

Grace Notes

Paddler Press Volume 9

Paddler Press
Volume 9 - *Grace Notes*



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by Scott and Jill Kalter

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Foreword

It's become a joke, if not a cliché, that Canadians say “sorry” too much. You can hear it the moment we bump into each other on the street (whether we were the “bumper” or not), or when one of us starts to interrupt the other in a conversation. Listen to these apologies carefully enough, however, and you'll recognize them for what they really are: the “grace notes” we bring to the music of everyday life.

As I explained in my submissions call for this issue of *Paddler Press*, grace notes were considered almost unnecessary embellishments in musical notation. I wondered if we could define the term, though: as the often quiet but reassuring moments where we show our humanity to each other, or where a spirit of mercy makes itself felt during difficult times.

The poems and creative non-fiction we got in response shows the many different forms in which these kinds of grace notes are offered to us. Reading them is a great reminder to not only be aware of them, and grateful for them, but to give them as freely as possible whenever we're able.

Shane Schick
Whitby, July 2023

Thank you to this issue's contributors for your continued support and trust in Paddler Press. A huge thank you to Guest Editor, Shane, for all his dedicated work in putting this issue together and for challenging us to both look for and give grace notes to others.

Happy Paddling,

Deryck N. Robertson
EIC, Paddler Press

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Cover Photo: *Dandelion*, digital image, 2631 x 1756 pixels
by Scott and Jill Kalter

After spending 30 years in the hustle-bustle of Los Angeles, Scott and Jill Kalter escaped to the Applegate Valley in Southern Oregon. They now live on a small “hobby farm” with their two border collies, black cat, and six sheep.

Monologue After the Drought

Brent Raycroft

That group of trees
standing in the middle distance
that wide face, that wall of leaves
roaring in the rainstorm we were hoping for:
Is it conscious of anything?

What a sophomoric question.
Just because it mimes with
upraised brow and streaming cheeks
the feeling that you're feeling
does not imply a mind inside.

And what a cynical reply.
Not conscious as in: "I write poetry"
but as in: "This wind! This rain! This
leaning into it on wakened roots!"
Something short-lived. Something acute.

To quibble would be—humanist.
But grant me this: whatever it is trees feel
they can't see this creature below their horizon
taking shelter in a doorway,
its eyes on their joy.

Heights

Brent Raycroft

The kids shoot past
like the next round of fireworks.
I am the grey smoke
revealed on the sky behind their light
holding to the shape I made
when I was bright.

Sea Bricks

Brent Raycroft

Sainte-Flavie, Quebec

Drive all day to take this breath
to watch your step on this wet beach
to let the light go wide,
after so much focusing.

Not a famous shore but the back yard
of a motel-restaurant and store.
Little waves hiss in repeatedly.
Some guy flies a drone from his balcony.

I used to love a beautiful stone,
the rare ones—the kind you take home.
I still look for them and pick them up
but I'm quicker now to let them go.

Here it's sea bricks that stand out.
Letters in a comic font. Red thumbs.
There must have been a wall
that stood here once and tumbled.

Each has holes that go right through,
sometimes one, sometimes two.
No longer bricks at all
but softly asymmetrical.

Very heavy jewelry.
Brass knuckles made of clay.
Try one on! Or in your palm:
A squarish totoro, staring silently.

They are young but old already
and fast becoming sand again.
Every granite pebble here
will outlast every one of them.

Brent Raycroft's poetry has appeared in *Vallum*, *Prairie Fire*, *Arc*, *CV2*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *The Walrus*, *Best Canadian Poetry in English 2014* and in other journals and anthologies. He lives with his family north of Kingston/Katarokwi, Ontario, in traditional Algonquin territory.

Aspiration

JL Huffman

A dangling, broken sign reads Trailer Court. Mobile homes lean in disrepair amidst junked cars, broken plastic chairs, and garbage-strewn gardens. Beyond the bent gate, a cacophony of rap music, TV reality shows, screeching curses, and bawling babies. Rusted desperation.

trampoline
a girl bounces, jumps
higher hopes

The Author, JL Huffman, is a retired Trauma Surgeon/ICU doctor who has published three poetry books - *Almanac: The Four Seasons* (2020), *Family Treasons* (2021), and *Voyage: Vista and Verse* (2022). Her individual poems have appeared in *The Pharos*, *The Asabi Haikuist Network*, *Haiku Dialogue*, *The Pan Haiku Review*, and others. For more info on the Author visit her web site jlhuffman.com and follow her on Twitter @JoanHuffmanMD

Aegis

Frances Boyle

An earth-spin away,
monks pray beside
a colossal
gold-veined rock.

Worlds from here
it is their treasure
and their brace.
A single hair of Buddha
ensures it will never fall.

In this hemisphere,
I know no comparable prize
until you split the peach for me,
reveal its golden flesh
and stone.

Convergence

Frances Boyle

Snowflake shadows rise
to join the snow
drifting down
in the street
lamp light.

Iris

Frances Boyle

i

No gazing into the void, not when
the sun shines on the snow so it
radiates cool light, when the bare black
branches of the apple are filigree, tracery,
and the green is daubed with white.
I want to find my way through
darkness to blue, find a way on this
Imbolc day when we're halfway
to spring. Know that Brigid speaks
to me of blue, that the tiger twitches
its tail. New year, new month, new
hope despite a city under siege. I'm
strangely optimistic as I avoid
the void, feel the gravity that stretches
drip upon drip into long icicles,
glittering beauty in their translucence.
Add red today for luck, for love. Red
and blue, the remembered purple
of the irises in my garden.

ii

Open to the pure energy, the light within the sound, a resonance
that rings itself, a grasp like roots unbound from ground, sinew-
ing across the path round the lake. If my heart were purged of
fear, it might fly out, tug me onward, bless me with its thrashing
inarticulate energy, hold my eyes ransom to familiar flowering,

theorems pooled like fist-clenched keychains. I'd be free to sing, my throat unlocked, numberless notes tumbling to wrap me in melody, to dispel the heaviness that haunts me, bore to the core of thrumming sensation, the breath of elsewhere, the synchronous sounds within silence.

iii

I sing of dead leaves limp on the landing,
fallen purple petals greyed to palest mauve.
Their regret imprints the paving stones.
A clutch of abandoned nests visible in trees.
The lake, still solid on Sunday now shows
shades of blue, paling to pools on the surface.
Construction workers on their phones above
on the embankment. They could be talking
to each other but I doubt that's so. New
shoots through old grass; my dog nibbles.

Frances Boyle's latest book is *Openwork and Limestone* (Frontenac House, 2022). She has also written *Seeking Shade*, an award-winning short story collection, *Tower*, a novella, *Skin Hunger*, a forthcoming novel, and two earlier poetry books. Frances's writing has been selected for the *Best Canadian Poetry* series and *Poem in Your Pocket Day*. Recent publications include *TAB Journal*, *Windsor Review*, *Acropolis* and *Dust Poetry*. Originally from Regina, Frances lives in Ottawa. Visit www.francesboyle.com and follow @francesboyle19.

How Taffy Everything Becomes

Tim Moder

Between ice and ice are summer days, our family on display at rented cabins, corners cleaned on Sunday mornings, pick up keys on Sunday afternoons. Paddle boats, blue and white, upside-down, inviting. Screen doors spring, then slam. Mismatched pots and pans. Trundle beds. Wrapped towels. Sand in the shower, the well smell of soft water. Flat flowers on the bottom of hot feet escape across freshly minted yards, to leap from docks dragged into weed beds, where actual fish, suspended, muscle silent arias from perfectly shaped O's. Remember this through smoky sundown visions as the fire pops and the knots untie. How taffy everything becomes.

Where I Hid My Love For You

Tim Moder

Underneath a bunker in the corner of a mad world, muddy with infinitesimal.
In acolytes eyes, with matching robes, having mustard seed faith, and shovels.
In coal miners' lungs, fermenting with the recycled sweat of frightened birds.
In concert halls, baroque; spinning, whirling, notes opaque in bandshells.
As boxers taking punches in disturbed dreams, decorated with clenched fists.
In a smooth card box next to the open oven, pencil scrawled only as mirepoix.
On slow-motion evening porches with warm breezes pushing silent swings.
Across the elbow-rooted footpath at St Peters Dome, sprawling uphill climb.
Over broad, robust tables whose formidable stakes are ill-gotten gain.
In sworn-to-secret candle flames when tired minds, bookish, bend memories.
Within priceless paintings whose unblinking eyes have lives of their own.
On salt sands, underwater, an inch at a time, feeling where the fish have been.
Between stations, in pinched static voices, recognized with deliberate antennae.
In plain sight, masquerading as the wind that muscles half-mast flags.

Lighthouse In The Sideways Rain

For Margaret Tauzell

Tim Moder

The air is sand on chapped lips,
and a chipped concrete buttress
causeway with sunburned iron
railings; beach fires, leather sandals,
planks that came from wrecks. I
watched you place your mothers'
ashes in uncertain surf. She has
always been a part of this place.
Boys have jumped here in an effort
to be men. Some of them became
memories. Their breath is water
lapping at the land. Their breath is
water always lapping at the land.

Tim Moder is a poet writing in northern Wisconsin. He is a member of The Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. His poems have appeared in *Great Lakes Review*, *Cutthroat*, *Deep Wild*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and others. Find him at timmoder.com

Faults

Zach Murphy

You were born into chaos before it became your shadow. You learned that your first heartbreak didn't unequivocally break you, it just prepared you for the future. You wondered why the stars preferred not to be seen, then you understood them for retreating behind the shroud. You longed as your dreams danced in the distance, only to taunt you in your sleep. You witnessed things burn because there was no other way. You witnessed things burn because there should have been another way. You felt your soul splash, sink, and swirl, like a tear that gets lost in a storm. And still, the mountains patiently breathed.

Zach Murphy is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in *Reed Magazine*, *The Coachella Review*, *Maudlin House*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, and *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*. His chapbooks *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press, 2021) and *If We Keep Moving* (Ghost City Press, 2022) are available in paperback and ebook. He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.



Damselfly on Gunwhale by Deryck N. Robertson
Digital Image

I am a pilgrim

Justin Lacour

I don't mean to go on.

How I splashed in the Atlantic Ocean
that April and couldn't get warm again.

Not even the sun (I was so thin)

You covered me in towels,
gave me hot water to drink

till I stopped shivering.

Now to what shall I
compare this to,

that first winter in New York,
I was too poor to buy books,

I'd loiter in poetry,

the Barnes & Noble on Fifth Avenue
(no one ever told me buy something or leave)

A poem would carry me

through eight hours of work,
stacking, shelving, scrubbing restrooms.

It was cold. You were there

at the end of work,
our bed on the floor.

Sleep was like entering a stone.

Justin Lacour lives in New Orleans and edits *Trampoline: A Journal of Poetry*.
He is the author of five chapbooks of poems, including *Hulk Church*
forthcoming from *Belle Point Press*.

That Crazy Old Lady

Barbara Leonhard

still has her Christmas tree up!
Indeed! Been three years now.
The LED lights haven't failed to sparkle
at passersby walking their dogs
and children playing in the park.

The few music students continuing
since COVID struck
blink several times
as they arrive weekly for lessons
to see the tree still waiting
for more Bluegrass tunes.

The bluebird pecking
at the picture window each spring -
Does it want to nest
in the tree's brilliant branches
alongside the crystalline angels
and shimmering orbs

on artificial branches?
My tree, fake news? Hardly.
As my gaze rests there,
I'm spared headlines of disease,
mass shootings, bombs marked
"For the Children", the inflictions
of 'isms', the forays of fear.

My Christmas tree,
determined to stand
until kindness and forgiveness
light up this world again.

Barbara Leonhard is an internationally known prize-winning poet and Pushcart nominee (2022). She is indebted to *Well Versed 2021: A Collection of Poetry and Prose* and *Spillwords Press* for past honors. Her debut poetry collection, *Three-Penny Memories: A Poetic Memoir (Experiments in Fiction, 2022)*, opened as a best seller on Amazon. Barbara is also Editor for *MasticadoresUSA*. You can follow her on Wordpress and Twitter (@BarbaraLeonhar4).

Our Nights

Devon Neal

When she pulls into the driveway,
she'll see the bedroom window open,
the leafy night air flayed through the screen,
and the bruised purple glow of the TV,
the only light in the room.

When she comes inside,
she's greeted by the blunt smell of beer
and a blend of fresh cilantro, lime, and peppers,
and a white noise burst of a paper bag
as I unroll the chips for us.

Our nights sound like familiar TV voices,
the trill of laughter, the pouring of wine.
Across the dark living room a hallway light
spreads a warm light into the kids' quiet rooms
as a fan lulls them to sleep.

There's the burn on the tip of our tongues,
the clink of a beer can on wood
and the way the night becomes a slight fog—
a subtle look, the graze of hands,
the way the first thing we think in the light of the morning
is when we'll do it again.

Stop to Consider

Devon Neal

Surely it is common to see
birds, amid the wave riding
of their flight, pausing atop
the tallest of our human-built
peaks—the tall silver cross
towering at the tip of the church,
the hotel's penthouse balcony,
each skyscraper's blinking needle—
and puts no thought to blueprints,
beams, foundations, and cranes
before skittering away to its next
destination, much in the same way
we sit against the wrinkled trunk
of the tallest tree in the woods,
eyes downward, chasing the insect-
like letters among pages in a book.

Devon Neal is a Bardstown, KY resident who received a B.A. in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University and an MBA from The University of the Cumberlands. He currently works as a Human Resources Manager in Louisville, KY. His work has been featured in *From the Depths* and *The Rye Whiskey Review*, and is forthcoming in *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *coalitionworks*, *Intangience Magazine*, and *Sage Cigarettes Magazine*.

Spin

Peter Lilly

How, not only melody,
but a choir of intermingling modes,
a school of tones, wakes intertwining
in the one voice of an orchestra,
the unintentional harmonics
of the bluesy fret-buzz of ancient strings,
and how the soul beneath these skins
is picked up by a needle,
that works towards the centre.
How the arm that reads the record
with precision, finds its cradle
After the music
Stops.

Peter Lilly is a British Poet who grew up in Gloucester before spending eight years in London studying theology and working with the homeless. He now lives in the South of France with his wife and son, where he concentrates on writing, teaching English, and community building. As well as previous issues of *Paddler Press*, his work has recently appeared in *Calla Press*, *Dreich* and *Green Ink Poetry* amongst others. His debut Collection *An Array of Vapour* is forthcoming with TSL publications.

Father Mercy

Nathanael O'Reilly

I abandoned my aging father
crossed the wild, wild sea
searched scriptures for mercy
boarded the overnight train
crossed the world for beauty
turned my back on my homeland

I left my tragic homeland
said goodbye to dear Father
sought an elusive exotic beauty
flew across the unknown sea
crossed deserts by train
begged the sun for mercy

granted the gift of mercy
born and raised in my homeland
I traversed the continent by train
education funded by my father
my future an open blue sea
my dreams filled with beauty

I travelled the world for beauty
expected and received mercy
survived near-drownings at sea
travelled back to my homeland
drank beer and whiskey with Father
stumbled blissfully to the last train

I caught the homebound train
imbibed the landscape's beauty
on the way home to my father
gratefully accepted mercy
welcomed back to my homeland
after years and years across the sea

I travel towards the sea
again, speed west on the train
immersed in a new green homeland
learning ancestral beauty
gathering small acts of mercy
living a dream for my father

I consume the sea's terrible beauty
ride trains through decades to mercy
dig deeply the homeland of my fathers

After drinking whiskey while rowing

Nathanael O'Reilly

the professor ties
his rowboat to the dock, climbs
onto planks, stumbles
to the closest pine, whispers
Let me lean on you awhile

Irish-Australian poet Nathanael O'Reilly teaches creative writing at the University of Texas at Arlington. His ten collections include *Selected Poems of Ned Kelly* (Beir Bua Press, 2023), *Dear Nostalgia* (above/ground press, 2023) and *(Un)belonging* (Recent Work Press, 2020). His poetry appears in over one hundred journals & anthologies published in fourteen countries. He is poetry editor for *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature*.

Handstanding

Steve Denehan

There are some nights
she sings
herself
to sleep

by far
my favourite nights

days too, are filled
with songs
muffled melodies
finding their way
from her room
to me
wherever I am

she sings
while handstanding
in the garden

while cuddling the cat

while jumping
on the trampoline

she whispers songs
when we sit together
on the couch
thinking

that I cannot hear

I do not remember
when I stopped
but
there was a time
when I
was just the same

strange how
the more songs
we learn
the less
we sing

Cardioversion

Steve Denchan

They are going to stop her heart today
she will become, for several seconds
a body
on an operating table
then, they will restart it, and she
will continue
to be my mother

this is what they do
to correct irregular heartbeats
cardioversion, is what it is called
like a phone or a laptop
we are rebooted

it has stopped before, her heart
when she fell
to be caught
by him

when she held her children
for the first time
breathless with the understanding
that they were hers
that she was theirs

when she answered the phone
to learn
that her own mother's heart
had given up

when she put her hand
against her granddaughter's chest
to feel another racing pulse

today, again
her heart will stop
in order to go on

Steve Denehan lives in Kildare, Ireland with his wife Eimear and daughter Robin. He is the author of two chapbooks and four poetry collections. Winner of the *Anthony Cronin Poetry Award* and twice winner of *Irish Times' New Irish Writing*, his numerous publication credits include *Poetry Ireland Review* and *Westerly*.

Vernal

Steven Searcy

A million medallions emerge,
and marriage beds spread everywhere,
and everywhere sparkles and flushes
with color, and clear air hums
some tongueless song, a long tone,
a lingering tune, even stones
are singing green, greeting warm,
and storms just juice the growth,
as each leaf lifts to light.

Steven Searcy lives with his wife and four sons in Atlanta, GA, where he works as an engineer in fiber optic telecommunications. His poetry has recently appeared in *Pulsebeat Poetry Journal*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Boats Against the Current*, and *Ekstasis Magazine*.

What we can learn from sea stars

Jean Janicke

At rock bottom
there are stars.
Lose an arm
to escape
a predator,
it can grow back.
A hundred legs
under pressure
can move forward.

Jean Janicke is an economist, coach, and writer living in Washington, DC. Her work has appeared in *Green Ink Poetry*, *Honeyguide Literary Magazine*, and *FERAL: A Journal of Poetry and Art*.

Born Knowing

Cheryl Skory Suma

In the middle of our walk through the forest, my four-year-old daughter dropped to her knees.

“Melody!”

Too late. She’d wrapped her tiny hands tightly around the railing in front of her, then sunk onto the bridge. Her pink leggings promptly drank up the fall rot that its planks offered. Water-logged leaves and aging moss eagerly became one with her tiny limbs, turning her pink to olive. I felt a twinge of resentment for the forest’s claim on her.

It had taken so long to get her into that outfit. She’d wanted to wear the fairy costume. Again. “I have to, mama,” she’d stated firmly. “Because fairies should go to the forest, or they’ll be sad.”

Somehow, I’d convinced her to wear regular clothes instead. Typically, there was no moving Melody once she’d set on something. Not without a fight. Having no fight left in me today, I crouched beside her, although I was careful not to let my knees touch the bridge’s soup.

“What are you doing, Melody?”

She ignored my question. Taking in a deep breath, she smiled. I mirrored her as best I could, taking in my own long breath. I couldn’t match the contentment in her grin, but I mustered a smile. It felt tired, even from the inside.

“Melody, what’re we doing?”

She angled her eyes briefly to meet mine before returning her gaze to the forest. “Seeing, mama.”

“Seeing.” I wished I could remember the language of children. It seemed so long ago. I looked around, trying to spot what had captured her interest. All I could see was a struggling creek, more puddles than free-flowing, and a forest that was dying. Fallen trees, broken limbs, rotting leaves.

Melody’s sweet brow furrowed. The adorable folding of new muscles always surprised me – the lack of a single wrinkle, more gentle waves than a true frown. “How come we just say green? Why don’t we have more names?” She turned away from the view to look at me, waiting for wisdom.

Ah. Something I could answer. “There actually are many different names for all the shades of green. Emerald, turquoise, olive, jade ... if you want, I can show you how each name matches a different shade when we get home. On my laptop.”

“Or you could show me now. Just point.” Instead of waiting for me, Melody stuck her own arm through the bridge’s rails, pointing at a mossy rock. “What’s that one?”

I stared at its cloak of moss — a multitude of shades. “Um, looks like a cross between....”

Melody interrupted my struggle to decipher the moss’s hues with a new pronouncement. “The forest’s green smells like growing.” A pause. “My bed’s green blanket doesn’t smell like growing.” Another pause. “This green is better.”

“Growing.” I smelt rot. A lot of rot. It was fall, after all, and it had been raining for days, with snow in the forecast. This was likely the last walk we would take here until spring.

“What does the forest dream about when it sleeps?”

My calves were starting to burn. I stood up. “Sleeps? The forest doesn’t wake or sleep. It’s a forest.” We needed to get going. It was a fifteen-minute walk back to the car, and dinner wasn’t going to make itself.

Melody sighed. So often, my answers seemed to disappoint her. “I mean in the winter. When the forest takes a break from growing.” She stood up, brushing her muddy hands across the front of her blouse. I really should buy her darker clothes.

“I wish I could grow for six months then sleep for six. Like the forest.” She ducked her head, giving me her slant-eyed look that meant she wasn’t sure she should tell me something. Melody took a few skips down the path, then attempted a twirl. She teetered for a moment but managed to right herself before falling. As I quickened my step to catch up with her, she froze, then dropped her voice to a whisper. “Mommy.” A smile blossomed as she decided to share her secret after all.

“Yes, Melody, what is it?”

“The reason I wish I could grow half the year then sleep the rest like the forest — it’s so I could grow bigger faster.” Another smile and a wiggle. Pleased with her own bravery in sharing her secret, no doubt. “I’m gonna be a really good grownup.”

“Oh yeah?” Now I was smiling too. Her enthusiasm for the

future was like honey, so sweet it had to be savored a drop at a time. A welcome addition to my bland days.

She nodded gravely. “ ‘Cause I won’t forget about seeing.”

My husband says we should have named her Dawn, not Melody. Always returning to the beginning.

“No rush to grow, sweetheart.” I stroked her hair. “You’ve got your whole life to see. Right now, it’s time to go home.”

*

That was three years ago. Every fall, I return to walk this bridge. To remind me of Melody and what she taught me. A year after her death, my husband refused to talk about her anymore. “We have to move on, Catherine. We can’t curl up and die with her.”

If I can’t curl up and die, I need to honor her life. To walk in silence, seeking the space between breaths, so I can see. Melody taught me we are born full of acceptance for what is, born knowing how to rejoice in life’s gifts. Then we spend our lifetime forgetting — most of us work really hard at it. We allow life’s noise to drown out the innate knowledge we brought with us. We turn away until we forget we were ever wise. Until wise seems naive.

Melody had it right; the secret to happiness is seeing. Taking it all in, one breath at a time. Celebrating what is right in front of you.

When I reach the bridge, I sink to my knees and clasp the railing. I imagine my Melody beside me as I peer through the slats, waiting to become lost in a sea of green.

Cheryl's work has appeared in US, UK, and Canadian publications, including *Barren Magazine*, *Reckon Review*, *National Flash Fiction*, *Exposition Review*, *FatalFlaw Literary Magazine*, *Longridge Review*, *SFWP*, *SugarSugarSalt*, and others. A multi-*Pushcart* nominee, her work placed in thirty-nine competitions since 2019, including: 2nd place, *BlankSpaces 2023 Write Prompt Contest*, Runner-Up, *2022 Pulp Literature Flash Fiction Contest*, Honorable Mention, *Exposition Review 2022 Flash 405 Contest*. Cheryl has a MHSpeech-Language Pathology, HBSpeech Psychology. Post publication, she joined the team at *Barren Magazine* as Flash CNF Contributing Editor and at *Reckon Review* as a staff reader. You can find her on twitter @cherylskorysuma



Little Wonder by Shane Schick
Digital Image

Elements of Grace

Richard-Yves Sitoski

Blood

It fills the body
the way ghosts fill a house,
ghosts that get drunk
when we drink,
that we set free
when we hope for things.

Antimatter

What is the name
for that part of the world
that continues
after someone dies?

Water

In my lifetime I'll become
the last person to remember my mother.
I've already begun to forget her voice,
how her words would fall
from the ceiling like snow
and land on my face like rain.

Air

At one point your heart
took its very first beat.
That day the wind
wore some molecules
off the top of Everest.
The two are not unrelated.

Soul

My dog and I spoke
about our life's mission.
Mine was to name
colours only I could see.
My dog's was to wish
for a longer leash.
The rest of the day
we silently wept
over what the other had said.

Richard-Yves Sitoski (he/him) is the 2019-2023 Poet Laureate of Owen Sound, Ontario, on the territory of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation. His work has appeared in *Arc*, *Prairie Fire*, *Train*, and *The Fiddlehead*. He is co-editor, with Penn Kemp, of *Poems in Response to Peril: An Anthology in Support of Ukraine*, profits from which will be directed toward efforts to assist displaced Ukrainian cultural workers. His one-person show, *Butterfly Tongue*, hits fringe Ontario festivals in the summer of 2023.

Power Down

Karen Grose

The room is sterile, institutional, walls the colour of egg yolk, a dying plant on the window ledge.

Four beds, women with broken hips, grey hair fine as mist, arms like milky reeds, their eight-veined feet pressed together as though in prayer. Harried on my lunch break I sit, no fan of sticky plastic seats.

Gran points a bony finger, lines on her face beaming in elegance. “A tech CEO,” she tells her new friends.

Nurses rush in and out, rumpled scrubs and sunken eyes telling the story of too much work.

My phone rings and I ignore it – all the screaming, screaming running, pretending, circuits shortening, fake news and false truths.

I murmur gentle words, plumping pillows, straightening blankets, scattering magazines with

large print for filmy eyes.

Yellow liquid snakes through plastic tubes secured to metal poles, lemony cleanser doing nothing to mask the smell of soiled linens, trays of soggy half-eaten egg sandwiches.

Not everything is as it appears.

A frail hand squeezes mine, a peace.

Gran hugs me and my knees buckle. She doesn't say I love you – doesn't have to.

Still, life interrupts, with calls and texts smothering me, drowning me:

Ping. A deal gone south.

Ping. The divorce lawyer.

Ping. Another schoolyard confrontation with my son this week.

Jagged pieces. Raw edges. Glitches I don't reveal.

Her friends smile, unspoken love invisible and caressing like the wind. Fire consumes from within, searing my heart, my soul.

How I long to fill the gap, slow down, be content. Tell me, how to let go?

How not to be busy now, busy all the time, exhausted?

My days are numbered too. The time will come. How will I identify myself, the line in the sand that divides earth from soul?

Gran smiles, easy. "Silence your pocket."

The women cackle, playful, a natural ease, all chiffon and softness. They're half robed, half exposed, their frail bodies a series of broken promises, whispering reminders of a life well-lived.

One story bleeds into the next: first dates, first loves, bruises and mistakes, past versions of self, simpler times. Long friendships, birthdays, raindrops, sunsets and leaves in October, colours which never get old. Family and children, lives built, now floating away.

Bonds tied strong enough to tether continents.

I want to drink it in, inhale it, the completeness they embody – the dream of the life I want to have, the one I feel in my bones.

The room gets quiet, content, and I sit with my thoughts, telling myself what has never been hidden.

I can feel quiet kindnesses along with glaring truths, tranquility amid dark skies with stars for guides, a world that values grace.

My body loosens.

This will not be Gran's last breath

This will not be mine.

Karen is a writer from Ontario, who splits her time living in the solitude of Buckhorn and bustling downtown Toronto. She has three published poems by *Roi Faineant Press* and one mystery novel, *The Dime Box*. A new (ish) writer with an insatiable curiosity to learn, she can be found on T: @kgrose2 or www.karengrose.ca

Coterie

Tamarah Rockwood

The very nature of drowning requires:
to death.

This thought
was only
a couple of minutes.

The causation
of the water is,

was,

there between
Between the clefts of the splitting land

which divided
people who stood

on the land and who grasped
onto roots as the land

split

and

as the divide

widened

and

the water rose
from the depth which
we did not know

was there, and we,

had the earth —

for a moment.

Shorter than the breath we held.

Tamarah Rockwood graduated from Harvard in 2020 and some publications include short stories, screenwriting, and poetry. She is the CEO of *Bainbridge Island Press*, as well as the manager of *Ars Poetica, WA*. In her life, she and her husband are raising their 5 children in the woods.

desire/path

Sonia Nicholson

walk with me my love, the first time
daily
count them — number one of fifteen sets /
to carve out to follow others trailing
crumbs break off
cross
grass
through
hedge
nothing to /you see?/ something, we will
free will footsteps human/being
make (our) wishes last forever
still
outlast the labels between
hung

it)
build it and they will (build come / fifteen
times forever yearning, short cuts we walk
the distance cut-ting short points a and b
illicit wisdom crowdsource wants

begin with one attraction, love, discrete
the lines we leave behind with naughty feet

Sonia Nicholson's work has appeared in publications including *Literary Heist*, *Pinhole Poetry*, *Heimat Review*, and *Rivanna Review*. A first generation Canadian who grew up in a Portuguese immigrant household, she was born and raised in Osoyoos, British Columbia. Sonia holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in French and Spanish from the University of Victoria, and continues to call Victoria home. Her debut novel, *Provenance Unknown*, was published in Spring 2023 by *Sands Press*.

The Mercies Upon Me

Shane Schick

Unasked, the waves grant me the favor
of carrying the entire conversation
while I sit in silence on the shore.

I turned left too slowly at the intersection
coming here, endangering lives. Not a single driver
exercised their right to a righteous honk.

This is on top of the so-far-okay feeling
in my knee after going on my first run in months.
I had been sure I'd pay a price for it.

Our accountant says I earned more last year,
but what can I honestly say I deserve?
The sun lowers like a curtain on my expectations.

I used to hoard the Get Out of Jail Free cards
in Monopoly, and must have amassed a deck.
It's almost criminal, all the mistakes I keep making,

and still, no one is pointing a finger or blowing a whistle.
I walk through the park, the air indulging me with breath.
The flowers on the path just give and give and give.

Everything I write here, and will write from here on in,
I've come to see as a totally insufficient thank-you note;
the address unknown, but the addressee all too obvious.

Shane Schick is a writer based in Whitby, Ont, where he lives with his wife and three children. His poems have appeared in literary journals across Canada (including *Paddler Press!*), the U.S., the U.K. and Africa.

Dad is Not Here Now

Navneet Bhullar

Call. Write. String words.

Anything about him.

No incident is too small.

Things.

Just him entering the room and all the radiance ---
tell me.

His anecdotes. His quotes.

His comment years ago on your rosebush.

He loved so much.

I want it all.

His knuckle on his whiskers.

His holding of your baby.

His words in goodbyes.

His tape-recording of his toddlers.

His post dinner seat reading in the
unheated corner of that Himalayan hut.

His patience in the heat as he packed to travel.

His health advice from things he read.

Anything about his readings.

His strides. His handkerchief.

His spine during therapy.

His chats with travelers.

His mornings in hospital.

His tight grasp on his scooter.

His long baths.

His jumbled phrases at night.

His voice. His turban.

Like when you water a prune,
the heart uncurls for a bit.
And rests on your words.
Call. Message when he comes to you.

Bring the words.

Navneet Bhullar is a physician and disability activist based currently in Pennsylvania and Indian Punjab. Her poems have been published online in *Cagibi* and *OpenDoor Magazine* and she would love to read her work in a print journal. She enjoys traveling to countries unseen, especially if they have mountains.

Good Things in Threes

David J. Kennedy

Your late uncle spoke
of the things that matter;

family, love, and art —
good things in threes.

*Forgetting the dead
and failing to remember*

*your death are calamities
of equal measure.*

The goldfinch with years
at most does not dwell

on deeds and virtue;
any footprint she may leave.

Far better to rummage
for seeds of dandelion

and sunflower hearts,
fill the sky with songs of color.

David J. Kennedy is a poet and non-fiction writer from Sydney, Australia, with recent work appearing in *Roi Fainéant Press*, *Authora Australis*, *South Florida Poetry Journal* and elsewhere. He is the author of two non-fiction books on the social and economic challenges of an ageing population, and holds a Master of Ageing from the University of Melbourne. David lives in Sydney's Inner West with his wife and three children. Find him on Twitter: @DavidJKennedy_



Between the Cracks by Shane Schick
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Rhythm of Grace

Deryck N. Robertson

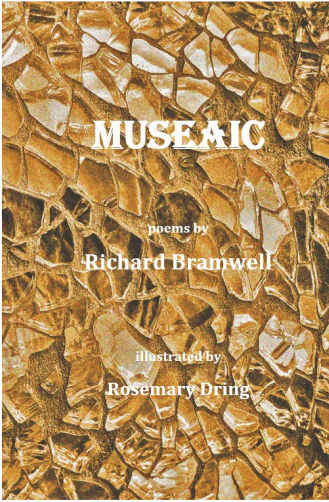
Saturday morning, dressed in fog
and expectations
lifts its veils and, slowly,
reveals a blue treasure underneath.

Soft pulses of daybreak
brush the land, almost
imperceptibly.

But you can hear it
repeating its appeal
to move to the rhythm
of grace.

That this is new
and yesterday
is no excuse.

Deryck N. Robertson lives and creates in Peterborough/Nogojwanong, ON where he is an elementary teacher. His work has appeared with *Loft Books*, *Orchard Lea Press*, *The Minison Project*, and others. His chapbook, *All We Remember* (*Alien Buddha Press*, 2022) is currently #1,415,780 on Amazon.ca but his Mom is still thrilled. He is the EIC and publisher of *Paddler Press* and plays an OK bass trombone. Follow him @Canoe_Ideas or deryck.ca.



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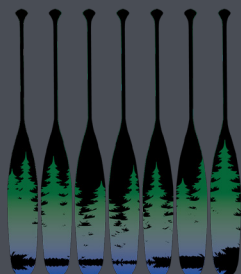
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*My Christmas tree,
determined to stand
until kindness and forgiveness
light up this world again.*

**from *That Crazy Old Lady*
by Barbara Leonhard**



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