

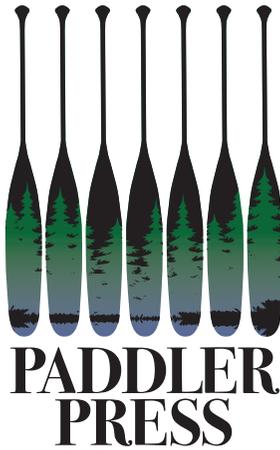


# Echoes

Paddler Press Volume 11

# Paddler Press

Volume 11 - *Echoes*



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Cover Art: *Could We Know Rain Like This?*  
by Jeff Langridge

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## Foreword

This issue has taken longer to put together than previous ones. At times, I've felt rushed. Then, to be honest, a bit lazy. Other commitments have taken me away on weekends and work-tired has me napping more when I get home. In the end, it came together and I trust you will enjoy the chosen pieces.

I have lingered over these works, appreciated the honesty of the writers, and found myself nodding in agreement or with understanding of what has been shared. I am drawn to events and can picture many, substituting myself into the poet's world. Camille Newsom's *Dog and I* is such a piece. Richard Bramwell's *Love You* is a simple yet profound poem that eloquently demonstrates what can make a relationship last, and why I will never eat the last peach in my house. The final piece in this new collection is a challenge to us all and I thank Steve Denehan for the sensitive way in which he wrote about such a difficult topic.

In this issue, I am thrilled to be able to share some of the photographs of Jeff Langridge. Jeff is a poet and a long-time friend with a wonderful eye, effectively capturing and sharing the delicate beauty of nature with the viewers.

Thank you again to our contributors and readers for your continued support and trust in Paddler Press.

Happy Paddling,

Deryck N. Robertson  
EIC, Paddler Press

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Cover Photo: **Could We Know Rain Like This?**  
by Jeff Langridge

# Love You

Richard Bramwell

I've not eaten the peaches.

You'll find them in the fridge.

I thought you might like them  
when you finish your shift.

They look luscious.

Yorkshire-born Richard Bramwell now lives in north-west England. He has published three books of poetry and counting. Enigmas feed his creative curiosity, for example, why is a poem not a tree? [richardbramwell.me.uk](http://richardbramwell.me.uk)

# Poet of the Caucasus; To Mikhail Lermontov

Aisha Al-Tarawne

Silent is the sun above rolling plains,  
he stands, quill loose in his hands,  
odes on his tongue,  
and there are looming mountains  
kissing his shadow- ever steady.

How the eagles soar,  
lifting your heart along with  
beating wings,  
magnificence shines, reflects off  
your bright eyes,  
pupils blown wide in quiet awe.

Aisha Al-Tarawneh is a nineteen-year-old from Denmark and Jordan who enjoys writing poetry. Some of her favourite poets include Mikhail Lermontov and Vladimir Mayakovski. In her spare time, she enjoys watching hockey and practicing archery.

# Love is a Language, His is One I do not Understand

Mariya Kika

He speaks as though the wind will snatch his words from him  
coded whispers of secrets riding along his breath  
Je can hear the tremor *r u n n i n g* along his tongue,  
hear how it shivers between /fownimz/

It is more than Je's ever heard him say—  
a whispered rush of *pleaspromisesproposals*  
that coat her pharynx and settle in her stomach  
Still, Je has not yet had her fill of his words

Words may not be enough, may never be enough  
Je must lay him out, a body upon a table  
an operation of love and consumption, surgical precision  
as Je draws out his words with tongue and teeth

Each syl • la • ble a quiet *plink* in the bowl at her elbow  
Each w-o-r-d and l-e-t-t-e-r a slide under a microscope,  
another foreign substance Je has yet to understand  
Je may never understand, must devote herself to his words

Je may yet need to learn new orthographies, perhaps whole languages  
keep a written ledger, journal after journal  
Breaking down the meaning between syl • la • bles  
Until Je de-codes the apparent simp-li-ci-ty of his l—o—v—e

Mariya is a young Toronto-based student pursuing an MHSc. She most prefers the forms of prose poetry and short stories; her writing often centers around healing, revolution, and family. Her work has appeared in such publications as the *Fiery Scribe Review*, *Livina Press*, *the Bitchin' Kitsch* and more. She can be found on Twitter @mariyakeeka.

# Words for my mother

Jerrod Laber

I have a hard time telling my mother  
that I love her. We struggle to articulate  
much at all to each other, as if  
our cores contain each alike

magnetic poles that keep us from getting  
too close, lest we are forcibly pushed apart.  
She knows she is overbearing, quick to temper,  
and I know I can be derisive.

I don't need to call you when I get home.  
I'm such-and-such years old,  
I'm not a kid, I might say. You'll understand  
when you have a child, her reply.

I wish I could tell her that I do.  
I don't have children yet, but I understand.  
Every year, tears can be shaken loose  
a little easier than the last,

the provocations increasingly slight.  
Tender and fragile she fills  
the hollow spaces between my bones,  
she moves as a bridged current within the marrow.

I wish I could tell her, but I can't.  
Each of us on twin peaks, the valley  
between is vast. So, I write it here,  
what I cannot say, knowing

I'll never show it to her, imagining  
instead a tear-stained word or three  
traversing the land, plucked from the page  
and carried to her by an errant wind.

# Cleaning a loved one's home after their death

Jerrod Laber

The faded shadow  
of an oversized crucifix  
tattooed onto the wall.

\*

Black and white photos of presumably  
long-dead friends and relatives tossed  
into the trash, further into anonymity.

\*

Still-living neighbors peek  
their heads in, offering condolences.  
How well did she know them?

\*

Searching for something  
meaningful to keep,  
terrified by the impermanence of it all.

# Maps

Jerrold Laber

When I encounter elderly couples  
out together in public,  
I think not of their lives together  
but their lives before they met.  
I retrace their most ordinary steps,  
recreate in my head  
the simple frustrations  
of their previous lives  
(their breath hot against the neck  
of one who cut them in line, for example)  
and also the banal joys,  
the sweetness on the tongue  
of a craving fulfilled,  
passing quickly from their minds  
but hidden in the circuitous patterns  
creased into their wise faces,  
labyrinths of smiles and stress  
long forgotten, maps of a rare world,  
a world that carries with it—  
the couple's combined touch, their eyes, their aura—  
the palpability of transcendence.

Jerrold Laber is an Appalachian poet and writer. His work is published in *Door is a Jar Magazine*, the *Oxford Review of Books*, and *Crab Creek Review*, among other places. He lives in Virginia with his wife and their dog.

# After Our Divorce Hearing

Alison P. Birch

after our divorce hearing  
we went to the local pancake house  
I sat across from you

I can't remember what you ate  
but I remember the blue of your eyes  
they reflected the sadness of mine  
we could've tried

but  
you drank diet soda  
we talked about life on the periphery  
our daughter

I looked at you  
your shoulders  
your hands I'd miss holding  
I choked back tears  
not knowing then  
I'd always miss  
the smell of your soap on your neck  
and diet soda

and not knowing why  
I would eat pancakes  
on the hardest days.

Alison Birch began writing at age nine and was selected by her teachers to attend a young writer's conference at the age of ten. She earned a B.A. in Elementary Education, a Master's in Education and Reading Literacy, and is in the process of finishing her Doctorate in Education. Alison has taught Kindergarten through fifth grade and at the university level. She has been a university lecturer and student teacher field supervisor. Alison is currently a faculty lecturer in the field of Education, Literacy and Linguistics. Work has been published in *Paddler Press*, *Texas Poetry Magazine*, *Wax Poetry and Art Library* and *Poetry World* #7.



**If Ferns Could Yawn** by Jeff Langridge  
Digital Image

Jeff is grateful to be behind the lens, pressing a button to capture what he did not make. Finding the best of creation when slowing down, including the shutter speed. He has crafted his art both in photography and poetry combined for the last 8 years. As a teacher of science, he sees the complexity of the universe and marvels at God's mind that can imagine such wonders. As a husband, he knows love is hard won through battles, mostly within his heart. As a father to two boys, he has been learning the appreciation of all things wild. Mostly, he is learning to trust and be faithful.

# How to carry the burning

Sacha Bissonnette

Such an unruly mother, fickle.  
She self-immolates in a brush stroke,  
both canvas and frame,  
imperfect and unfinished.  
Her funeral march is on,  
scorching earth and sky.  
It's like the unfamiliar thrill  
of burnt cinnamon,  
or the way my voyeuristic nature,  
sits deep and low in my stomach  
every time I watch her set fire.

She leaves both skin and ash,  
    there,  
        visible,

for me to sweep up  
and place in my pocket,  
year after year,  
after the cutting,  
like a reminder,  
like a haunting.

Sacha Bissonnette is a writer from Ottawa, Canada. His fiction has appeared in *Witness*, *Wigleaf*, *SmokeLong*, *EQMM*, *Terrain*, *Ghost Parachute*, *The No Sleep Podcast* and elsewhere. He is currently working on a short fiction collection as well as a comic book adaptation of one of his short stories. His projects are powered by the *Canada Council for the Arts* and the *Ontario Arts Council*. He has been selected for the 2024 *Sundress Publications Residency* and is the winner of the 2024 *Faulkner Gulf Coast Residency*.

# Paint

Devon Neil

I awoke this morning before the paint was dry—  
liquid sunlight still dripping from the sharp edges  
of the shrubs, the greens and yellows of the lawn  
dissolving into a rough mosaic, the treeleaves  
palming marbles of dawn, hints of wet dark  
shadowing wood and road, the sky sharp  
with warps of canvas bends and brushstroke  
birds. It was early enough that the glistening hues  
of the day still hadn't quiet settled; indeed, so early  
I almost saw the artist walking away, closing the door.

Devon Neal (he/him) is a Kentucky-based poet whose work has appeared in many publications, including *HAD*, *Stanchion*, *Livina Press*, *The Storms*, and *The Bombay Lit Mag*, and has been nominated for *Best of the Net*. He currently lives in Bardstown, KY with his wife and three children.

# Centuries After....

Abu Ibrahim

Centuries after, at the embassy

I sat humbly praying my interviewer be kind

The room is damped in chained memories

I, the “slave boy” hoping the man across the table sees value in me

He checks my papers thoroughly like his people checked the body  
of my people

He smiles, and approves my entry

“Oh!!! he is a strong one” whispers in my ears

My ancestors toiled on farmlands

I, too, with my sharpened teeth wants a bite off the Big Apple

What’s the difference between an embassy and a slave market?

What’s the difference between La Porte du Non-retour and the  
airport?

Slavery is still alive, and this time, we are paying our way into the  
plantation

# My Heart is the Yam and You Are Not Eating

Abu Ibrahim

My mother knows I don't love yams  
Still, for decades,  
She never fails to fix me a plate  
Even at the risk of a few bites  
Even if I don't eat at all  
This is how you make me feel:  
My heart is a plate of sliced yams  
And you are not eating

Abu Ibrahim, known as IB, is a Nigerian poet whose advocacy led to the creation of the *Best Spoken Word Poetry Album* category at the Grammys. His debut album *Music Has Failed Us* received a Grammy acceptance and is available on major streaming platforms. He's performed at prestigious events globally and received awards for his impact in storytelling. Connect with him on X or Instagram at [@\\_therealib](#)

# Betrayal

V.M.. Sawh

In the last planet, we flourished,  
Overwhelming all lesser forms of life,  
Believing it owed us, all it could nourish.  
In the last continent, we mined for riches,  
Demanding time, tears, and temerity of have-nots,  
To make our goods cheap, to the very stitches.  
In the last country, we held up our identity,  
Waving flags and wearing puffed-chest patches,  
Content that outsiders want for every amenity.  
In the last government, we placed our trust,  
Even when they squandered all our riches,  
Entrenching themselves as slaves to their lust.  
In the last city, we plied our trade,  
Dutifully serving the cynical embankment,  
That crushes us for more wealth in the shade.  
In the last neighbourhood, we cherished safety,  
Until the bonds of community failed us,  
And our peers sought to make their exit hasty.  
In the last family, we sought legacy,  
To assure us that we would continue.  
In those who would give our elegy.  
In the last love, we found our companion,  
Who has journeyed with us all along,  
We part abruptly, our togetherness abandoned.  
In the last person, without mind  
Rot consumes all that we are,  
Till to all else, we are blind.  
In the last body, without need,  
We do nothing but wither,

Until our living we exceed.  
In the last organ, without function,  
Carries out its last task,  
Succumbing to failure, without compunction.  
In the last cell, without which,  
Life must not be, the structures fail,  
Burst to nothingness, black as pitch.  
In the last atom, without will,  
All movement stops,  
And goes still.  
We are betrayed, friend,  
Now and forever,  
In the  
End.

V.M. Sawh is a neurodivergent, disabled writer of colour and a resident of Toronto, Canada. His previous works include the #1 Amazon bestseller, *Cinders*, and the critically acclaimed short-fiction series, *Good Tales For Bad Dreams*. He has garnered recognition from esteemed institutions such as the *Toronto Public Library*, *Ontario Writer's Conference*, *Book Nerdection*, and *Readers' Favorites*.

## Contents May Have Shifted II

Kendra Whitfield

Inside of me are: pink plastic barrettes, sparkly beads, unshed tears, sunsets splayed golden over crisp white fields, billy goat horns, velvety cat paws, books (mostly unread), lost keys, good hair days, abandoned chapstick tubes, sheet music, rocks picked up on riverbanks, broken dreams fledged with bluejay feathers, a spruce-top crow's nest, silver peaks, yellow prairie dotted with black pumpjacks, chitinous grasshoppers, a pile of cedar shakes gathered for burning, gin, butterscotch pie, bingo cards, rental cars, coal dust, chalk dust, stardust, salt spray, shale-pressed fossils gathered on the shore, too many shoes, too much sugar, ravenous thirst, graven images, a broken heart, and another, grieving lungs, whiskey (never wine), sun-soaked porches, wanderlust, trivia, chlorine, undanced tangos, raw rivers of fear and scorching deserts of shame. Inside of me is a forest of longing that I cannot see for the trees

# The Price of Admission

*-after Natasha Rao*

Kendra Whitfield

I was relieved the day my mother died  
It was easy to love her until I knew better  
I used to dream of becoming a young widow  
Sometimes I still do  
I'm lazy and easily bored  
I never wanted to be a teacher  
I couldn't think of anything better to do with my life  
Thirty years in, I still can't  
I'm selfish  
I was glad when my father disappeared  
I doubt the credibility of God  
Sometimes I wish my cat would die so I could start over with a  
new kitten  
But then she pets me with a white-tipped paw and  
I am reminded that love is pure and purrs  
I used to think that all I wanted was to be alone  
Now, all I want is someone to talk to  
I can never think of anything to say.

Kendra Whitfield lives and writes at the southern edge of the northern boreal forest. Her work is forthcoming in *Ghost Light Lit*, *Dalika Magazine*, and *Duck, Duck Mongoose*.

# Green Valley Lake

Susan Andrews

I'm seven years old, and this is my third summer vacation at the lake. Mom and I are sitting on the sandy shore eating peanut butter crackers. My dad and brother are in a rowboat fishing for trout. I like being in the boat, rocking gently on the water and looking at the pine trees, but I don't like to fish. It's boring.

Velveeta cheese—  
The bait I'm given  
To keep me quiet

Two years later. Our rowboat circles, straightens, and circles again. Grinning, my best friend, Janie, and I each pull on an oar. We'll get to our fishing spot—eventually.

Summer adventure—  
We share the dawn  
With dragonflies

I'm standing on the boat dock, huddled in my coat, chilled. Friends are waiting for me in the car. I haven't been here in decades. Both of my parents have passed. My brother lives in another state, and I've lost track of Janie. I smile, suddenly remembering when her fishing pole fell in the lake. So many good times. I blink away tears and take a deep breath. I look around for a few seconds and head back to the car.

Cold autumn wind—  
Warm memories  
Follow me home

Thoughts  
Come and go—  
A misty morning

Raindrops hit the ground  
Making dots and splatters—  
Freeform sidewalk art

Sunlight dappled pathway—  
I step  
Into the moment

A circling thought  
Perches head cocked—  
Contemplation

Susan Andrews lives in California, where she has taught and worked as a freelance writer. Her haiku have been published in several journals. She created and participates in the weekly #HaikuSaturday event on Twitter. Her poetry has also been featured in *Tyger Tyger*, *Parakeet Magazine*, and *The Dirigible Balloon*. She is passionate about animals, the environment, and kindness.



**King Solomon's Envy** by Jeff Langridge  
Digital Image

# Trip to the Farm

Holly Day

The butterfly lands on my hand in an attempt of curious deconstruction. I stand perfectly still as it explores my wrist, climbs up my arm curiously, seeking the source of attraction, some hormonal secretion or new deodorant that smells like butterfly love.

My daughter watches the butterfly climb to my shoulder envy in her eyes. She wants a butterfly to want her, too wonders aloud as the first is joined by a second, a third. My husband mutters something about my time of the month and I shush him not because I'm embarrassed but because I am awash in the magic of it, too and I don't need him to spoil it with realism.

Later, my daughter relates the story to her best friend about how all of the butterflies at the farm were following me  
how I had so many butterflies on me  
and how none of them landed on anyone else.  
The two little girls stare reverently at me  
little worlds of astonishment in their eyes  
and for one moment, I feel  
as special and amazing as I've always wanted to be.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Analog SF*, *Cardinal Sins*, and *New Plains Review*, and her published books include *Music Theory for Dummies* and *Music Composition for Dummies*. She currently teaches classes at The Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, Hugo House in Washington, and The Muse Writers Center in Virginia.

# Sailing Through Vermont

Rick Blum

One a.m. Central Vermont. Dead of winter.  
Navigating Interstate 89 in a yacht-worthy Coupe DeVille,  
snow swirling thick and fast like a swarm of black flies  
that terrorize these sodden hills in spring.

My buddy – asleep in the back seat – and I left Montreal  
a couple hours earlier after dropping off his dad.  
It is his car I am now captaining down this desolate stretch  
of white-capped peril, still hours from home port.

Decide to nurse the Caddy up to 50, 55, hoping to save ...  
what, 15, 20 minutes driving time? Mistake, of course, as it  
decides the proper position when cruising above 45  
on this snow bejeweled highway is sideways.

Through the driver's window I now stare at the snow-slicked  
road rapidly approaching, my only thought being to find  
an ample landing spot replete with swells of crystalline  
fluffiness and a dearth of unforgiving trees.

Ahead I spot the perfect destination: gentle downslope,  
no rocklike oaks or dense maples or, even, soft pines within  
50 yards of the road – a safe harbor beneath a sinister sky.

I am about to implement the plan – gently nudge the steering  
wheel right (or should it be left?) – when the headstrong sedan  
decides that sideways sailing isn't as fun as it thought it  
would be, so tacks, unprompted, back to our original  
orientation – hood to the fore, trunk astern – still in the lane  
we plied 10, 20, 30? seconds ago, before time expanded  
infinitely, the world was a milky dreamscape of possibilities  
and for once an astute outcome was surely within my grasp.

Rick Blum has been chronicling life's vagaries through essays and poetry for more than 30 years during stints as a nightclub owner, high-tech manager, market research mogul, and, most recently, old geezer. His writings have appeared in more than 50 print magazines, literary journals, and poetry anthologies, as well as in numerous online publications.

# exhausted the curve of highway

Bryan Vale

exhausted,  
the curve of highway  
sends what it hopes  
will be the last  
of the bright white  
lights running off  
to the next straight  
stretch. they've all got  
somewhere to be but  
the curve in the  
highway is drained and  
bored, no longer so vital  
as when its concrete  
was first poured, no  
longer interested in  
tracking and categorizing  
the various makes and  
models of the vehicles  
crossing its face.  
no, nothing is new  
anymore.  
the curve in the highway wishes  
for a netflix  
subscription.

Bryan Vale is a writer from the San Francisco Bay Area. His fiction and poetry have appeared in several journals, including *Quibble*, *Constellations*, and *Paddler Press*. His work has been nominated for *The Best of the Net*. Learn more at [bryanvalewriter.com](http://bryanvalewriter.com), or follow Bryan on Twitter and Instagram at [@bryanvalewriter](https://twitter.com/bryanvalewriter).

# Bargain Bin

Andrew Smigłowski

They say that talk is cheap,  
So, you can afford me;  
You'll find me in the bargain bin --  
Located in this pharmacy, for some reason --  
Beneath a copy of "Suits" on DVD --  
Wait --  
10 bucks for Season Four?  
That's a pretty good deal, actually.

Andrew, as an undergrad, studied English, history, and creative writing. While enrolled, he wrote for the school newspaper, and both edited and contributed to the school's award-winning literary and arts journal. In the years since, his poetry has been featured in both *WayWords Literary Journal* and *Call Me [Brackets]*. He now helps manage a café, writes in his free time, and continues to pursue a career in writing.

# Controlled Chaos

Steven Denehan

My daughter came  
to me  
last week  
looking for examples  
of oxymorons

the juxtaposition  
of two words  
in perfect contradiction

I did not quite remain  
deafeningly silent, but  
only one example  
came to me  
*old news*  
not terribly good  
at all

typically  
in the days since  
they have come along  
as a dull roar

*bittersweet*  
how I feel  
when I look back  
when I look  
forward

*civil war*

how things are  
between myself  
and my sister

*pretty ugly*

the thoughts I have  
on a weekly  
daily  
hourly basis

*alone together*

how things  
used to be

*actively dying*

how a nurse  
referred to my father  
today

Steve Denehan lives in Kildare, Ireland with his wife Eimear and daughter Robin. He is the author of two chapbooks and five 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*.

# Befriend

Angela Townsend

Maybe I use the word too easily. Maybe I use all the words too easily.

But if we interact twice and you top off my hope tumbler both times, I am going to call you my friend. I am going to talk about you to people who will never meet you, trying to capture your electrons like fireflies in a jar.

“My friend Willie secretly wants a tiger. He’s seventy and looks like a wise little boy when he talks about it. He believes they are both wild and kind.”

“Where did you meet your friend Willie?”

“He’s the postmaster.”

“The postmaster is your ‘friend?’”

There’s a way of saying the word that embarrasses me. In an instant, I am the child holding both sides of the broken-heart necklace, knocking on doors until I find a taker for half. I am the little girl who bribed the neighborhood boys with gum, if only they would listen to me sing one song.

But my dictionary is handwritten in permanent ink.

“My friend Jade takes the most magical pictures. She can make the 4-H Fair look like a return to Eden. She has a crush on Shaq and knows all the words to ‘Cheeseburger in Paradise.’ She’s one

of the funniest people I've ever met.”

“Where did you meet your friend Jade?”

“She's been volunteering where I work for two weeks.”

“Someone you've known two weeks is your ‘friend?’”

I can feel irresponsible in an instant. I have been prodigal with words since my first colored pencils. It has not always played out well. Editors arrest me for intoxication with adverbs. The emotionally intelligent worry that I am wildfire. I declare too much, too soon, and find that my words are heavy syrup, sticky on the shards of a broken necklace.

I try to speak things into being, then remember someone else already took the trouble to create the world.

“My friend Dean says my blog posts are ‘niblet prayers.’ He's had a beef with God – actually, he says a ‘beefsteak with God’ – for years, but he argues with the ‘Old Man’ every day. Dean says he wants to know the God who grins. I say Dean makes God grin every time they argue.”

“Where did you meet your friend Dean?”

“Through a friend of a friend on Facebook. He lives in Oregon.”

“Someone you've never met is your ‘friend?’”

Some astigmatism cannot be cured. I am at peace with my condition. I will keep calling them as I see them, friends grinning

between the ferns of acquaintance. The entrance fee is a kernel of kindness.

If you remind me how impossible it is that we are here together at all, you are my friend.

The back of the necklace is as brazen as the front. It's too easy to become my friend, and it's too demanding to lose the title. At least, I assume that's the case. Like particle physics and the multiverse, the loss of my friendship is a tenuous concept existing only in theory. It has never been documented.

If the postmaster commits genocide, or the volunteer kidnaps my family, it might squirt hot sauce on the word "friend." But Dean is unlikely to eat kittens on live television. It is more conceivable that we will simply fall out of touch, love songs thinning to pages of rests.

"My friend Benny taught me how to fold socks. We used to do laundry together as grad students. He could sing like Andrea Bocelli, and we'd belt out Appalachian hymns and the Backstreet Boys. He chalked everything up to God's sense of humor. I think of him every time I get silly."

"When did you last talk to your friend Benny?"

"Twenty years ago."

"Someone that far in the rearview mirror is still your 'friend?'"

How could it be otherwise? My friendship and my theology feed each other. They are co-conspirators, sitting in the church stairwell with a loaf pilfered hot from the oven. They pop crusty

bites into each other's mouths. I gobble "once saved, always saved." I stake my last exclamation point on the claim that love can't be lost.

"My friend Karen stitched me a pillow. I had no idea she'd ever noticed the tiny signature line on my emails, but there it was in pink embroidery:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That's the heart of my friend Karen."

"When did you last speak to your friend Karen?"

"She doesn't speak to me anymore. There was a misunderstanding."

"Your friendship is over, and you still call her your 'friend?'"

I don't believe in "over." I wear my necklace every day. When the last word is spoken, neither too much nor not enough, we'll get to introduce our friends to each other. There will be loaves to go around. My exclamation points are just warming up.

Angela Townsend is Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary. She graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Chautauqua*, and *The Penn Review*, among others. Angie has lived with Type 1 diabetes for 33 years, laughs with her poet mother every morning, and loves life affectionately. Twitter @TheWakingTulip Instagram.com @fullyalivebythegrace

# Las Capias

C.G. Dominguez

There is a time-capsule quality to being part of a diaspora. The image you retain of the way things are, the way things are done, the way they're meant to be, will always be fixed on that moment of rupture, of parting. Traditions and folkways and fashions fix themselves in the amber of that moment, hermetically sealed away, and have no means of evolving.

So it is with las capias. I don't actually know, have no means by which to know, whether they are still a common element of Boricua weddings. I suspect they've fallen out of fashion, as everything must. But they were ubiquitous in my mother's time, and when she and her siblings took flight to Hartford in the eighties, she remembered them.

A capia is a delicate trinket, a badge made from a folded ribbon and maybe a silk flower or two, straight-pinned into place. At weddings, they are handed out as favors, printed with the names of the two lovers and the date of the happy event. When I married my wife, my mother took it upon herself to craft a massive batch of them, complete with the traditional scallop shell bowls they're meant to rest in, and I spent what felt like half the evening explaining to my sprawling clan of brand-new in-laws what they were, and what they signified.

No, that isn't fair. To this day I remain touched and surprised by the good faith effort my new family made to play along, behave themselves, keep an open mind. Never mind that none of them had ever been present for an event with two brides, or had heard a wedding playlist with quite so much salsa music interspersed. I

walked away from that moment with renewed hope, though tenuous, that all the earlier ugliness, the tears, the threats, the fights, might remain a thing of the past. That, in some small way, I had won a tenable surrender, worn away the sharp edges of their discomfort and suspicion.

Then, a few weeks later, my mother in law presented us with a gift. She had taken one of the capias and cut it in two, stuffing the halves underneath the cheap polyvinyl sheet of a DIY Christmas ornament, the kind you might use to frame the message from a fortune cookie or memorialize a concert ticket. The coral pink rose which adorned the ribbon bulged out against the clear plastic, tugging and distorting its shape so the sheet pulled away from the stamped metal frame.

“Now it’s an ornament!” she said, as though it wasn’t one already, as if there was something wrong with the capias as they were. As if my own family’s trees weren’t adorned with dozens of them, from my parents’ wedding, and those of my aunts and uncles, cousins and friends.

I batted down the hatches of my fury. I told myself she could have no notion of what she’d done. That she was trying to be thoughtful, trying to make an effort. That this was, as so many of our gestures were, an olive branch in the continual battle we could never admit we waged against each other.

But I couldn’t help picture her in this brutal little act of creation, holding the ribbon in one hand, her hulking scrapbook scissors in the other.

My mother had made hundreds of capias, far more than was necessary for the number of guests. There had been many left-

overs at the end of the night. I still had a box of dozens in my own basement. She could have gone home with handfuls, pocketfuls.

I pictured her experimenting with the best way to achieve the look she sought. I pictured her cutting up one, then another, playing with the angle, the length of the resulting scraps. I pictured the pile of mangled polyester and satin. I wondered whether she felt better, after, or worse.

C.G. Dominguez is a proud queer Boricua working and writing in the American Midwest. Her work has or will soon appear in *Muleskinner*, *BULL*, *Hofstra's Windmill*, *MISTER Magazine* and elsewhere.



**Mom is Late** by Jeff Langridge  
Digital Image

# Teams

Ewen Glass

The water isn't quite brack.  
Brackish maybe.  
Estuary humour,  
common as sandpipers  
on shop signs.  
By The Crown, smokers mock  
barrel-and-twine boats  
crossing the narrows under yoke of  
corporate camaraderie.  
*And look at these absolute clowns!*  
Arranged in lines,  
a team in black searches sod and sediment.  
They aren't with OffLimitSolutions  
and there's no team-building cup;  
theirs is a prize of tissue and bloat.  
The kind heave of the water  
has pushed  
and pulled the body,  
ashore and back out.  
The officers reach for him,  
and the smokers are suddenly reverent  
*For goodness sake,*  
one says,  
*Can nothing bob solemnly?!*

Ewen is an emerging voice in poetry, in both English and Ulster-Scots registers. Originally from a small town in Northern Ireland, he now lives in England with two silly dogs, a tortoise and lots of self-doubt. On a given day, any or all of these can be snapping at his heels.

# As Words March On

Richard LeDue

The encyclopedia died in its sleep,  
so sure of tomorrow  
that it left no will, leaving everyone  
wondering what happened to simpler times,  
when encyclopedia salesmen  
drank coffee from paper cups  
and told their wives they loved them  
from 1000 miles away,  
while the rain turned newspapers  
into makeshift umbrellas.

Richard LeDue (he/him) lives in Norway House, Manitoba, Canada. He has been published both online and in print. He is the author of ten books of poetry. His latest book, *Sometimes, It Isn't Much*, was released by *Alien Buddha Press* in February 2024.

# When I First Came to This Town

John Grey

I looked up.

Then down.

I learned a couple of street names.

I saw a man who looked so much like my father.

A car almost ran over me.

I poked my nose in a very ornate Catholic church.

The factory smell irritated my nostrils.

I spied a young girl in the park  
clutching rosary beads to her chest.

And a young man proudly showing off  
his studded leather belt.

I was too late for the fair  
but I saw the trucks loading up  
the rides and the shell games.

I patted a free-roaming cat  
and a beagle on a leash.

I ticked the box that reads “has a public bathroom.”  
That was before I discovered the door was locked.

I heard a child scream  
and came upon a Ford Mustang  
painted a hideous bright yellow.

The place was small, so I walked in a loop.  
but the scenery did change a little,  
even on the fourth go round.

That’s all to do with people,  
the way they walk, or jog,  
different speeds, different directions,  
or stop to point at something.

And what they wear,

over their bodies, on their fingers.  
And the faces, broad and narrow,  
pretty and lived-in,  
dour and lively.  
Some smiled at me.  
Some didn't.  
Like the sprinkler system.  
Sometimes I avoided the spray.  
Sometimes it hit me  
flush in the jaw.  
That's why I kept going by it.  
If I choose some place for comfort  
then it must be at my peril.

## **Condemned By a Maple Tree**

John Grey

It's been years since  
the maple tree in my back yard  
was cut down.  
It was encroaching on the house.  
And the neighbor's roof.  
Professionals did the job.  
All those years of growing  
were power-sawed to death  
in an hour or two.  
I still have the poems I wrote  
in honor of its sturdy trunk,  
its wide span of branches,  
the shade in summer

that it gave freely,  
the colors of fall,  
perfect for sun-gilding,  
the soft kiss of falling leaves,  
the staunchness of its winter detail,  
its silent town-crier budding  
at the approach of spring.

I feel such a hypocrite  
for ordering the tree's demise.

And a heel, a turncoat,  
a betrayer of both nature  
and all of my ideals.

Why the tree?

I ask myself.

I've written many poems to women.

I haven't had any of them killed.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Lost Pilots*. Latest books, *Between Two Fires*, *Covert* and *Memory Outside The Head* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *California Quarterly*, *Seventh Quarry*, *La Presa* and *Doubly Mad*.

# Unsent Letter to an Absent Penpal

Harry Katz

I hope you were able to quit your job  
And kill your boss  
And drive north to New York City.

I hope it's sunny your first day there  
And the streets are paved with gold  
And they let you pry up a piece so you can pay your way the rest  
of your life.

I hope you find love by the handful  
And it teaches you without bleeding you  
And you never wake up alone when you weren't expecting to.

I hope you don't write  
And yet I pray you will.  
I live off the fantasy but I'd die to know, Alice

Harry Katz is a part-time bartender and full-time student in the Department of American Studies at Stanford University. His work has appeared in the *Rye Whiskey Review* and the *White Cresset Arts Journal* and won the *Bocock Guerard Fiction Prize*. He lives in the stormiest part of Central Virginia, in a county with far more cows than people. He can be found and reached at @katzinbag on Twitter.

# The Thickness of Skin

Heather Kish

I hid in my parents' closet to look at a picture of you,  
running the pad of my little thumb over your faces,  
trying to see myself.

I don't know why I thought I had to sneak around  
to look at a photo of my grandparents.  
We avoided talking about you,  
so maybe I thought I couldn't look either.  
It was too painful I think,  
to live all that you were missing  
and my father having to watch it for you.

She's in the hospital bed  
and her legs aren't much thicker than her bones,  
which is to say,  
the thickness of skin.

It was the day of my parents' wedding  
so she's smiling, her teeth the largest part of her,  
a fragrant corsage pinned to her hospital gown.  
Her happiness is genuine.  
You're smiling too, but really you're just parting your lips  
and showing your teeth,  
there's no joy there.  
You have a look of protection on your face.  
Like the camera shutter might suck her inside of it  
and she'll evaporate forever.

Which of course she did  
not long after.

Later,  
much later,  
resetting headstones later,  
I would hear someone say,  
she held on for that day,  
like she could hold on to anything  
except hope or the bedrail.  
But really, what else do you need?

It was one of the first photos I saw of her  
so I thought she always looked that way,  
like she was trying to convince someone  
she was well enough to make it through.

There are Violets in my mother's wedding bouquet.

# Looking Out

Heather Kish

There are so many birds  
on the coast.  
Have you ever wondered why?  
That is something I would like to know.  
Is it the water that draws  
them there?  
The plants underneath?  
The abandoned fish along the shore?  
Is it a religion?  
A religion of birds?  
Are they welcoming loved ones  
as they return from over the water?  
What were they doing before this?

The sky is deceitful  
in its clarity  
in those days just before spring.  
The mirage of heat forcing me to squint,  
but the sun still too far away  
to thaw the tips of my fingers.  
The frozen ground isn't quite ready  
to let the bulbs go.  
Wants to keep them hidden  
for a time still.  
To keep us guessing  
because it knows  
when they push their heads out  
we will feel the sunshine.

And I don't want to be buried in a dress.  
Don't bother with the nylons.  
I want to be wrapped in my favorite quilt,  
dressed in my comfy clothes.  
I want a fluffy pillow without feathers.  
Something that holds your head  
but cannot be felt.

I want to tell you how it really is.  
How incredibly bad I want  
only to talk to you.  
I wait at the shore for you.  
Search the shoreline for a sign of your return,  
glistening sustenance.  
I will see you in the morning.

Heather Kish received the Undergraduate Poetry Award from Western Michigan University and earned her MFA from Lindenwood University with an emphasis in fiction. Her work has appeared most recently on *Brevity's* blog and *Defenestration*. She currently lives in Florida but her heart remains in the midwest. Twitter: @HeatherKish Instagram: @HeatherKish



**Ruffled Finesse** by Jeff Langridge  
Digital Image

# Dog and I

Camille Newsom

Mid-January. The neighbor's parsley is green.  
Soil soft, lawn owners out mowing.  
Wreaths loiter on front doors. Fake  
frosted pine cones and cranberry colored buds  
protrude from porch pots. Heaps of parcels:  
mattress-in-a-box, the newest gadget, groceries. It's trash  
day, the most convenient day for Dog to poop anywhere  
he wants, and for me to quickly abandon the poo  
in a proper receptacle, not flaunt it around like  
a cute new handbag. Dog gets distracted  
by a collie across the road itching to play,  
and I, by the short man driving the collie,  
itching to chat, which I gladly do, and then remember  
how much kinder I am to strangers with animals.  
A school bus lingers between us, a handful of slumped students  
ready for snacking and snoozing after school. Dog and I relish  
a social interaction gone well and a joke that never ages:  
finger-drawn penis and balls on a school bus window.

Camille Newsom is a livestock farmer in Western Michigan. In her poems she observes our living and dying world through humor, grief, and a sprinkling of spite. Her first chapbook is *This Suffering and Scrumptious World* (Galileo Press, 2023). Her poems have appeared (or are forthcoming) in *Terrain.org*, *Dunes Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *MAYDAY*, and others.

# Ireland

DS Maolalaí

woman at the office  
I wish I was in love with  
anything as you're in love  
with Ireland; I know  
you don't believe me  
when I tell you  
it's nothing special.  
know you know  
that it is  
where magic happens,  
where people are wise  
and romantic  
and you can't buy it

when I tell you  
again and again  
that we watch the same tv shows  
there, eat the same candy-bars,  
see the same movies.  
you are an animal  
driven by thoughts of motion  
and by knowing the world  
as it is  
is not the world you believe in,  
that America hasn't got it's tendrils in Ireland  
as it has done  
Toronto.

I wish I were  
half the animal  
you are –

your inability to change your mind.  
I wish I were half the animal you are  
with your love of things you have heard about.

I wish I were an animal  
looking out  
from under flowerstems.

## A cave

DS Maolalaí

I look at old photographs sometimes. old girlfriends  
and girls I had crushes on once. me  
in some t-shirt or other, my hand  
like a flower to my face.  
I did things in photos – still do them.  
need something to lean on to look  
like there's any intention. melissa  
with a wineglass and my wrist swinging loose  
as a bicycle wheel locked to a fencepost.  
johanna looks pretty, me serious  
over her shoulder: red face cleanly shaved  
as a laboratory rat. the past is a cave  
full of badly shaped stonework and beautiful things  
made of crystal which have never been touched.

DS Maolalaí has been nominated twelve times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart and once for the Forward Prize. His work has been released in three collections; *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019) and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022)

## Father's shoes

Vasco Pimentel

The sound of my father's shoes  
echoes against the plywood  
with a reassuring familiarity  
as I wear them to his funeral.  
I can hear his voice – every now and then –  
Every time  
I utter one of his mannerisms  
in my childhood language.  
The cycle of self-centred perspectives resumes  
As I stare out  
into the distance  
Surrounded by a half-unknown crowd  
Watching an overgrown shrub  
Its rich green  
popping against the faded,  
peeling white of the local cemetery wall  
As I reflect on the notion  
That in the end  
It all comes down to  
Death.

Vasco Pimentel is a writer and poet based in Fremantle, Western Australia. He is a scriptwriter and storyteller for *THRIVE*, a script-assessing panel-list for *Short & Sweet* and the Creative Writer Lead for *Blazing Swan*. Born in Lisbon, Portugal, Vasco left his home at the age of eighteen and migrated to Australia.

# A Lesson In Baking

Anthony Wade

It was a pre-cooked, reheated dessert  
served in a disappointing new restaurant  
that saw me a small boy again  
watching Mam craft an apple pie,  
the brisk assemblage of the same  
wooden spoon, and knife for the butter,  
laid beside the same old yellow-white bowl,  
and green garden apples kept in the larder  
under water to drown the earwigs,  
dark objects of deep boyhood anxiety,  
a craft learnt from in turn watching  
her mam sifting and blending and stirring,  
being allowed first to stir then being taught  
to feel the dough in the fingers,  
no recipe, no opening of a bought packet  
but the teaching of a personal alchemy,  
and though later she taught me how  
to scrape potatoes and heat meat, I still miss  
never being asked to stir the spoon.

Anthony Wade is an England-trained graduate lawyer with a Masters Degree who worked mainly in The Netherlands before developing a severe medical disability. Since settling in Ireland he has published in poetry print journals across Ireland and Britain, the US, and Canada, and more widely digitally. An active member of the local writers' group, a *Forward Prize* nominee, he lives by the sea in his late Mother's county only ten miles from where he enjoyed his childhood summers. X@anthonywadepoet.

# grounded

Thomas Gordon Reynolds

feathers on the ground can be depressing as hell  
and hell can be pretty depressing itself  
if you'd rather be flying than walking  
and you know  
that the bird is probably dead  
and somewhere  
some dark  
green-eyed  
monster  
purrs and is warm indoors  
settling down before the fire  
to sleep  
and dream some innocent dream  
of sailing away over house tops and the trees

Thomas Gordon Reynolds is a writer living in small town Ontario. It took him twenty years to get a degree in English. He has written much and published little (the novella *Break Me*, *Quattro Press*, Toronto, 2011, under the name Tom Reynolds).



**Balanced** by Jeff Langridge  
Digital Image

# Chili from Chicago

Donna Pucciani

Dried red peppers conspire  
with smoky paprika and cayenne  
in a small jar of granular magic  
tucked in my suitcase, wrapped  
in underwear and secured safely  
in a shoe. I arrive in Madrid

to cook for my Spanish family,  
stirring the promised powder  
into a witches' brew of tomatoes,  
onions, red beans and pintos. Cocoa  
gives depth to the simmering pot  
of culinary adventure, mellowing  
the moonrise in a warm Spanish sky.

The natives are ecstatic,  
never having tasted such heavenly heat.  
Sorrow is exiled, the bitterness  
of everyday tedium lost in a soup spoon.

Wars and tyrants vanish. A savory silence  
hangs over the table, every mouthful  
a dwarf star setting fire to summer.  
Even the baby, well past his bed time,  
his laughter a blazing comet, hunts  
the beans with his miniature fork,  
paints his nose with sauce, demands  
*Más! Más!*

# Curses

Donna Pucciani

This summer, the blessing of rain  
becomes a curse on drought-stricken land.  
Water jumps the curbs like a wild beast  
escaped from a cosmic zoo, running  
wild in streets, and fields are drowning  
in their own wheat.

The earth, hardened by weeks of thirst,  
resists the fast-moving floods that jump  
the tires of buses and wash away  
crops in the yellowed valleys.

Umbrellas turn cartwheels as  
flood warnings kick the sun back  
into a dun sky over the cities.  
Dust becomes mud, and shopkeepers  
in sad bodegas sweep muck and puddles  
over their doorsills back onto the streets.

Such oddities become everyday trials,  
the spells of evil magicians  
who are ourselves.

Donna Pucciani, a Chicago-based writer, has published poetry worldwide in *Shi Chao Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *ParisLitUp*, *Meniscus*, *Gradiva* and other journals. Her seventh and latest book of poetry is *EDGES*.

# Celebrate

Johanna Antonia Zomers

Amarillo by morning!  
That yearning song of swooping violins  
has been in my head since last night's celebration.

Sisters and friends resplendent in bridesmaid finery.

The party outside  
by the barn was the first  
since the pandemic shut us down.

We had forgotten how the early evening could stretch on under  
the pale lavender sky.

The rain never came, wind billowed the sheltering white drapes.

Cows raised their heads in the pasture to listen and look at the  
farmer's daughter, just married.

Radios tuned to country stations  
in a thousand milk parlours carry those sweeping violins, that  
sad and  
tender journey across the open  
Texas plain that holds all our unspoken griefs.  
The saddest songs  
are best for nights when it seems  
that no one could ever feel  
loneliness again.

This morning,

a bridesmaid in a coverall,  
her updo still in place,  
gathers eggs at sunrise. Not Amarillo by morning  
but Sunday joy, Sunday best.  
Rejoice, we danced again!

## **Autumn with Cancer**

Johanna Antonia Zomers

Cormorants wait on the lake  
to claim an unripe harvest.  
Snow muffles the world,  
the bone grey sky  
closes so gently  
around us.

## **Donegal Wedding on the Old Place**

Johanna Antonia Zomers

We dance in that barn now  
small beneath the soaring  
angled timbers, garlanded  
for our celebration.

We dance for the promise of  
love. We dance for

the nuptials, tipsy,  
drunk with sentimentality.

We dance among  
the ghosts of hay days  
gleaming fragrant summer loads  
dropped from the high gliding fork.

It was often starlight before the day's  
work was done; they made the time  
reluctantly then, for the tasks of  
marrying and burying.

The full-uddered cows  
waited below  
shifting in the stall, creak  
and rattle of chain on the rail.

Johanna Antonia Zomers is a playwright with *Stone Fence Theatre* and writes a weekly column for a Canadian newspaper. Her first novel *When the Light Enters* was published with *Pastora de la Vega Press*. Her poetry has been published in *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Lothlorien*, *New Ulster* and other journals in Ireland and the UK.

# A Poem About Child Sex Slavery

Steve Denehan

I come up on deck  
not long after dawn  
a hell of a morning  
the cruise ship carving  
through water that leaps  
with borrowed sunshine

I suck in the sea air  
hold it  
let it out  
feel the better for it

there is a pool  
a couple of bars  
some shuffleboard courts  
empty, but not for long

I walk to the bow  
king of the world  
the horizon the only thing  
ahead, behind, all around

I notice something in the distance  
something indeterminate  
colour, colours, moving

as we sail closer, I see  
an enormous, almost impossible amount  
of beachballs and inflatables

colour at the convergence of the oceans  
lost toys pressed into undulating pyramids  
by the push of the water

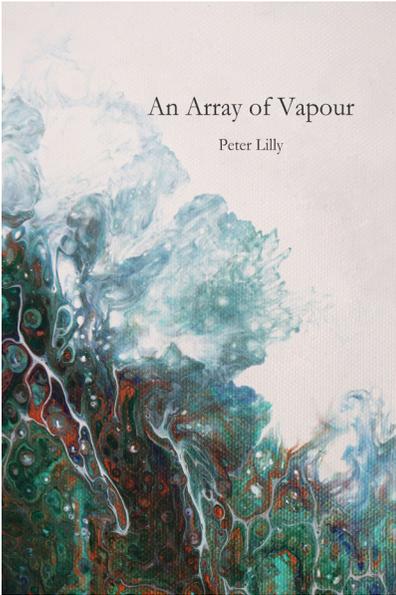
I turn to a nearby crewman  
point, ask  
he shrugs his shoulders  
says that this  
is the somewhere  
of lost things

I watch them shrink behind us  
until the only colour left  
is the green of the water

This poem was written for The Salvation Army's Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking (MSHT) Month poetry contest. Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking exists in Ontario. It's happening in our homes, our neighbourhoods, across our country, and around the world. 60% of those trafficked in Canada are trafficked in Ontario.

Globally, the number of people experiencing modern slavery and human trafficking has increased to an estimated 49.6 million people on any given day. This means worldwide approximately: 27.6 million people are experiencing forced labour and sexual exploitation and 22 million individuals are experiencing forced marriages. Women and girls make up an estimated 11.8 million of those experiencing forced labour and sexual exploitation around the world. Children make up more than an estimated 3.3 million of those experiencing forced labour and sexual exploitation globally.

**If you or someone you know is in need of support or you want to report a potential case call the Canadian human trafficking hotline: 1-833-900-1010.**



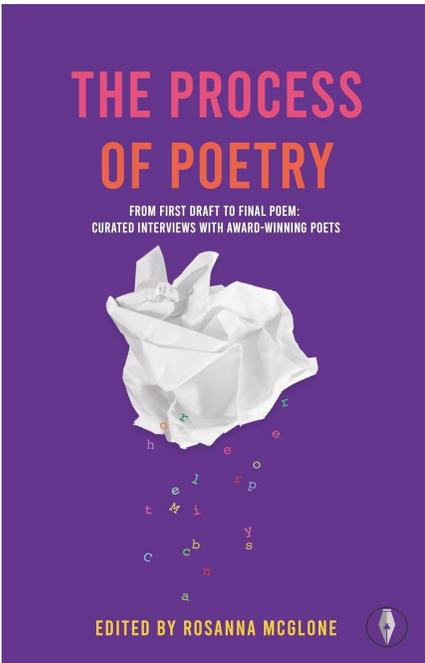
Cover design by Silje Lilly

## *An Array of Vapour* by Peter Lilly

From 2010 to 2015 Peter Lilly worked in various frontline roles for New Hope, a homelessness charity in Watford, just outside of London. This deeply personal collection is inspired by and written in response to this work and the people he encountered. The collection doesn't shy away from the dark realities of homelessness, but dwells in these spaces so the readers' eyes may adjust, notice the beauty, and see that there is still a light of hope,

even for those for whom society has largely given up.

[tslbooks.uk/product/an-array-of-vapour-peter-lilly/](http://tslbooks.uk/product/an-array-of-vapour-peter-lilly/)



## *The Process of Poetry* by Rosanna McGlone (Editor)

A unique collection of interviews with contemporary poets at the height of their craft. How does a subconscious thought become an award-winning poem? Journalist, Rosanna McGlone, speaks to some of the country's leading poets to find out. Don Paterson, Sean O'Brien, Gillian Clarke, and many more, explore the development of a single poem from rough notes to a final version to provide invaluable insights for writers and poetry enthusiasts alike.

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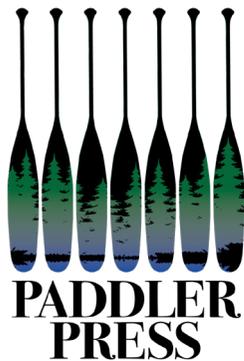


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