry my wares:  
Come by, come buy:

Bed frame and racket.  
Snow globe, man's jacket.  
Picture frames, vases,  
matching suitcases,  
clippings he saved me,  
gold ring he gave me.  
Sheets we made love in,  
daughter and son in.

In time we will find  
what fruit bears the vine,  
whether junk turns to treasure,  
whether grief can be measured  
if memory tendered

the coin love has cost,  
the debt still I owe.

Now I'm counting out change  
and wrapping what's fragile,  
watching strangers slink away  
with those things that were mine.

—after Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1862)

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### **The Golden Touch**

by Elizabeth Johnston

*"In eternal lines to time Thou grow'st"* —Shakespeare, Sonnet 18

*"What if there is no me like my statue?"* —Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

All love's a mine  
from whose banal bed the poet sweeps  
her precious metal:

fleeting sneeze, or tender curve  
of ear, his freckled knuckle  
folding in tissue a scatter of clipped nails

as if he pocketed a thousand gilded moons.

Bio- Elizabeth Johnston is a founding member of the writer's group, Straw Mat Writers. Her poetry and plays have been nominated for Pushcart and "Best of the Net" prizes. You can read her most recent work in *New Verse News*, *Mom Egg Review*, *NonBinary Review*, *The Luminary*, *Rose Red Review*, *Carbon Culture*, and *Teaching English at the Two Year College*.

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### **Beast**

by Alexandra Guida

Long, gold hair,  
like the color of a setting sun,  
showed through the open window  
as he peered out.

Those gold strands,  
brushed from his face  
by a gentle breeze  
that came every few minutes.

Perched upon the sill,  
like a canary,  
he looked out  
into the open world.

He was seen as a monster  
and a beast,  
But he wasn't anything more  
than a gentle man.

Unlike everyone else,  
I gave him a chance—  
to love and be loved.

Bio- Growing up, Alexandra knew there was something missing and quickly found the enjoyment of reading and writing creative pieces. Throughout oncoming years, she started to write her own poems; however, it wasn't until college that she realized just how spontaneous and intriguing her own mind could be.

With multiple creative writing classes behind her, she learned that her poetry and fiction writing topics varied, making it easier for her to write about a vast array of subjects. This has helped her in writing over 50 works, both poems and short stories.

As a full-time undergraduate at Southern Connecticut State University her schedule can be a bit hectic, however that does not stop her passion for writing in her free time.

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### **Dante on the Nueces**

by R. W. Haynes

Things come back to haunt you, and that is good  
As you stand in desperation as owls fly past  
Deep in that final, inescapable wood  
You find yourself lost in at last,  
Awaiting help or comfort of whatever kind  
Poetry supplies to its demented crew.  
Old ghosts confirm old wanderings of mind,  
A rare reassurance that what one did do—  
In foolish strength of past delusion—had  
Some meaning, however wrong, and still  
Signifies not all the world is mad,  
To show how right recourse reproaches will.

As darkness takes over, fear surrounding sense,  
There lives a warming, patient penitence.

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### **The Line of Pelicans**

by R. W. Haynes

If the mind whips left and down before the breeze  
Like a gull just where the shifting breakers course  
And beaks its prey and looks around to seize  
More vivid nutriment, alacrity and force,  
Agility and quickness, in instant conjunction,  
Satisfy its purpose, its dynamic correctness,  
And the surging rhythm of its essential function  
Throws forth gestural directness.  
Yet the line of pelicans, each dignified,  
In a coasting procession of lonely, bardic souls,  
Attuned diversely to the schedule of the tide,  
Exults in the gliding perfection it controls,

Lit by a calm sun, they master the breeze  
As the mind would master the ocean with ease.

Bio- R. W. Haynes, Professor of English at Texas A&M International University, teaches Early British literature and Shakespeare. His second book on playwright Horton Foote will appear in March, 2016. Haynes's poems have been widely published, and many of them are online.

## Tightrope

by Jamie Pietrasz

My toes clench,  
the golden braids of yarn beneath me  
like a grappling hook  
and the talons of the graceful bird before me,  
who wears feathers stained with the dusk of winter,  
and keeps me from falling,  
the threads inside me from tearing  
ever so delicately.

The moon,  
it pulls at my hair  
so that the strands mimic  
the bird's tail feathers  
while my fingers intertwine with the sun  
so, no matter where my rope ends,  
there will be light  
to fight the darkness,

And, as I wander over seas  
of stars and shadows,  
my bell tolls assuredly  
and my words hold onto my heartstrings  
as my toes let go of everywhere they've been  
to embrace freedom,  
not through death,  
but through life relentlessly.

Bio- Jamie Pietrasz is currently an emerging writer who is a senior in the Creative Writing department at Howard W. Blake High School in Tampa, Florida. She has won two Silver Key regional awards from the Scholastic Art and Writing Contest. She has also placed first in her grade level in the Hillsborough County Teachers of English contest and was a part of an elite performance troop at her school called "The Warrior Poets." Her work has also appeared in her school-wide publication titled *Synapse*.

**The Rubens Room**

*Marie de' Medici Cycle*  
*The Louvre*

by Laura Hampton

Nothing had prepared me.  
Anticipation at being there,  
I expected to be edified, delighted, intrigued.  
Not hit over the head, blindsided, ravaged,  
Converted.

Huge flesh. Bellies, thighs, breasts.  
Peopled out to the edge.  
Flying, writhing corporeal essence.  
Everywhere bolts of red tossed out by heavenly cloth merchants  
Swirling drapes, waves, clouds and hair.  
No body at rest, gyrating to an unsounded crescendo.  
And the painter, massive canvases to fill  
Seems not to have enough space to fit it all.  
What imagination brings  
Mermaids, peacocks, angels, gods and goddesses  
Crowding to attend a mere woman?  
What emboldens him to use such color?  
Cramming together glistening, glowing, jewel chroma.  
Umber, aquamarine, jade,  
Ruby, tangerine, pink.

Long dead the queen, she still  
Takes up so much volume,  
Makes so much noise,  
Spin doctors her life in paint.  
The gallery, basketball court long  
Blood red walls pulse behind  
Gilt frames wide as sidewalks.  
I sit on a bench. Stunned.  
And vow to go home and put color on every white wall.

Bio- Laura Hampton lives in Houston, Texas. By day she is a Pilates instructor. She writes poetry, short fiction and non-fiction.

**Dry Tears & Columbian Dark** *(note that due to layout space limits in our software, a few of the longer lines add additional lines to the verses by 1-3 words or so)*

by Christopher Knodel

It was always the same.

We knew from the start that our compatibility was temporal.  
Within a few weeks, we established the patterns that defined our lives.  
One of us would subconsciously, if not intentionally, tweak the other.  
We knew all the buttons.

There was no gray, no shades of compromise.  
We never made it to that level of maturity.  
Fervency always guided our mercurial interaction.  
We were too young, too alive—to ever see past our own ends.

She hated that I was her first lover.  
I never got past her lack of attention.  
We loved, but the flames could only be fanned within the bounds of our  
game.

Once the fuse was lit, there was no returning.  
My pupils dilated as her irises darkened.  
My brow furrowed while her skin formed crow's feet at the corners of her  
eyes.  
My nostrils flared—just barely, as her upper lip quivered into a Neolithic  
snarl.  
She threw blows as I blocked them.  
Her volume increased as I went into a muted state.  
She raged while I forced a look of disinterested flippancy that propelled her  
deeper into madness.

We'd argue all night and by morning make passionate love.  
We'd begin our day with dry tears and Columbian dark.

It was always the same.

Bio- Christopher "Irish Goat" Knodel is an author, poet and ultra-distance runner in San

Antonio, TX. He is a freelance journalist and syndicated newspaper columnist. He is easily spotted by his kilt, tattoos and six-inch, flaming-red Van Dyke goatee.

### **fantasy**

by Carole Mertz

listen to the sougning sounds,  
(rain's sweet sighs)  
watering life's driest strands

murmuring on midnight leaves  
watchful eyes  
beckon into sweetest dreams

at the tearoom noontide break,  
heather scents—  
come, dear, dream the dream awake

Bio- Carole Mertz has poems in *Page & Spine*, *Every Day Poems*, *Lutheran Digest*, *The Write Place at the Write Time*, *WestWard Quarterly*, *Rockford Review*, and in anthologies. Two poems won Wilda Morris' 2015 Poetry Challenges. Her reviews of poetry collections are in *Arc*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *Copperfield Review*, *MER*, *World Lit. Today*, and (forthcoming) at *CutBank*. Her tips are in *Writing After Retirement*, Smallwood & Redman-Waldeyer, Eds. (Rowman & Littlefield).

### **Tasked, All**

by John Zedolik

The man walks as if he carries  
oceans, bagged upon every limb and  
really one torso

A cosmopolite, if I were being  
humorous and quietly cruel

But I exhort him silently as I pass to  
drop that ballast dragging down, drain  
that ocean in which he will drown

Up you will rise, light as the surface  
upon which you will float and even  
skim on the tension, carve figure-eights

You, unknown, for whom I care, just  
another creature tasked with transportation  
of spirit, flesh, and frame

Bio- For thirteen years John taught English and Latin in a private all-girls school, and in 2010 completed his Ph.D., in which he focused on the pragmatic comedy of *The Canterbury Tales*. Currently, he is an adjunct instructor at Chatham University in Pittsburgh. However, he has had many jobs in his life including archaeological field assistant, obituary writer, and television-screen-factory worker. He has had poems published in such journals as *Aries*, *Abbey*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Eye on Life Magazine*, *The Journal* (UK), *Pulsar Poetry Review* (UK), and in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. His iPhone is now his primary poetry notebook, and he hopes his negotiation with technology in regard to this ancient art form continues to be successful.

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### **Beautiful Hands** (*prose poem*)

by Kelsey Gentry

The knuckles on the tops of her hands bulge like the tops of colorful hard-boiled eggs peeking out from the grass around her yard at Easter. Her skin is soft and wrinkled, laced with silvery-blue veins and stretched over the enlarged knuckles, thin slices of cheddar cheese on top of her homemade macaroni casserole. Her thumbs protrude from her hands at right angles, curved and wrinkled to match the seat cushions in the old Lincoln town car she drove. Her fingers stick diagonally out of the mass of knuckles, warped and bent over time, cucumbers left too long in the garden behind her house. The middle joints are permanently straight, a stiff row of playing cards in her nightly game of solitaire. The tip of each finger bends slightly downward following the curve of the sheets draping over the edge of the beds she painstakingly straightens up each morning. Her fingernails alone remain undamaged, well-manicured, and even lightly polished at times, a sign of persistence despite the pain.

Bio- Kelsey lives in Northern Virginia and is currently pursuing a degree in Biology at Cedarville University. She has enjoyed writing since early elementary school, particularly poetry and short stories. Her other areas of interest include playing piano, sketching, hiking, and photography.

### **Instructions for Mourning**

*For the Children of Franklin Peterson, DDS*

by Lee Marc Stein

Sophie and Luke, you run after each other  
through the funeral parlor, weaving in and out  
of the long line of the saddened who inch  
toward the open coffin and hope  
to resurrect your father by chanting  
“Oh, no, but it’s much too soon.”

Eight and five, you can’t grasp how you’ll miss him.  
Sophie, you ask your sobbing mother  
“Why is Daddy so cold?” There is no answer.  
There will never be answers—only your  
infinite-loop questions, each delivering  
shockwaves to your head and heart  
until you pass through childhood.  
Then you can let him go,  
yet still feel the warmth of his giant hands  
and hear all the world’s good echoed in his laugh.

Another wake—my father frozen forever at 52.  
At fifteen the hole in my life would be deeper  
than his grave, but I would not even cry.  
“Act the man,” my uncle said. Assumed the role  
for a week, paid the price for decades.

You keep on playing, Sophie and Luke.  
Let your child tears wash out the gully of pain.  
If you hold them back, they will burn you.  
Grieve for the father you love—  
there will be no death like this one.

**La Mattina in Chianti**

by Lee Marc Stein

We wake with smiles to shotgun pops—  
not gang turf wars or terrorist attacks  
but hunters ferreting out wild boar.  
Descending from the villa  
we are dazzled by the lake of cloud.  
Mist permeates mountains like spilled milk.  
Bricked casas on hilltops balance  
perfectly between pristine cypress.  
Olive trees and grapes punctuate  
the autumnal Tuscan landscape.  
Treasure seekers—men and dogs—root out  
morels and porcini mushrooms.

Talk frittatas, gnocchi and veal,  
sacred paintings in the Uffizi,  
the profundity of Siena's Duomo...  
recall our ersatz tragedies  
with open-umbrella laughter...  
escape our fretfulness  
in the undulating verdant hills.

Bio- Lee Marc Stein lives in East Setauket, NY. His poetry has appeared in *Blast Furnace*, *Message in a Bottle*, *Miller's Pond*, *Subliminal Interiors*, and *The Write Room*. His book *Whispers in the Galleries* features ekphrastic poems. His stories appeared in *Bartleby Snopes*, *nicollroad*, and *The Write Place at the Write Time*. He leads workshops at Stony Brook University's Lifelong Learning program on modern masters of the novel.

**The Dragon's Tale**

by Beate Sigriddaughter

Yes, I took the princess away.  
She's hidden up in the mountains.  
She's hidden from your strange world of corsets and obedience among the  
yellow flowers.

She's hidden from your male fantasies among my lithe cousins, the lizards.  
She's hidden from your benevolent contempt in the moss of morning dew.

You thought I was going to eat her?

Bio- Beate Sigriddaughter lives and writes in Silver City, New Mexico, Land of Enchantment. Her work has received four Pushcart Prize nominations and won four poetry awards. Her 2015 novel *Audrey: A Book of Love* is available from ELJ Publications.

<http://www.sigriddaughter.com/>

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### **Permission**

by Jada Yee

My shoes are filled with letters,  
self-addressed, eleven years ago;  
ones that hoped for confidence,  
ones that hoped for courage.

Hopes that turned to high expectations,  
which turned into success and failure.

Outcomes now tattooed to heart.

Sweat of my feet and black puddles deep  
have steamed them to my skin.

All that I read are dark blue vines,  
thickly invasive and pointedly sharp.

Worship the words that bleed from my skin.  
Ink to paper, mind to screen, they are the master it seems,  
but once in awhile they're forced to release  
and in their place comes a memory...

The day was ordinary.  
Stand and supervise the imaginary.  
The freeze tag, tether ball, slides and swings,

traces of hands and summery things  
drawn from scratch on the black-top playground.

And the impossible occurrence of someone  
so strangely not me awoke from a sleep and said,  
“Who wants to color my shoes instead?”

The smiles from my permission  
led to an astounding stampede.

All of my bruised resentment  
washed out with colorful chalk  
by these young, talented artists.

In that moment, I forgot that I was still afraid of the world.  
I forgot how ashamed I was of my mistakes.  
In that moment, I gave myself permission  
to feel happy, to feel free.

Bio- Writing poetry is another means of inner translation. It provides an arena for the perfectionist, the fearful, the outraged and the hopeful. In every poem, Jada strives to remain honest, whether that be narrated joyfully or by reluctantly facing her own worth. Her work can be found in *Crack the Spine*, *Poydras Review*, *Penny Ante Feud*, *Tipsy Lit*, *Underground Books*, *Mad Swirl* and *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*.

### **Watching Swallows with My Father at Sunset**

by Mark Schoenknecht

At age six, with my father,  
Watching a barn swallow  
Circle the property:

Black feathers shimmering  
Like fine hair slicked with oil.  
The two-pronged tail,  
Fanned and resolute  
As well-ironed shirt collar.

It struggles toward the darkest part of dusk,  
But glides back down  
To where the yellow meets the suburb,  
Riding an invisible circuit  
Whose monotonous wont  
Defeats the need for map and compass.

“Why does it keep on flying in circles?” I ask.

“Maybe he needs to stay close,” says dad.  
“He’s probably got a nest to take care of,  
And children to feed.”

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### **A Change in Residence**

by Mark Schoenknecht

The landlord’s ignoring calls about the dishwasher,  
So I dunk my hands into soap bubbles  
And pull out a mug,  
Lined with the round stains of coffee,  
Historical as the rings of a maple tree

Or the bags below my eyes, still dark  
From working the morning shift.

Like the animate spaces of lawn  
In the cold of the planet’s orbit,  
I am needing a tilt toward the sun.

Outside the screen door  
Is the shed, mossy roof  
Sagging toward the middle  
To form the curve  
Of a waning moon;

Dirt-smearred windows  
Framing a flowerbed  
Trampled with rain.  
And fog,  
Stifling as the gas

That filled our kitchen  
The time you failed to notice  
That the burner hadn't caught.

Inside, I'm scraping  
Dried egg off a plate,  
Waiting for calls about better employment  
Or the trip to visit Laurel in Melbourne.  
Waiting,

A bed of hard earth, hungry  
For the celestial flame,

For the struck match  
In a kitchen full of propane  
That could blow this whole life  
Open again.

Bio- Mark Schoenknecht's poetry has appeared in *2River View*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Driftwood Press*, and elsewhere. In 2013, Mark was awarded the David A. Kennedy Prize for his collection *Kissing the Girl Who Wore a Mustache*. He's currently working toward a PhD at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

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**Mangroves** (*inspired by the Writers' Craft Box "Roots" theme*)

by Lydia Suarez

You told me once that you had seen  
a tree floating on the ocean,  
sponges at its feet and storks in its tendril crown  
that we would have time to see the *Fantasticks*  
and visit Vienna.

My entire family ate a piece of meat this size  
you said cutting into the steak.  
Christmas we filled clogs with hay and carrots.  
We traveled here in steerage.

You pronounced t's like d's and denied an accent.  
I listened as I had when my mother read me stories,  
under crisp sheets, enchanted and smelling of soap.

Our daughter would have your grey eyes  
and my oval face.  
I hope you don't expect a lawn.  
Pish Posh, I said, I adore apartments.

You stared at my mother as she brought in packages,  
searching for vestiges of the future in me  
when I would reach the age you were already.

The age when  
entrenched roots  
may no longer  
drift upon green seas.

Bio- Lydia's stories and poems have appeared in *Pearl*, *Prism Review* and *The Mom Egg* among other venues. She is a first generation Cuban American with ancestral roots in the Canary Islands and Mallorca. Legend has it that her great-grandfather Adolfo was a knife thrower and butterfly tamer.

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### **Every Love-child's Dream**

by Pascale "Tia" Louissaint

His scent in the hallway as he skips  
to 10 Lake Avenue  
reminds me of Jasmines.

It's that night spell, Garden Rain scented  
candles, Orchid petals on the floor as he  
serenades my mother  
that reminds me

something of love birthed me.

By day—most  
nights—it's all gone

to a drunk waitress and a delinquent  
he works overtime to feed at 10 Lake Avenue.

I lick the crumbs off his table  
when I'm too hungry to fetch. I try to forget

dollar bills in birthday cards  
while he promenades with his wife at the mall  
where his son shoplifts. I try to forget

quick I-love-you-good-night-darling lullabies  
before I utter *daddy, stay* as he hurries

back to 10 Lake Avenue. I pray  
to forget

Jasmine  
fragrance roaming the hallway  
but rarely visiting my chamber.

Bio- Pascale Louissaint (Tia Paul-Louis) was born on August 24, 1984 in Jeremie, Haiti to Dr. Edgard N. Louissaint and Roseline Louissaint. In 2011, she married Paul Moise Abucher, a poet, preacher and US Army soldier who inspires her spiritual and cultural writings. Aside from working and writing, most of Paul-Louis' time is spent with her daughter, Roselila (Lily).

Paul-Louis' writing experience began at age 11 through song lyrics and short stories. Readings of Edgar Allan Poe and Langston Hughes broadened her interest in poetry. Though she graduated with a BA in English/Creative Writing from the University of South Florida, the MFA program at National University vividly introduced her to the art of character and identity. Finally, with much encouragement from her husband and helpful critiques by fellow poets and professors such as Frank Montesonti, Paul-Louis is evermore determined to further explore the creative writing world.

### **The Little Mermaid On Her Quest for Love**

by Katherine Estes

Mermaids know my pain  
Of walking away from home,

And finding a boy to love,  
Yet receiving none in return.

My feet ache from going so far,  
And I'm so tired I cannot speak.  
My family no longer knows me,  
Yet they love me still.

Sadly, this boy will never be mine.  
He bounces from girl to girl  
And leaves me to wait—  
Yet what he wants, he will take.

Bio- Katherine Estes, a seventeen-year-old born and raised in Memphis, TN, has had a focus on writing poetry since she was sixteen. Over the past year, she has developed a confidence in her work that has allowed her to have the desire to start looking to be published. She currently lives in Baton Rouge, LA, and attends The Dunham School. She most enjoys writing poems that coincide with classic fairy tales. When she's not writing, she is busy studying for AP European History, AP psychology, and breezing her way through American Literature to the annoyance of the rest of her English class. This is her first publication.

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**Gravestones** *(inspired by the Writers' Craft Box "Roots" theme)*

by Mary K. O'Melveny

We are walking carefully  
over the bumpy sponge of earth  
where bright golden lichens sparkling over  
the green-gray headstones  
in the misty, salty afternoon  
might as well be artistry as mystery.

This is no casual stroll  
amidst centuries of the forgotten,  
no random viewing of mossy history,  
this is a mission, wildflowers  
and soft rain notwithstanding,  
the ancient church our silent sentry.

We have been at this task all day,  
in churchyards large and small  
at the edges of towns where faded parish records  
hinted at ancestral roots, names near enough  
to make a stop, eyes wandering somberly  
over patches of stone-filled grasses.

Mickey is the first to find her  
amidst the many crooked totems  
leaning up and in with no random order,  
carvings faded and crosses crumbling.  
She is "Mary Mulvenna" and, etched there,  
is but the barest hint of breath and life.

Newer graves are here as well,  
bordered with bright flowers  
and little ribbons resting like tiny birds.  
But it is Mary's stone that I have come for,  
a provable lineage visible to the naked eye  
even if nothing more can ever be known or said.

*Poet's Commentary: I wrote "Gravestones" about my recent trip to Northern Ireland to look for clues about my ancestors who left the area for the United States in the 1800s.*

Bio- Mary K. O'Melveny is a recently retired labor rights attorney. She lives in Washington, DC and Woodstock, NY. She has been writing poetry for a few years and is a member of a women's writing group based in New York's Hudson Valley. Her work has been published in *Twisted Vine Literary Arts Journal*. She is currently working on a chapbook entitled *Memories and Memorials*.

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### **The Wind is Blowing**

by Brandon Robinson

The wind is unsettling with its intrusion,  
It blows my papers onto the floor.  
They weren't stacked on my desk and file cabinet  
Accidentally.

It changes the pressure in the rooms,  
Then the doors slam  
In anger.  
My son's door. My daughter's door. My door.  
With the wind, we live together in isolation.

I could close the windows,  
Fall into the house,  
Locking all the windows.  
Then it would be still.  
We might suffocate.

I don't want to kill anyone.  
It's just that the bills are in order  
And there's money and we're getting along then the  
Wind blows  
And one day I might go outside.

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### **Distant Star**

by Brandon Robinson

Distant star,  
As dust you dazzle,  
Though I could obscure you with a pencil's eraser.  
Across this divide, that would be painless, and assuming.

You are a heavenly body,  
A shepherd in the wild.  
You are unaware of my thoughts,  
They could make you a king.

Does your fire  
Fuel the evolution from mud towards enlightenment?  
Do your travels  
Change the seasons for citizens across the worlds?

Am I in winter,  
Since you are distant,  
Has my summer  
Always been cold?

Bio- Brandon Robinson tries to think poetically about daily experiences. Whether reading a magazine, taking out the garbage in the snow, or sitting at a green light, even the common can be illuminating.

**Merry Christmas, Mama** (*prose poem*)

by Ginger Peters

She finally did it. She killed herself in the bathroom on Christmas Eve, the dead of winter. She had threatened to kill herself for fifty-eight years, the only difference is she didn't "blow her brains out" as she had always promised. She slashed her wrists with a razor.

But, after years of not following through with her raging threats, I quit worrying or believing in her empty words.

This particular night, Christmas Eve, Daddy had been dead for 3 years and she had been my responsibility since that time.

This cold, snowy winter's night, she pissed her pants and sat in it for hours. I begged her to go change—

She could still walk, but I couldn't force her or physically carry her, without my husband's help.

They had all gone down to the town Christmas parade and I stayed at home with her.

After a last plea for her to go bathe and change her clothes, she yelled at me and said, "Everyone here treats me like a dog." I just nodded, for I had heard that line all of my life.

I helped her into the downstairs bathroom, ran a warm tub of water for her, laid out clean panties and a clean gown, and helped her frail bones into the tub.

I told her I was going to put on some water for tea and I would check on her shortly.

I pulled the door shut, for privacy's sake.

As I was heading back to check on her, the family came home, with Christmas candy, huge smiles, and stories of the Christmas parade. I sat down on the arm of the sofa, listening intently for a few moments. I cherished their happiness and wonderment of such a blessed season.

Suddenly, I remembered her alone in the bathtub. I hurried down the hall. I remember the teapot whistling when I found her sunk down in a sea of red—

Not red like Santa's suit, but thick brownish-red, like blood and death.

I didn't scream as I felt her pulse. I dialed 911 on Christmas Eve.

The red and white ambulance took her away and none of the family wanted to use that bathroom anymore.

We had to save up a few months to have it remodeled. We even put in a new tub, even though there were no blood stains in the old one.

I use that bathroom more than the others. I'm not afraid of it, however, I do on occasion hear her screaming, "I'm going to blow my brains out," especially in the winter, when it snows and when it's close to Christmas.

I find myself cleaning that bathroom often and one time I even said aloud, "No Mama, you didn't blow your brains out, you used a razor. But you have peace now. The magical season took care of you and gave you what I never could. Merry Christmas, Mama."

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### **Snow Ghost and Me**

by Ginger Peters

Late-afternoon a red glow from the setting sun  
turns the sky orange, but turns the adobe homes  
an odd shade of pink.

I look west, I hear the fire crackling  
my snow ghost and me.

Breathing in and breathing out  
just the two of us.

My mind strays from the breath,

as I notice two rabbits hopping along  
the frozen layers of snow from the day before.  
A leafless aspen sways gently in the aftermath  
of the winter storm.  
When will the meaning of things stop mattering?  
I say this aloud to snow ghost.  
But, snow ghost appears aloof of my questions,  
yawning and stretching out on the old blue sofa.  
I think life's questions no longer matter to a snow ghost  
or any other kind of ghost.  
With my thoughts, I walk on over, sink into the soft cushion,  
resting my old body next to snow ghost.  
I wonder how important it is to keep being human.  
I could easily become a ghost of winter anytime,  
nothing would matter then.  
Suicide is a sin "they" say—  
Snow ghost blinks its dark, hollow eyes at me.  
I feel warm blood running through my arthritic hands,  
through my wrinkled temples.  
I breathe in, I breathe out.  
From the sofa, snow ghost floats closer to the fire,  
bored with my philosophical conversation.  
I watch snow ghost begin to disappear in front of the flames.  
I hear a hissing sound on one of the burning logs—  
Snow ghost is now gone.  
I humbly close the curtains, the evening darkness is now here—  
I find myself impatient with the thinking of a live person.  
Perhaps I too, will fade away so peacefully at dusk,  
after snow has littered the earth with white purity.  
Perhaps I too, will become a snow ghost in a season, in a winter  
not so far away.

Bio- Ginger Peters is a freelance writer, living in Santa Fe, NM. She enjoys writing poetry, narratives, and memoirs about life and nature. Both are joyous at times and both are cruel at times. Being able to write about the joy and cruelty of both, is her way of dealing with the happiness and peace and dealing with the suffering and sadness that goes on in our world and in each individual being. This is just another way, all beings are bound together.

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### Going Somewhere

by Anina Robb

Seclusion is its own secret  
like the natural moment of waking  
from sleep. The stiff spirit,  
no more clear for being close,

no less itself. All around,  
the sounds of morning:  
pipes channel water, sheets smoothed  
along sheets, and the overwhelming

return to others. Awake, people  
have no home, crossing curb  
to curb, thinking they are going  
somewhere, ending up

still in their shoes, not blessed  
but comfortable in the leathery  
imprint of their own arches  
where they always were.

Bio- Anina Robb is a poet living in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. She has published many poems—both in print journals and online. In her free time she likes to run.

**Planted in the Garden** (*prose poem inspired by the Writers' Craft Box "Roots" theme*)

by Sarah Bigham

Even now, as the frost-browned basil has become brittle to the touch and the last of the scarlet and ochre leaves have spun lazily from the trees, I am called to the garden. If I search carefully under autumn's detritus, I can yet find a fuzzy green nub of the scented geranium to caress, adding fragrance to my fingers for a walk amongst the stalks, reminding me of summer's golden glory as I sow bulbs in sunny coves.

It is here where, tempting fate each spring, I enfold delicately-haired tomato seedlings into the dirt, too eager for digging after the stolid torpor of winter to abide the forecast warnings, knowing a draping of old sheets each

evening will provide enough warmth to keep them thrusting shoots down and pushing leaves up as the green world explodes around us. Such a joy, then, to entrust new life to the ground.

It is here where I revel in the bursting, buzzing, brilliance of nature abundant, often erring in my sprinting quest to sort eager weeds from surprise volunteers and last year's new additions which have morphed unrecognizably from the spindly sale rack specimens I take pity on during sojourns at nurseries—all throbbing with life, unwilling to be plucked from the soil without a fight.

It is here where my loves are, the hardest planting of all, the only kind I dread. I nestled their still-warm, so-loved, fur-clad bodies below the grass, watered with a rain of tears, knowing their hurts had finally eased. Small chiseled stones mark these spots, but I know them by feel. I was married here, barefoot, under the gnarled branches of the pink dogwood, to have them near.

My heart is in the garden, rooting me to this place, anchoring me to fly.

*Poet's Commentary: As an avid (if somewhat haphazard) gardener, roots are something I spend a lot of time navigating. While I know there are many interpretations of the "roots" theme, my garden is what I most associate with roots. I have an abiding love for my quirky garden and I created this poem as I reflected on WHY I love it so.*

Bio- Sarah Bigham reads, teaches, and writes in Maryland where she lives with a kind chemist, three independent cats, and an unwieldy herb garden.

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## **Of Wings and Women**

by Nicole M. Bouchard

The first time I saw them,  
A startling recognition overtook me.  
In the darkest shadow of my reflection,  
I glimpsed what would be familiar,  
What once was foreign.  
What once was hidden.

What once, but no longer,  
was repressed.

Thousands of sharp quills, barbs and hooks  
sprouting from my core  
The velvety black depth of feathers growing  
Down my porcelain shoulder blades  
like words to cover a page,  
Penning truth into the empty spaces,  
the inflicted ones that have burned  
For lack of expression all these years.

I've dreamt in black; ink in my veins.  
I've wept in typeface, screaming out in white reams of blank pages.  
This is the forbidden language—all we're not supposed to say, think, feel.  
I've held it down, held it back, held it over my head like a threat  
Held it all this time until it was holding me;  
a rising tower of phrases constantly caging, constricting, censoring.  
I've sent out missives on avian guardians,  
unconscious of how I was becoming one.

An army of winged warriors came to me one day;  
Waiting for me to cross the sill, holding vigil,  
Spread in legions across the land beneath my sole window.  
Not knowing they were my sisters  
come to implore me toward wholeness,  
I feared them, all cloaked in black, and wished them away  
Seeing too late the fierce beauty  
in the sapphire glint of feathered shields laid against their backs.

Black, a printer's gold,  
made by mixing all fundamental colors in extreme  
Raw and ripe with potential, power undiluted,  
Bearing equal measures of all the elements used in its creation,  
Forged by what was into something greater, symbolic of what is yet to be  
A transformed product of the past and an open gateway to the future—  
An integration of dark and light, every experience and emotion;  
The hue coating my wings of armor.

Resistance defeated by instinct, the primitive lust for survival—  
Pain too great to stay in an outgrown shape, what I'd fought

of the transformation I've accepted;  
invited my truest form to stand to her full height,  
succumbed to her strength with a smile, dancing untamed in the darkness.  
A wind wild as the spirit summoning it, will shatter the window.  
Its force the breath, my breath, speaking the latent language of my soul.  
I'll raise these immense black wings, open ivory arms—soar without fear.

Gliding freely, weightlessly, I'll be joined by my winged sisters,  
Who have seen what I've seen, who know what I know,  
Realized beings deepened and strengthened by adversity.  
In flight I'll think of those before us,  
a 16th century poetess drawing pen as sword to defend her place  
and a Victorian visionary, all in black,  
asking in print  
if the wings of women are yet strong enough.

The bird  
With distinctive voice  
who nurtures,  
defends,  
ascends  
into the clouds,  
doesn't fear the extent  
of its own power.

(See About Us page for staff bio)

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**I Am Roots** *(inspired by the Writers' Craft Box "Roots" theme)*

by A. J. Huffman

Gnarled appendages are my only means  
of grounding, of holding my place  
and my self steady against my own  
environment. I am ghost  
of a thousand lives. I breathe  
them like seconds  
on a clock without hands. Exhaling  
tears, I feed my foundation

the sorrow required to breed. I am  
the cross, and I have never needed nails  
or ropes to hang myself. I glow in both  
moon and sun's light.  
I am daughter of neither.  
Nothing lays claim to me.  
I am married to my own rings.  
My leaves whisper on the wind.  
They know  
they were born to fall.  
Seeds of my tomorrow,  
I will name them like decades,  
remember them as nothing  
more than failed attempts  
at decoration.

Bio- A. J. Huffman has published twelve solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. Her new poetry collections, *Another Blood Jet* (Eldritch Press), *A Few Bullets Short of Home* (mgv2>publishing), *Butchery of the Innocent* (Scars Publications), *Degeneration* (Pink Girl Ink) and *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* (Transcendent Zero Press) are now available from their respective publishers and amazon.com. She is a four-time Pushcart Prize nominee, a two-time Best of Net nominee, and has published over 2,400 poems in various national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, and *Kritya*. She is also the founding editor of Kind of a Hurricane Press.

[www.kindofahurricanepress.com](http://www.kindofahurricanepress.com)

## **Mute**

by Lois Greene Stone

What if snow made a sound  
like rain when falling? Might  
the magic from cascades of  
white flakes be altered by  
audio distraction? Rain is  
gentle, harsh, violent, soothing.  
Snow may blizzard, swirl,  
or trickle but each unique

shape settles on another  
silently.  
Forts, forms with carrots  
for noses, balls, catching  
with one's tongue, sleds,  
skis...rain repels such purposes.  
Plows and personal blowers  
interrupt the quiet of winter  
clearing paths for cars and  
walks. Human-made noise.  
What if snow made a sound  
like rain when falling? Should  
Nature ever allow those  
flurries to speak?

Bio- Lois Greene Stone, writer and poet, has been syndicated worldwide. Poetry and personal essays have been included in hard & softcover book anthologies. Collections of her personal items/ photos/ memorabilia are in major museums including twelve different divisions of The Smithsonian.

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