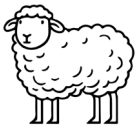
the LAM

art. literally.

Issue I:
Darkness and Light



2025



The LAM is dedicated to publishing prose, poetry, and art by authors and artists in Lanark County. For information about our submission process and anonymous judging, see www.thelamonline.com.

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To the best of The LAM'S knowledge, the stories in this magazine are original works created without the use of AI. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and artists.

Cover art by Jill Heinerth.

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EDITOR'S NOTE



In November 2023, I founded the Almonte Writers Guild with the goal of creating a literary community in Almonte. Over the first two years of operation, I had the opportunity to chat with a multitude of writers from across Lanark County about their dreams and goals for their craft.

What I heard in these conversations, more often than not, was that many of these writers — my *friends*! — doubted that they'd ever be published. Sure, some were hobbyists that only wrote for their own benefit. But many of those who wanted, deep down, to share their work with others lacked the confidence that they'd ever be able to do so. Especially in the competitive landscape that makes up publication today.

This is why I started The LAM. It is why our magazine welcomes writers and artists from the farthest corners of Lanark County — little hamlets and villages where few reside. The LAM is founded on the desire to give local writers and artists a place to see their work in print. It's an even playing field: we consider each piece without the author or artist's name attached, we don't charge a submission fee, and we do our best to present a wide breadth of contributors.

My hope is that in these pages you will find familiar faces: family members, friends, your grocery clerk, your child's teacher. Hopefully, you'll find a new favourite, too. Someone who lives next door to you.

That's what small towns — and Lanark County — are all about.

Elysia Rourke
Editor in Chief



I grew up between Lanark County and Mississippi Mills. Both hold special memories for me, from being startled by the train at night as it crawled through Almonte when we lived on the island to skating in Watson's Corners, with hot chocolate and horse and haybale rides. I can still smell the hay. Our country road just got a yellow line in 2024.

Over the years, I have gone away and lived in cities across Canada. I returned home in 2019 when my dad died. I found it brought me back to the rest of my family and the towering great red pines that sing in the Fall winds. The Japanese call this *matsukaze* (wind blowing through pine trees).

This last year, I moved back full-time and ached to rebuild my community, write, and heal in the garden. I found The Almonte Writer's Guild as they were about to celebrate their first full year. This quickly became a catalyst to a beautiful partnership, bursting with possibilities. I started The LAM because I was enchanted by members' stories, lived and creative. I wanted to facilitate and build a platform that would amplify voices and bring the community together to celebrate our known and emerging local-rural artists and writers of Lanark County.

Within these pages, our contributors have explored the theme of Darkness and Light, challenging the expected and ordinary. Through slightly off-the-wall original stories and artwork, readers will be transported through underworlds, tragic war ridden character arcs, and imagine beautiful, new worlds beyond the stars. Appreciators of the weird will dive deep and examine what it means to be human and to question the divide between reality, fallacy and the fragility of time.

Marianne Jeffery
Creative Director

OUR TEAM



EDITOR IN CHIEF

ELYSIA ROURKE (*she/her*) is a children's author and stay-at-home mom. Her debut novel, *Whale Fall*, is slated for publication with Penguin/Nancy Paulsen Books on June 16, 2026. She is the founder of the Almonte Writers Guild and lives in Almonte, Ontario with her husband, two sons, and dog. She publishes *Ninetween*, a free newsletter full of writing tips and middle grade reading recommendations, monthly on Substack. The rest of Elysia's writing can be found at www.elysiarourke.com.



CREATIVE DIRECTOR

MARIANNE JEFFERY (*she/her*) is a poet and short-form writer who has done a little bit of everything, from pouring coffee to teaching K-6. She is always learning and passionate about bringing community together through creativity as a Director of the Almonte Writers Guild, Founder of Almonte Grief, and Creative Director of The LAM. At present, she divides her time between Almonte and Lanark County.



ARTS EDITOR

VANESSA USCHY COPLAN (*she/her*)is a visual artist specializing in mixed media drawing, painting, and textiles. She is currently working on 3D textile canoes, mixed media drawings, and paintings that reference personal and collective histories. In addition to having an active studio practice, she teaches at the Ottawa School of Art and in her home studio. She is currently preparing her canoes for open submissions to the World of Threads festival in 2026. Her portfolio can be found at www.vanessauschy.ca.



ARTS EDITOR

EMILY PETTIGREW (*she/her*) hails from Lanark County, where her work at the Middleville Museum and studies in Canterbury High School's visual arts program ignited her passion for history, community engagement, and art. Now based in Almonte, she is pursuing a B.Sc. in Neuroscience and Biology (Combined Honours) at Carleton University. Emily balances her scientific studies with creative pursuits, including fine embroidery and writing.



BUSINESS GURU / ADVISOR

TRACY MARTINEAU (*she/her*) is an entrepreneur who once played a key role in bringing the country internet access back in the dial-up days. Over four decades of business, marketing, and writing experience led her to undertake and complete a Psychology (Honours) degree at Athabasca U, just so she could understand people better (aka what is wrong with these people?!). She lives in Almonte among family and friends.

GHOST BOW

JILL HEINERTH

The ghostly remains of a WWII shipwreck lies twisted on the ocean floor in Newfoundland. The surrounding water is a deep, inky blue, swallowing the edges of the scene into shadow. A diver's light pierces through the hush of the deep, illuminating the wreck's crumpled bow. The contrast is stark: light reveals fragments of life—soft coral, encrusting algae, and puffy anemones—while darkness clings to the unexplored recesses of the war grave, hinting at secrets entombed in silence. History is both revealed and concealed, and beauty is born from ruin.





JILL HEINERTH. From technical dives deep inside underwater caves to being the first person to swim inside Antarctic icebergs, Jill Heinerth is a Fellow of the International Scuba Diving Hall of Fame and Explorer in Residence for the Royal Canadian Geographical Society. Jill has made TV programs for the CBC, BBC, National Geographic, and produced independent films. Her books Into The Planet and The Aquanaut have been lauded by diverse voices from Oprah to the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Dolly Parton and a new documentary Diving Into The Darkness, celebrates her life as an explorer. It is available for streaming on Apple, Amazon and YouTube.

THE SEED

TRACY MARTINEAU

It had been almost two months searching for Persephone and there had been few clues to go on.

The most interesting, by far, had been from Hecate, the witch of crossroads. *Fitting that*, the bard nodded to herself. If anyone had seen Persephone once she had passed from the middle earth, Hecate would know about it. It was no small feat crossing into Underearth. Not even for a goddess.

You find her or don't come back.

Oh yes, the directive had been clear. And considering the source, Orpheus had no doubt what awaited if she failed. Or *who* waited.

Orpheus sighed, rolling her shoulders to release cramped muscles. Not since she had tangled with Hera two summers ago thanks to a snarky remark made by Hermes, yet attributed to the bard, had there been so little rest. And yet, if she were honest with herself, Orpheus knew Demeter had only to ask and this would have been a task to be taken on gladly. But, with a wry smile, Orpheus continued her trek. To be sure, the gods and goddesses were not known for their concern for mere humans, hero or not.

That this was the path Persephone had taken, Orpheus was certain. There had been birds who had come to the bard's song, sharing what they had seen. There had been shadows swirling at the entrance of this cave with steps leading further down into the depths of Hades' domain, all too eager to share what they had witnessed.

There was nothing else for it. Rolling her shoulders, Orpheus adjusted her lyre across her back once more. Her path was clear; she knew it to the core of her being. And to the ends of the earth, into the very Underearth, Orpheus would go for her heart-sister; no doubt about it.

There was no hesitation as she made her way on the steps leading down.

It didn't mean she was unafraid…

Underearth

"Are you expected?" The small, misshapen figure squinted up at the human requesting an audience.

Orpheus' lips twitched, "Oh, I would think I am," she answered after a moment of thought.

"Hmmm…"

The bard simply waited while the attendant considered their options. Of course he would see Orpheus. With or without an appointment, the bard smiled to herself. As she had expected, it was mere moments before being ushered into the throne room.

"You look tired, Orpheus."

"I could say the same for you, my Lord." Orpheus bowed gracefully, mindful of the instrument strapped to her back and the Dark God before her. Her smile was fixed, her eyes held Hades' until he nodded his head and motioned for the bard to approach.

"Walk with me."

Orpheus fell into step as they exited the throne room into the garden.

Garden…

Orpheus supressed a shudder. Yes, technically, it was a garden, she conceded. And yet, the only things that grew here were dark and twisted. There was no plethora of colour, there was little light. Much like the earth above, she reminded herself again why she was here.

"I assume you're here for her."

Orpheus nodded, their eyes meeting for a moment, before they continued their stroll along a broken path.

Hades let out a heavy sigh, his great shoulders drooped. Orpheus frowned as her eyes lowered, watching for uneven and broken stones, lest she trip. The dark god seemed to have no such concern. Perhaps he walked this path often. Her attention back to Hades, she wondered if anyone would have believed how tired and worn he looked. She grew more concerned.

"She cannot leave."

Hades' voice was dull, monotone. This was not what Orpheus had expected. Not at all. Chewing her bottom lip, thoughts flashed through the bards' overly active mind. Shaking her head to clear these gloomy thoughts, she cleared her throat and began.

"My Lord, the earth must have her back."

Hades refused to respond, his gaze fixed on

something far off, though he had stopped near a bench that looked surprisingly sturdy, to Orpheus' relief.

"I know I am not the first to petition," Orpheus began, remaining standing while Hades settled comfortably on the bench. Still, he did not look at the bard. "Since Persephone has left the earth, you must know nothing will grow and all life is suffering." Still no response. "And Zeus and the Council have lifted their sentence…Persephone will not go to Tartarus…"

"She was never going to Tartarus."

Now this was the Hades Orpheus knew. There was cold fire in his voice and what burned in his pitch-black eyes, she could only hope would not be directed at her. She waited, knowing he was not finished, and was genuinely curious where he was going with his statement.

Hades waved a hand in dismissal, or defeat, and sighed, the cold fire leaving him just as quickly. "There is nothing I can do."

Now Orpheus frowned, "But, my Lord, surely you can release any who venture into your domain?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps once that was so. Perhaps it will be again." Hades' responded cryptically, once again his gaze was held by something far in the distance. He shrugged. "Our powers, our domains, our very existence, it is all in flux…"

Now Orpheus was torn. She was not, *absolutely not*, going to threaten Hades as she had been directed to do … by Demeter, by Zeus, and let's just say most of the Olympians. If Demeter did not have Persephone returned to her, there would be no return to Spring. And without Spring, there would be no food not just for festivals and offerings, which the gods and goddesses enjoyed, but the humans who worshipped the deities were starting to die. Without worshippers, the gods and goddesses knew they themselves were threatened.

Nothing like having personal stake in the game to get the Olympians motivated.

Attempting to change Demeter's mind once it was made up was not something anyone would envy Zeus attempting to do. But Orpheus knew it was more than that … Demeter needed Persephone returned. It wasn't just a mother-daughter thing. It wasn't even a way to circumvent the Council's edict that Persephone be punished for her previous crimes. No, there was something far more important going on.

It was the reason Orpheus had agreed to this quest.

"My lord, Hades," Orpheus began. "We need her to return to the earth or all will cease to exist."

There was nothing for it but to say it plainly. Perhaps the god was not aware…When the Council sent the Fates to retrieve Persephone, to carry her to Tartarus, Demeter had found her daughter first, and they had devised a scheme. True, it had always been Persephone's plan to visit Hades, but hiding in the dark god's domain couldn't stop the Council forever. Demeter had done the only thing she could …

"I know, Orpheus. I know."

Hades looked up and sighed deeply. "Persephone cannot leave. She has eaten the fruits of this domain and…" He spread his hands, despondent and hopeless as his words.

Orpheus felt the colour drain from her face and for a moment she wondered if she would faint. This couldn't be…

"Oh Hades…" Orpheus whispered. "Persephone carries Demeter's powers. She is Spring Itself. If Persephone does not return…"

Eyes as dead as the world around them stared at her.

"She cannot leave and now neither can you."

In Another Garden

Her nails had gotten long.

She wiggled impeccably manicured, three-inch blood-red nails.

Definitely not her mother's nails.

Persephone snorted indelicately, her mouth almost a grimace. Definitely wouldn't have been her own nails a few months ago. But here in the Underearth there was little to interfere with their growth. Not the planting, weeding, harvesting. Not the cooking, baking, brewing. Not even the dancing, laughing, and singing.

No, she sighed, there was very little happening here. It was not at all what she had expected. And just what had she expected, Persephone demanded again of herself harshly. Oh, she had hoped to correct wrongs, make everyone understand consequences, and…She laughed to herself…and change things.

Change things? Well, everything had changed.

Just not what she had expected and now she had no idea what to do about it.

A low growl escaped as Persephone dug her nails into the hard ground she sat on. Frustrated, the young goddess knew there had to be a way. There was always a way…She just didn't know it…Yet.

There was something on the wind that made the goddess pause. A sound…*music*…but how could that be? And then, she recognized the tune. It

couldn't be and yet there could be no doubt. Rising to her feet, Persephone didn't walk, she ran, in the direction of the sounds…towards Orpheus, her truest friend.

Yet Another Garden Path

"Is it true then?"

Arms linked, Orpheus felt the slightest shudder from the goddess. "Yes," Persephone whispered. "I had to do something!"

Eyebrow raised questioningly, Orpheus eyed her friend and waited for more. She didn't have to wait long.

"There had been emissaries from the Council…Hermes, Hecate…they were going to collect me even if they had to invade. Can you imagine?" Persephone shook her head at the thought, not entirely displeased by visions of Olympus' armies invading Underearth.

"I was aware, yes." The bard spoke quietly, carefully, sensing a change in her friend. Perhaps it was the time in the Underearth…perhaps it was the edict the Council had attempted to carry out… an eternity in Tartarus was not to be taken lightly… and yet Orpheus sensed there was something else at work.

"So, I knew I had to do something," Persephone had continued, reminiscing for a moment. "I knew Hades would not let them take me back." She smiled darkly. "And I knew my mother would not let them send me to Tartarus." Now the goddess' gaze fell, her words a mere whisper. "They would punish Hades if I went back…"

Persephone stopped, pulled on Orpheus' arm.

"Don't you see Orpheus?" Persephone's dark blue eyes pleaded for understanding. "Now that I can't go back, they simply must stop blaming Hades. And, it's not so bad here, really." Her voice trembled slightly.

Oh dear, Orpheus sighed.

"No one can question your heart," Orpheus began delicately. "Even if I could believe you could live without Spring…the rest of the world cannot…"

Persephone's eyes filled with tears. "It really wasn't supposed to be like this…"

"I know, Persephone, I know." Orpheus comforted her friend as the sniffles began.

"I'm horrible, I know, but I'm ever so glad you're here with me."

The bard smiled reassuringly, patting her arm.

Oh dear indeed.

Puzzles in the Garden

"Let's think this through." Orpheus sat on what was, all things considered, a rather comfortable stone. It was warming to her body which was also surprising and yet welcome as Underearth was cooler than she would have preferred.

Persephone sat cross-legged, leaning her back on the stone the bard rested on. Nodding her agreement, she waited.

"If you carry Demeter's power of Spring, surely even here you feel it?" Orpheus asked hopefully.

Biting her lip, thinking about it, Persephone sighed. Dark blue eyes looked up sadly. "Nothing."

Orpheus frowned, considering.

"I know what it feels like!" Persephone assured her. "During festivals especially, mother would share the power with me. It was a way to spread the flowers further, faster, and let's be honest, I like flowers even more than she does." The tinkling laughter was a stark contrast to the dreary landscape surrounding them.

Despite herself, Orpheus smiled. How could anyone resist this impetuous goddess of light? So impetuous, the bard sighed, part of her wanting to shake the goddess…and yet…

"Persephone? How did you know the pomegranate seeds would hold you here?"

The goddess shrugged a shoulder. "Hecate, of course. She knows so many things and my mother often would consult her. Why?" She leaned forward hopefully.

"I'm just wondering why."

"Why what?" The slightest irritation could be heard in Persephone's tone.

If Orpheus noticed, she showed no signs of it. Shifting to sit cross-legged next to the goddess, the bard pondered the puzzle before them. Muttering, cutting herself off, tilting her head, frowning deeper, until finally she began to smile.

"Oh for heaven's sake, Orpheus tell me before I burst!" Enough was enough…

With a chuckle, Orpheus turned to her friend. "It's really quite clever and simple," she began. "And it's all your own doing." She laughed again.

Persephone's eyes narrowed. There was a glint in their darkened hue that reminded Orpheus of Hades, which prompted the bard to continue quickly.

"You came to the Underearth to escape the Council's edict. Because Demeter was uncertain the Council would relent if she withheld the Spring, she

passed that power to you. That's why no one noticed Demeter had *less*, because the harvest continued as usual."

"Yes, yes." Persephone spun her finger impatiently, though her attention was held completely by Orpheus' words.

"When the Council rescinded the edict sending you to Tartarus, there was no reason not to return. However, you knew Olympus planned to punish Hades and so you ate the pomegranate seeds to prevent your leaving. Thus, the gods and goddesses could not invade Underearth without also harming you!"

"But…that doesn't explain anything." Persephone frowned, biting her lip.

"Ah well, you, my friend, with your heart of gold changed everything." Orpheus smiled warmly, holding her friend's cold hands. "You hold Spring, but you haven't used the powers since you have been here?"

Persephone frowned deeper, shaking her head.

"Isn't that curious when you wanted to come here and change this place?" How well Orpheus knew that the bleak and dull atmosphere would have torn at Persephone's heart and soul.

The goddess blinked several times as the question was turned over in her mind.

"You can't leave because part of you doesn't want to leave."

Persephone lowered her eyes. It was true and yet…She looked up at Orpheus. "Are you saying I could leave?"

"That is *exactly* what I am saying." Orpheus smiled. "But this is a powerful spell you and Hecate devised whether you knew it or not. You ate six seeds?"

Persephone nodded.

"Then I would wager you are here for some measure of time for each of the seeds. Considering how much I know you want to be here and how much you want to return home, I would further wager it is one month for each seed, thereby dividing your time equally between the homes."

Biting her lip, this time with a growing hope in her eyes, Persephone nodded.

"Then all that remains is to let the Council know." Orpheus leaned back, releasing Persephone's hands which had grown warm.

"And Hades." Persephone smirked. "I know he's happy I'm here and all but I know he will worry about me returning home. And," she chuckled mischievously. "I haven't had the heart to make him any tea in way too long. It turned him positively blue last time. Definitely time to shake things up again!"

How a god as dark as Hades could turn blue…and why would he allow Persephone to…

The bard laughed. It was such a relief to see her friend smile and one puzzle at least seemed to be solved. It wasn't lost on Orpheus that just as spring was the time for plants to sprout, so too would Spring return to the earth in its proper time. Almost as though Persephone herself were the seed waiting to grow. For some reason that image brought shivers to the bard.

For another day, Orpheus told herself firmly. Meanwhile, there remained the matter of how she was going to leave Underearth…

FIN

Author's Note: *Similar to myths, Persephone ate six pomegranate seeds, Hades ruled Underearth or Underworld, Persephone only became Goddess of Spring after spending time in Hades' domain, and Hecate was not Goddess of Witchcraft until after she had assisted Persephone to return to the earth. Different to myths, Orpheus is a female bard, not male. She retrieves not her wife, but her heart-sister.*



TRACY MARTINEAU writes and tells all sorts of stories. Current works include a retelling of fairy tales for adults, a lyrical stroll through Persephone's life, and a personal narrative of what it's like to be "a woman of a certain age". She lives in Almonte and can be found at tracy@madnessmaven.ca.

BLESSINGS

SUSAN FISHER





SUSAN FISHER got her start in writing and photography in the ‘70s and ‘80s working for The Carleton Place Canadian, and The Almonte Gazette. She went on to freelance for 30 years in both professions with The Canadian Wildlife Federation, Canadian Geographic and various newspapers and organizations. Susan also exhibited photographs with Lanark County groups The Passionate Eye and Naked In the House.

CASTING SHADOWS

CRYSTAL BRUCE

The power is out and I'm bored.

Dad says it won't last long but it has been out for hours. We had peanut butter sandwiches and other random food from the pantry for dinner even though I was promised Dad's spaghetti special. He always puts extra cheese on mine.

We're together in the living room with a flashlight. Dad's trying to read a book I've never seen him pick up before. He keeps groaning because he has to hunch and his back isn't very good. We need to sit close under a pile of comforters he pulled directly off of our beds. Dad says it'll get cold tonight if the power doesn't come back on. We're so close I can smell the peanut butter he had for dinner.

I'm not really scared — just mostly bored. I've already counted the bumps on the ceiling in the flashlight spotlight. There are approximately 483. Or 484. I can't really remember.

Dad asks if I'd like him to read to me but we haven't done that since I was a little kid. Sure, I'm still technically a kid, but I can read on my own now. Not that I do. Unless gaming counts. There's a lot of reading in some games.

I've long played out the battery on my gaming system. I'm itching to grind a little longer to build my character up so I can beat the Great Beast in my game. Dad doesn't get it. He doesn't like it when I play full screen on the TV because then he can't watch the baseball game.

We used to watch baseball together. Heck, I used to play baseball! Again, that was when I was a little kid. I stopped playing when mom and dad broke up and scheduling became too difficult. Or whatever.

I toy with the idea of asking him to play catch. I think there are some old beat up gloves somewhere at his place. But then I remember it's dark outside and the cold is creeping in. I sigh deeply, sink down, and bring the comforter up to my nose.

About 10 minutes later, I'm on the edge of sleep because what else is there to do? Dad stirs and gets up to stretch, pulling me out of my carefully tucked cocoon. I mumble, annoyed.

"Whoops, sorry kiddo," he says.

Kiddo is a name I wish he'd give up.

I exhale loudly through my nose. A little bull snort. It's a warning of sorts that I'm mad.

He pokes anyway.

"Are you sure you don't want me to read to you? The story's getting pretty good," he teases.

I take advantage of the darkness and roll my eyes. He can't see that, can he?

"Don't be like that! We need to make the best of what we can right now."

Ugh, busted.

I scramble up, pulling myself out of the tangled folds of the comforter. I'm wedged in tighter than I expect and pull a limb free with force behind it. I end up upsetting the smorgasbord of various pantry bits and the flashlight goes rolling across the hardwood floor, lighting up the living room in stages, sending huge shadows across the walls.

"Ah, sorry!" I'm quick to jump up, then realize that I'm at Dad's and can relax a little.

"It's OK, kiddo! It was an accident," he gropes around in the dark, picking up spilled crackers and raisins.

I bend to help and drag the flashlight over. My breath catches. Behind my Dad, on the wall is the silhouette of Great Beast, like the boss in my video game. The folds of his shirt jut off his spine, creating jagged scales. He looks way bigger than he should be as his shadow reaches all the way up to the bumpy ceiling. His outreached hand is magnified and its curl looks menacing.

I scramble back, just a little bit. My breath catches in a mix of awe and fear.

A car goes by, lighting up the room for just a split second. Dad's looking towards me, puzzled.

My held breath escapes me. I feel silly for being scared and even sillier for thinking my Dad would be anything like the Great Beast.

"You OK, kiddo?" he asks. I can still see his beast-form behind him.

"Uh, yeah…" I hesitate. Do I tell him what I see? Will he even care? "It's just…"

I trail off.

"Hmm?" Dad coaxes gently. And just gently enough.

"Your shadow looked really cool," I blurt out.

He looks back behind him, ruining the illusion from his point of view.

"Oh yeah?" He asks, standing up straight as his shadow crosses the ceiling. He's dotted with ceiling bumps from his shoulders up.

"I'm a giant!" He bellows.

I snort, not the bull snort from earlier, but as close to a laugh as I'll allow for now. I join him behind the light. The top of my shadow-head meets his shadow-shoulders.

We take turns posing in front of the flashlight, sending our silhouettes to paint the wall. We tell stories about butterflies, wolf heads, rabbits, and deer with antlers. It's the most fun I've had with Dad since I was a little kid.

Dad and I sit there on the floor after the end of our woodland performance. It's cold in the room and the power still isn't back on. He pulls me into a half hug, and I let him, even though I'm not a little kid anymore. Our shadows meld together.

FIN





CRYSTAL BRUCE is an aspiring children's writer and illustrator. She secretly finds it delightful when the power goes out, which happens often in Lanark where she lives with her husband and daughter. You can find out more on her website petitestory.ca or follow her on Bluesky @petitestory.bsky.social.

THE TIDES OF MOTHER-HOOD

LAURA PENNEY

Sometimes when I'm daydreaming
I fall back into the dark tank
Of thoughts and fears that swirl
Around my neck and pull me down
A circle of light above growing smaller
Maybe that is fine.

And then, I remember
You just learned how to say moon
You smile at me, proud little boy
Pointing to the sky you say it again
As the cold circle becomes a moon
I drift up to kiss your cheek, smell your warm head
And watch you fade into sleep.



LAURA PENNEY is a mother of two boys, who married a man from Almonte and now calls this community home. She works as a lawyer with the Department of Justice. This poem was Laura's first dip into poetry, as a way to try to explain to friends and family, when regular words just won't work, how post-partum depression can feel.

MY HOMETOWN

MARY ANNE HARRISON

A few years after the death of my dad, Basil O'Keefe, my mom moved away from the family farm in Corkery into her first apartment in Almonte. She was 82. As a family, we thought it would be easier for her not to have to drive for groceries and appointments, and she would also be closer to her sister and friends. We were also concerned that she was spending too much time on her own and hoped that this move would widen her social circle.



As she and I sorted through her belongings in preparation for the move, Mom shared with me all kinds of stories about her and my father's life together. We missed him terribly. Once we were done, we drove into town and left the discarded belongings at The Hub — Almonte's second-hand store — so that they could be resold and the money donated to charity.

A week later, we opened up our local paper, The Almonte Gazette, and there in black and white was a four-by-six-inch photo of my father with a story to accompany it. A local gentleman had gone to The Hub and bought one of Mom's old suitcases. When he went through the suitcase at home, he found a black- and-white negative inside a tattered envelope with the word "Daddy" written in pencil on the front.

Knowing that this photo certainly meant something to someone, he took it to The Gazette and asked if they would publish it in order to return the negative to its rightful owner. The paper did just that and their story asked readers to contact them if they knew who "Daddy" was.

Immediately, the calls starting coming in fast and furious; readers knew the man in the picture. It was their brother, their uncle, their brother-in-law, their neighbour, their friend, their cousin, their favourite bus driver. The staff at The Gazette were astonished by the response.

Mom and I went to the Gazette right away to claim our negative and thank the staff for taking such good care of it. They also gave us the name of the man who had found the negative, and we called him and thanked him for reuniting Mom, Daddy, and me.

The small town of Almonte really did go that extra mile for us and we sure appreciated it. The move into town wasn't easy on either of us and we were always second-guessing whether it was the right decision. The fact that a complete stranger was willing to take the time to return that one little negative meant the world to us. We really believed that it was Daddy's way of telling us everything would be okay.

Mom eventually moved one more time, from her apartment to a nursing home a few blocks away. She passed away November 2017 at 97, and until then hardly day went by that she did not look at, in her words, "that famous picture of Daddy," on her bedside table.

FIN



MARY ANNE HARRISON grew up on the family farm just outside of Almonte with her Mom and Dad and 5 older brothers. She has been retired for 10 years from a 37 year career with the federal government. Mary Anne is currently spending her golden years enjoying time with her husband, David, and their dog, Ruby, capturing family stories from years gone by and creating mosaics in her studio.

A MOMENT OF PURE GRACE

SHERRY GALEY

Bethesda Terrace and Fountain from the northern end of the Central Park Mall. The terrace is divided into two levels: the upper level which corresponds to the mall and the lower level which corresponds to the fountain.

A central stairway descends to an arcade underneath the street. The ceiling of the arcade is covered by 14,000 Minton encaustic tiles designed by Jacob Wrey Mould — and is simply stunning.

I approached the arcade from the fountain side after having admired the sculpture gracing the fountain which was designed by Emma Stebbins in 1868 and called the Angel of the Waters.

The story is from the Gospel of John about an angel blessing the Pool of Bethesda, giving it healing powers. (Stebbins was the first woman to receive a public commission for a major work of art in New York City).

The 8-foot bronze statue depicts a female winged angel touching down upon the top of the fountain, where the water spouts and cascades into an upper basin and into the surrounding pool lined by four cherubs.

Lo and behold, I heard the sweetest and most angelic voice singing what sounded very much like Gregorian Chant. It was a young female busker, her voice resonating throughout the huge structure thanks to incredible acoustics. Playing at her side was her cherub-like toddler son.

Initially, I was behind her under the arcade in the darkness, but as I moved closer the scene opened up and she was bathed in the light that poured down the staircase. A moment of pure grace.

FIN



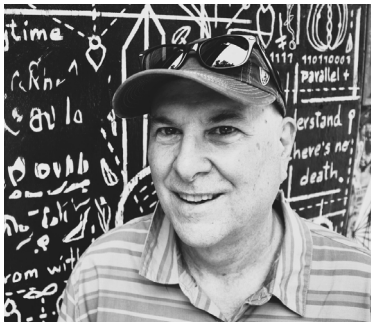


SHERRY GALEY attributes her wanderlust to being born in Singapore and living in the Caribbean as a child. In a multi-faceted career, she has run her own communications business, worked overseas and served as speechwriter for former Auditor General Sheila Fraser. Moving to Almonte has given her a great base to explore passions such as travel and photography.

MOM'S DREAM

ROBERT MCCLELLAN





ROBERT McCLELLAN is a former combat photographer and photojournalism instructor. Robert's unique viewpoint of the world is evident in the details of his provocative images and multimedia art pieces. He is the writer and producer of several award-winning documentary films, an acclaimed podcaster, and his recent books include "Boom Baby Boom" and "Leaving Trump's America." Along with Jill Heinerth, Robert publishes a free weekly newsletter at ExplorersMindset.substack.com

658 AND THE GIRL

DAN HENDRIKX

There isn't much to like about Ridgewood. Except Jane. I like her. She's got a nice smile, a great laugh, a tattoo on her forearm, and she's always there when I fall. That's been happening more and more lately — my legs aren't as strong as when I first arrived — but she's usually there to help me up.

Today, I didn't make it past the testing room door before my left leg gave out. I would have hit the ground hard and that wouldn't have been ideal. Jane was there, catching me in her strong hands. Her smile made me feel a little less hollow today.

"Are you okay?" she asked, eyes full of concern. She'd just been through testing herself and her face showed it.

"I'm okay," I said even though the words rasped in the air.

"Let's go," she said quietly. She guided me back to my feet, and we slowly walked past the lines of people waiting their turn.

"How was it today?" she asked. "What'd they test?"

I kept my eyes locked on the door at the end of the hall. "My toes. Yourself?"

She held up her left arm. A new tattoo marked her, barely visible against her dark skin. "They injected me with something."

"Sorry to hear that."

The sunbeams coming through the barred windows held dust, but you didn't need to see it to know it was there. Ridgewood held a smell, a deep musty fog that permeated the air. The guards themselves wore thick black masks with strange tubes that distorted every word they said.

Goosebumps lined my arms as the guards scanned our tattoos. Then, they opened the door for us and waved us through, the straps of their guns clicking loudly in the eerie silence. Behind us, I heard them chuckling as this lovely eleven-year-old helped my old bones along.

***

She took me to my dorm first. My left leg was starting to drag, and Jane, sweet Jane, she helped me get to my cot. At least mine was close to the door. The further away you were, the worse it became at night. The cameras couldn't penetrate the darkness at the furthest corner of the room, and the shadows were far from friendly.

Thumping into the cot took more energy than I had, but at least the pain was replaced by a dull, throbbing ache radiating from my head to my recently-tested toes. What remained of them, at least.

"Get some sleep," Jane said quietly. She kissed my forehead. Her lips felt frozen, but they soothed my burning skin.

"Thank you, Jane," I whispered. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Of course you will," she said quietly. "Someone's gotta take care of you, Bill."

"You're a light in this place, Jane."

"We gotta stick together, Bill. Get some sleep. We're in the yard later."

Her teeth flashed in the dim light, and then she was gone.

The cot creaked as I rolled over to stare at the concrete wall. Once, I'd marked the gray with every passing day, but I'd long since given up on that. I'd planned to count fourteen days — that was how long you stayed at Ridgewood before moving on. But now, seeing sixty-some scratches etched into the thing, steadily shakier and more uneven, I didn't care.

Outside, wind battered the barred windows. Something metal rattled in the hallway, and a chill filled the room. Then the silence returned, that smothering, deafening silence.

***

"And how are your feet today, 658?"

Sitting across from me was a man who I once would have called quite handsome. Blond hair, blue eyes, a perfect smile — back in the day, he certainly would have caught my eye. Today, he held a clipboard, and those eyes flickered back and forth across mine.

"They've certainly felt better, Dr. Gloucester."

"And your knees?"

"There is a hollow feeling in the base of my left knee. The right is sore, and beginning to swell. Is this normal?"

Dr. Gloucester didn't answer. His pen

scribbled on the clipboard. I didn't bother looking around the room; the last thing I wanted was another baton swatting the back of my head from the gas-mask-man behind me.

"Have you experienced headaches, 658?" the doctor asked.

"I've had a headache since my arrival, Doctor."

The pen stopped, and the man squinted at me. "Was that a joke, William?"

My shoulders slumped at his tone. "No, Doctor."

A frown creased his face. My heart didn't bother falling. I knew what came next.

"Send in the next one. And take care of 658."

Stars flew in my vision. I hit something hard and the darkness came.

***

"You need to be more careful," Jane whispered. They'd let her have a cloth and a cup of cool water to dab my face. The good doctor hadn't been too good today, though admittedly, I should have known better. All around us, forlorn faces sat on their beds, some talking, most not.

"Oh, Jane. He overreacted, that's all. And this, this is far from the first time." Admittedly, this one was certainly worse than usual. A splitting headache threatened to tear me in two.

She wagged a little finger in front of my face. "Come on, Bill. I don't think I'd be able to handle this place without you. Please? For me?"

Those pleading eyes, barely visible in the twilight streaming through the windows, tugged at me, and I sighed. "Yes, Jane. I'll be more careful."

"You're rubbing your finger again. Are you okay?"

I looked down. She was right. For some reason, I'd been rubbing the white stripe on my ring finger. How long ago had David's ring sat there? Two months? Five?

"I'm okay," I whispered. But tears flooded my vision, stinging and salty as they dropped down to my mouth.

"Can I hug you?" she asked.

"The guards won't like it."

"That's not a no, Bill."

Thin arms wrapped around me — tight, surprisingly strong. There was warmth in her embrace. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been hugged by a child, and though it took every bit of my strength, I reached up to squeeze her arms. The tears came, even more prominent, and I let my head thump against the wall where I sat.

"Thank you," I said softly. I meant it with every piece of my soul.

"Is that better?" she asked quietly.

"It is. Thank you, Jane. You're a beacon in this place."

"We gotta stick together, Bill."

***

I woke the next morning with a throbbing, splitting headache only made worse by the morning sirens. It didn't matter, though. I'd dreamed of David once more, and tears stained my pillow.

I forced myself upright, wishing dearly for Jane's arms to help me to my feet. The air was hot, thick, like a smothering soup, and once more, I wished for an open window. You do a lot of wishing in Ridgewood, but they don't come true.

Muffled voices filled the air as everybody shuffled to their feet. Guards were spaced throughout the room, all in masks, all staring through those dark, grease-streaked visors. Dust once more glittered in the sunbeams coming through the only window overhead. Bare feet shuffled along concrete, fabric rustled in the air, and gunstraps clicked gently in the quiet.

The man from the cot next to mine made eye contact, but quickly looked down at his filthy toes. At least he still had all of his. They'd taken three of mine for testing, and the dull itch was the only reminder of Little Piggy one, three, and four of my left foot.

A guard stepped closer to me. His boot thumped loud on concrete. I glanced up into that mask, just for a moment, then stood slowly, keeping my hands wide and in sight.

He said something. The tubes distorted it, but it sounded like, "Move, 658."

So I did.

***

Jane sat with me today. She didn't always — a few of the others sometimes needed help handling dull spoons with their missing fingers and hands — but today, she was probably worried about me. I couldn't blame her. My knees threatened to give at any point, reminding me just how much I'd inconvenienced the good doctor.

"How's your head?" she asked quietly, setting her bowl down.

"It's been worse, Jane. How are you?"

Her eyes focused on the "oatmeal" in front of her, and the spoon clinked against the bowl as she stirred her colourless slop. "I'm in Room Four today."

A sharp pang stabbed at my heart. "I'm sorry, Jane," I whispered. Last time she'd been in Room Four, they'd taken several biopsies all at once, leaving her screaming and writhing in pain.

"I'll be okay," she said. "Something tells me today's the day."

"What makes you so sure?"

She jerked her little thumb over her shoulder, where two guards watched her quite closely. "Them."

A film of tears spread across my eyes. With every fiber of my being, I wanted to reach across and comfort the poor girl. She itched her forearm once more and the fabric shifted, showing her tattoo once more. I pushed my bowl aside, no longer hungry; a twisting, shooting pang rolled throughout my stomach.

She didn't deserve this. Ridgewood didn't deserve her.

"I love you, Jane," I said quietly.

"I love you too, Bill. We gotta stick together. This place — it can't break me."

Loud, shouting voices pierced the quiet. They echoed from the dirty floor. We all heard the rhythm of boots trampling along concrete, and as we'd all learned, we set our spoons down carefully, stood, and stepped back from the table.

Men in black leather flooded into the room like a never-ending wave. There were dozens of them — hundreds, more likely. All wore masks. All carried guns. The two men in the corner approached our table, faces forlorn under their greasy visors. Jane gave me a soft smile, then stood and followed them to the door, where they disappeared down the hall to Room Four.

The rest of us all formed our line, and the day went on as usual.

***

Some time later, when the pain in my kidneys was nothing but a major inconvenience, I sat on a small log in the yard. The guards kept threatening to take it away, but I needed the break. My left leg was fighting me hard today, and now, new bruises lined my entire body. I wasn't the man I once was, and so I sat.

I looked around, hoping to see a little dark face bouncing towards me with a smile, but I couldn't see Jane. Over by the wall, a man paced back and forth, clipboard in hand. Maybe it was the good doctor. Maybe it wasn't. Did it matter?

Twenty-foot fences lined the yard, hundreds of feet long, capturing this patch of brown, dry nothingness and sealing us away like animals. A few oversized vehicles sat parked beside the exit doors, their tarped beds full of today's failures. Two guards grunted, throwing one of the last bodies into the pile, then dusted their hands and nodded to one another before returning inside.

Though a few people stood in groups out here, probably talking about their latest testing and reminiscing about life on the outside, most of us stayed by ourselves. It was too easy to irritate the guards — they'd broken up a conversation with more than just their own words before. There was no point in irritating them.

So I sat, bare feet digging little trenches in the dry, dusty earth, watching the guards return with their failures. This one was small, only a few feet long.

For some reason, my heart thudded with a sharp pang. There weren't too many here that size. I was only fifty feet away or so, but I watched.

"Please don't be," I whispered. I didn't pray much, but this time I did.

The shape shifted, only slightly.

A little black arm fell free, coated with sticky drying blood. I knew that arm. I knew that tattoo. I knew that little girl.

I cried.

***

They beat me for it, but I hardly felt it. When I stumbled out of the doorway, almost thumping into the next person in line — a green-eyed young man with a shaved head and a face tattoo that would have drove me crazy in my younger years — no little hands came up to catch me. I hit the ground hard and my knee screamed at me.

I cried, then, too, as hard hands gripped my shirt from behind, tearing the fabric as it forced me to my feet. They shoved me hard and I joined the people lucky enough to be done for the day. I shuffled back to my room, lay on my cot, and stared at my notches on the wall.

"I miss you, Jane," I said quietly. Saying her name hurt worse than any of the others I'd lost in Ridgewood. It sent a thick, sharp blade through my heart. She was so young.

"Shh," someone whispered. I closed my eyes, letting the tears fall free. Out in the hall, people stomped to and fro.

I tried to sleep, but I couldn't. First, it was shouting, then another gunshot, then a storm battering away at the walls of this place. But then, it was memories of a tiny little child, probably only eleven or so, bleeding and crying for her old friend William. So instead, I cried.

Sometime that afternoon, I rolled out of my

cot, stared at what remained of my dirty, scabbed toes, and shuffled in line to the mess hall. I ate tasteless nothing. I drank from a cup of water that held a film of grease. I watched as the guards beat the man who slept next to me for daring to drop his cup from a hand that only held two fingers.

I carried my tray to where I was told. A numb, pulsing, empty hollow filled my chest where a little girl's smile should have warmed. And I went to my testing.

***

I sat in the yard, watching the people mingle. I drew a little J in the dirt with my big toe, but water flooded the trench, weakening the edges until her initial disappeared. That, too, hurt more than I wished. A sharp rock stabbed the stump of Little Piggy number two, but I just let it sit there. Maybe it would give me an infection, and it would spread, and I'd die. Maybe then, I'd see my friends, my David, and Jane in the next life. Maybe it would be better than Ridgewood. Maybe it would be worse.

Fewer voices penetrated the quiet air, so not much sounded other than the wind. The clouds overhead, black and twisting, threatened to unleash the elements on us. The guards would be fine, tucked under their little shelters, but we wouldn't be. They'd leave us here to drown and rot away in the mud, and we'd let them.

"I miss you, Jane," I said softly.

***

Days passed. Weeks. Then one night, a loud siren echoed, waking me from my sleep. A man stood beside me, gently tapping my old, worn shoulder. It was that young fellow with the shaved head and the face tattoo.

"What?" I asked. My voice was still hoarse from sobbing.

"New intakes. We need to go."

"Are we moving?"

"Heading to Cell Block Seven."

I closed my eyes, but sat up. The man helped me to my feet. Guards lined the room, and we formed our line, and we shuffled away.

To our left, bars lined the glass windows. To our right, a concrete wall held the testing doors. We moved along, pausing only to scan our tattoos at every door.

They slapped a few of us. One man felt the butt of a gun between his eyes. A woman screamed as she was pulled out of the line and shoved into a cell. Behind me and ahead of me, sobs pierced the night, punctuated by the occasional hiccup or tearing scream. I kept my eyes focused on my missing toes, forcing every step on my ever-weaker knee.

We scanned our tattoos one last time, then found ourselves entering Cell Block Seven. It was indistinguishable from where we'd last been — dozens of cots lining a room, all holding a single filthy, scratchy blanket. The guards pushed the last of us through, then slammed the door shut, sealing us away with a heavy, deafening clang.

The chaos didn't take long to begin. Fortunately, most people left me out of it. I was too old, and they wouldn't make me walk to the back, to the dim, shadow-filled corners where the worst of the worst tucked themselves away from the guards. Instead, the man from before guided me to a cot near the front, holding me by the elbow just like a little girl once had, and gave me his support as I sat. This cot was harder than my old one, but it'd do.

"Thank you," I said, nodding to the man. I lay down, though every bone creaked, and stared at the empty wall. The man took the cot next to mine, pointedly staring at one haggard woman rushing at him.

"I'm glad to help. What's your name?" he asked.

"658, William. And yourself?"

"721, George."

I nodded. "A pleasure."

"Mine, too. We've gotta stick together, you know?"

"Agreed."

I closed my eyes and thought of Jane.

FIN



DAN HENDRIKX, currently working on a debut horror novel, loves learning how characters react to challenging — sometimes impossible — circumstances. With a deep passion for stories and people, he's often found chatting with strangers, at least when he's not creating a new way to haunt his readers.

APOCALYPSE

SUSAN FISHER





SUSAN FISHER got her start in writing and photography in the '70s and '80s working for The Carleton Place Canadian and The Almonte Gazette. She went on to freelance for 30 years in both professions with The Canadian Wildlife Federation, Canadian Geographic, and various newspapers and organizations. Susan also exhibited photographs with Lanark County groups The Passionate Eye and Naked In the House.

ON THE BOARDWALK

DANIEL MACFADYEN

On the boardwalk,
when day meets night,
where land meets water,
people walk dogs.

I am walking slowly —
carefully,
walking demons
to exorcize them a bit,
on a very short leash.

A while ago,
I didn't even know
they were in my house,
and when I did,
didn't think I could tame them.

But as I slowly soak up this day
in humanity,
bathed in nature's last light,
my beasts on a chain,
I try to accept them
for the bitches they are.

I am trying to tame them;
Think I'll even try to name them.

Name them and tame them,
that's what I'll do.

And when they are dead,
which I hope is soon,
I'll get a golden lab instead.



DANIEL MACFADYEN has been published in a number of journals and anthologies in Canada and the US. He did not write anything for nine years, but began again in 2025. He lives in Perth, Ontario.

SHADOW WORK II

VICTORIA LAUBE





VICTORIA LAUBE is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice is rooted in photography but who also uses a variety of other media and techniques in her art making. Her practice serves to reconcile personal challenges and to uncover and explore the ordinary, often overlooked, phenomena of life — transformation, decay, aging, and death. She lives in Fallbrook (Balderson), Tay Valley Township.

THE FADING PATH

MAGGIE FORBES

I sat on the front step with my hands wrapped around a hot cup of coffee. My lifelong friend, still in her robe and slippers, ambled along the rather long pathway of her raised container garden. She muttered softly to herself as she ran her fingers along the edge of each container. At the end of the row she paused for a few seconds staring into the distance.

"It's hard to make friends here," she said. "So no plants."

With a slight chuckle, she retraced her steps and stated, "I need a new bra."

Then she smiled and glanced my way. "Do you drink coffee?"

A confused look crossed her face, "I'm sorry did I ask you that already?"

I stood, reached for her hand, and started up the stairs. "I'd love a cup of coffee."

tilling the garden
my friend unearths
that her brain is broken



MAGGIE FORBES, a pseudonym, is a recent member of the Lanark writing community, hoping to channel her passionate hobbies into wonderfully enticing stories. Ideally, she'd prefer to write travel journals, creative non-fiction, or memoirs; however, poetry, particularly Japanese poetry, has recently taken hold. She is honored to have one of her works included in the debut release of the LAM.

BENEATH A FILIGREE OF SCARS

ELLEN SYMONS

For a kid who skips two years when he's in elementary school, being bullied is like putting on socks. It happens every day. Some bullies are blatant, with insults and pounding fists. Some are subtle. You're friends, you think, until you notice the nicks on your self-esteem. The filigree of scarring they've sliced on the delicate tissue of your heart.

When my family moved, and I transferred to seventh grade in a downtown school, I didn't expect to be free of bullies. But I hoped to go undetected for a while.

That first week, no one picked on me. There was no fuss when I sat at the corner of a table in the cafeteria, no one bouncing pens off my head in class or pushing me into walls. My anxiety receded enough that by the end of the week, I was sleeping through the night and eating breakfast. I still ate alone, my parents leaving early for work, yet I submerged myself in the feeling of blending in, as if my life had always been that way.

Monday, I found out why no one had come after me.

A Grade Eight boy named Tyler ruled the school. And he'd been sizing me up.

Our first meeting started badly.

In the yard, two bigger kids appeared at my elbows. They ignored my wide-eyed agitation, and walked me to the long, narrow cloakroom at the back of a class where Tyler held court. They pushed me inside; not hard, but firm, and I fell. I fell into him — into his arms, into his lips.

I could say I tripped over my feet and a pair of pink galoshes but what I *really* tripped over was the Cupid's bow of his mouth, the steel of his eye, and the way his brow beckoned through his frown. At first his lips were hard and stern. Then they softened. I wanted to stay there. Instead, I pushed away, cringing, and waited with an empty fatalism for whatever was coming. I knew about bullies.

He flicked his finger, sending his guards out. They pulled the accordion door shut, leaving us in the cloakroom's close, dim space.

"Cory." He knew my name. "Watch yourself." His voice was icy.

"Yes." I was mortified. Flinching. "Yes, sorry. It was…I'm clumsy. Sorry."

He looked me over. "Well."

All I could do was wait.

Then he spoke. "Do that again."

"What?"

"Do *that* again. Kiss me."

Instantly, I fell, again. Headfirst. Against my better judgement and the certainty that he would add to my filigree of scars, I fell. In love.

I tumbled into a glacial pool, knowing hypothermia would kill me, but I did not resist. His mouth wasn't cold, though; it was a hot spring, a secret healing place in the middle of snow-capped mountains. It was warm, and it welcomed me inch by inch into his depths. He would mend me. His strong hands were the support I'd been looking to lean on forever.

Until. "Stop," he said. "I don't—" He eased me away. "Recess is almost over. We have business to get to."

I nodded.

Whatever he wanted.

He'd brought me in to give me an assignment — watching out for the small, Grade Four twins, Lily and Leo.

"They're yours," he told me. "You're not big, and I need someone who won't scare them, who knows what it's like to be—"

"Bullied," I said.

"Out of favour," he corrected.

I joined his cohort.

***

Tyler was always the smartest person in the room. Clever. He understood people. His belief in his own destiny made him impervious to obstacles, and his family's wealth protected him. I knew these things from the stories he told me that year, and from the way he talked to adults that sounded deferential, but

was manipulation. Benevolent manipulation. He wanted to fix things, in this school where disastrous teachers smoked in the yard and the principal faltered.

Attentive, commanding, organized, Tyler easily collected sidekicks: a troupe of kids who enforced his rules of kindness.

Did we think we were gods, or angels? Did we think he was a saviour? Benevolent, but undeniably a bully, he was irresistible to me. I was a child living practically alone, expected to be self-sufficient, my parents gone more than present, and I wanted to be…what? Directed. Bolstered.

Cherished.

In fact, he ruled me, with honeyed breath, with steely eyes that dragged up in my own gaze a confession of everything my soul wanted to keep hidden—all my feelings for him.

He never said how he felt. But over and over, he met my lips with his, strong arms supporting me, until, inevitably, he'd put me from him. "Enough," he'd say, and I'd nod, and worry, believing I wasn't guaranteed his attention. That I could lose all this at any time.

So. I made myself special.

Lily and Leo, if they came to school with any lunch at all, brought white sugar pressed between slices of Wonder Bread. In my kitchen each morning, after my parents left for work, I'd make three thick sandwiches. Brown bread, lettuce, meat, cheese. Apples, carrot sticks, cookies. Milk tickets. Lunchtimes, the three of us ate together. It was always too much food, and I'd send them home with leftovers crammed into their shared backpack.

I took on Lincoln, the scrawny, runny-nosed boy who dragged himself around in half-off woolen socks, sleep stuck in his eyes. I'd take him to the boys' bathroom, help him blow his nose, wash his face, touch it dry with rough paper towels. Pull up his socks, put his shoes back on. One day he came to school with his face already washed, and smiled at me.

I took on Helen, too tall, too smart, too innocent to be popular. Her long body curved to look smaller, her blonde hair in scraped-tight braids, she'd made her name when she shouted at the class clown, "Oh, Derek, you make me so horny." She thought it meant *amused*. I'd walk at her side, glaring warnings at kids who giggled or stuck two fingers above their head and pretended to be a bull. Helen started to stand at her full height.

***

Our routine settled. Tyler stopped sending bigger kids to collect me. He knew I'd appear, pretending not to be eager, and step inside the cloakroom, and wait. I'd wait for the door to close, for his brow to beckon, for the bow of his lips to curve, for his eyes to steal my soul. Wait for him to say that I mattered. He didn't say it.

He must have thought he showed me. But without words, I didn't trust myself to understand. I began sinking into that glacial pool, waiting for the cold to kill me. Waiting for new scars from life's fickle knifepoint. He'd be leaving for high school. Spring approached, and the end became a question of weeks.

And then, one day, I couldn't jump into that pool. I stayed away from the cloakroom. On the next day as well, and the one after that, and the next one; I minded my charges, I minded my business, and I stayed away from him.

By Friday, I was ragged with sleeplessness and a sour stomach. I would've given in, that day; I would've sidled to the cloakroom and stood, head down, waiting once more. He saved me from pleading. At morning recess, two kids appeared, and after a giddy walk there I was, standing before him.

"Cory," he said. "You're free to come or to go. But if you go, you can't come back."

I nodded. I understood the rules. But when he flicked his finger to order the door pulled closed, then said, "Kiss me," I stood my ground.

It was my birthday, and I was eleven. Maybe that made me strong. Maybe reckless. I wanted to be in charge of myself. I looked at him, and didn't budge.

"Cory?" he said.

"You kiss me." I wanted proof.

He lifted from his chair with his steel-blue eyes softly lidded, the tip of his tongue to his lips; then he checked himself, and sat back down. What I wanted wasn't the way things went. His finger flicked, sending me out. I left and stood, breathing choppily until I'd put my body and bones together. Then I walked away.

***

By Monday, our tiff was over. Not forgotten, but forgiven. I had to forgive — I couldn't stay away. And him? Maybe he also realized our last days would go too fast.

They did. We reached the last hours. There was a party at lunchtime in the gym. I was hanging along the wall, watching my charges dance, when two kids arrived. Always two. As if he needed to make sure I wouldn't run.

"Cory," said the one on the left. "He wants you."

I walked between them, from the gym into the front hall. They turned toward the classroom where, even today, he held his hidden court. I stood, and

watched them go; they spun back to see why I had stopped. Then I turned, walking out the big front doors of the school, down the broad stone steps, and home.

I would rather cut out my own heart than have him do it.

***

In time, I gave myself to a few men. A few women. None of them offered a healing spring in the chill mountains. None of them had that beckoning brow. Those ice-blue eyes. A Cupid's bow mouth or imperious finger. None of them owned me.

Then, I was twenty-two. At university, studying child psychology. Still a protector. That was who I'd made myself, for him. I was still looking for ways to stop the lonely trembling of my heart. I still dreamt of his eyes.

One day in the library, bent over my books, the back of my neck prickled. Tyler rounded the corner of the desk, lowered himself into the chair across from me, his ice-blue eyes browsing my stack of books. Looking at me.

"Cory," he said.

***

We caught up.

"Law school," he said. Intending to be a judge. After selling a start-up at twenty-four, adding unnecessary millions to his inherited money, he wanted to be useful.

"And you?" he asked. He nodded while I told him some of it: the schooling; my two jobs. Post-grad teaching assistant. Daycare worker.

I held back my pain. I held back how my heart and my body still searched for a foundation as sure as his strong hands, and how nothing I had found came close to touching me the way he did.

"And here you are."

I didn't ask about the ring on his finger. "I missed you."

The bow of his lips bent in a soft smile. That hot mountain spring billowed warmth into snowy air. Then his smile faded.

"Do you remember Helen?" he asked.

"Of course. Why?"

He shook his head. I asked about the others. Did he see them? Lily and Leo? Lincoln? Anyone from back then?

He shook his head and said, "You left me."

"At knifepoint," I retorted.

"What?"

"*You* were leaving. I didn't know what else to do."

He put his hand on my arm. "You were wrong to leave. I wanted you…to stay, with me."

I sank into warmth then, easing years of ache and longing, healing myself in the secret pool. He slid his hand away.

"I'm married."

I'd seen the ring, but my heart stopped anyway. I was not healed at all. I was injured beyond recovery; why had I hoped for anything?

"Why would you tell me that?" I asked.

Slowly, with finger and thumb, he twisted the gold band. "You'd find out eventually."

I shook my head. "No. Why would you tell me *now*? That *back then*, you wanted to stay with me? When we could have done something about it, when all I needed was a word from you?" My voice was a rising challenge, and I waited for ice to fill his eyes. "Why would you say that *now*, when it's too late?"

I don't know if his eyes were icy — I couldn't see them. He was watching his fingers twist the gold band, as if he were embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and it sounded honest.

He had married Helen. It was another cut on the filigree of my heart. But her, or someone else; what did it matter? It only mattered that it wasn't me and never could be me.

***

We left each other that afternoon edgy and angry, but I'd put my number in his contacts. He texted. I texted back. Bit by bit we abandoned our anger and hurt. I asked about his marriage. I wanted him to be happy. He looked away, but said he was. Was that all I needed? I told myself yes.

He suggested coffee. As before, I was powerless to stay away.

Coffee grew into lunching together. In spring, it became sitting on the campus lawn. I'd bring thick sandwiches, like I'd made for Lily and Leo. He brought elaborate iced drinks.

If I could afford a doctorate, I told myself, I would stay. Until he finished law school. I would stay with him, or — *he's married* — not really *with* him, but beside him, and make myself what he wanted me to be. Again. Even with no hope beyond, I would still do that.

My appetite left. My insomnia returned. I regressed to my childhood, to the time before him, when I'd roamed my echoing house, patching myself after a day of knocks and insults. Remember, I now whispered to my dark room, *he is married*. And I'd turn on my side in bed, wrapping my arms around my chest, holding myself together.

Classes ended and summer started, and we were apart. *It's best this way.*

The campus was a ghost town. The empty hallways stretched, polished floors reflecting the windows' light, leading me nowhere new. I had few students during my office hours, and I

traced the same paths day after day: in the front doors of the university, up the stairs, down echoing hallways, to my office, and my desk. I would sit for a while, then take the trip in reverse: hallways, stairs, door, home.

His name hounded the rhythm of my steps. *Tyler. Tyler.* I walked faster, I walked slower; his name kept pace. Tyler.

It's best.

***

One day at the end of July, as the late sun went down, he phoned.

"It's me," he said. "Are you free? Come dancing."

I'd been so empty. I rushed into a shower, into clean underwear, into my best shirt and jeans. I rushed to the Market, to the bar. Eyes open, I rushed into dishonesty. I rushed into my past, into the cloakroom.

I rushed toward him, toward his lips, and I tripped over my feet. Some of his drink splashed to the ground.

"Cory." He laughed. "Watch yourself."

He put down the glass and his hands landed on my arms. I leaned in, to their strength. His eyes weren't icy — they were soft and his lids fluttered. He was staring at my mouth. Like a gentle tug on the filigree of my heart, threatening to unravel it, his voice beckoned.

"Cory," he said. "Come here."

I could feel his breath on my face, smell the whiskey. I took another small step in. Our edges brushed — my yearning and his withholding finally meeting, equal, indistinguishable.

"I'm alone tonight," he said, and he paused, watching me from under his fluttering lids. "You could kiss me. Like you used to."

I moved toward his mouth. *Remember. He is married.* Despite my headlong rush to get exactly to this moment, I stepped back and I shook my head. "I can't."

This was not who I was. I tore myself from the tug of his desire and I took myself home.

***

By August, I was walking hours each day. His name still coupled itself to my steps, but I tired my body so it plunged into sleep for some hours a night. One evening, in the window of a stylish restaurant, there he sat. In our school's old neighbourhood. With Helen. Twirling a long-stemmed wine glass, looking at her as she spoke.

Helen was elegant. Her blond hair was swept into a French twist, her posture precise, her simple ecru dress raw silk. She had her hand in the air, flipping it as she spoke, and I thought, *she's learned who she wants to be*. Bumping against him, we'd learned who we wanted to be.

He turned, and through the glass we saw each other. We both looked at Helen but the sinking sun flashed, and she was hidden from me. I found myself flipping my hand, an echo of her, almost a wave. Hello. Goodbye.

It wasn't until September that I heard from him again.

"It's me." His voice was flat. Tired. "Can we talk? Come meet me."

"No," I said. "I'm yours, only yours, but I can't be this way." A pained silence weighted the air. "We can't be this way." I hung up.

Shortly, he appeared at my door. "Stop leaving me," he demanded. He looked worn. "Helen —we've ended it."

I didn't trust his words. "Why?"

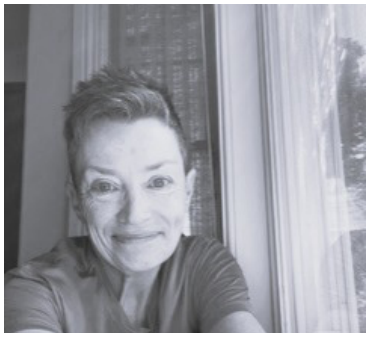
"She's — we're — it was convenient," he said. "And you were — gone. But it was always you. I should have found you. Told you. But in those days…you knew the rules, I told myself. Stay or go. You went. I let you. Cory." He stepped forward, reaching for me. "I was wrong, to lose you." There was no ring on his finger. "She says she's happier. She says hello."

I tilted toward him. "Tell me again."

"It was always you."

I led him inside, to where we would start to heal our filigree of scars. When he kissed me, I closed the door.

FIN

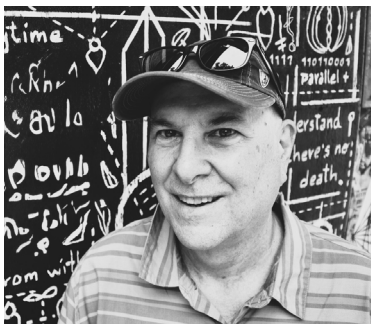


ELLEN SYMONS lives on a rural road near Almonte, Ontario, with her wife and cat. She writes poetry about how nature shapes us, and short stories about self-discovery. Landscape, identity, betrayal, and forgiveness are also central themes in her first novel, now going through its final revision after five years of early mornings in the writing chair.

FUNERAL GARAGES

ROBERT MCCLELLAN





ROBERT McCLELLAN is a former combat photographer and photojournalism instructor. Robert's unique viewpoint of the world is evident in the details of his provocative images and multimedia art pieces. He is the writer and producer of several award-winning documentary films, an acclaimed podcaster, and his recent books include "Boom Baby Boom" and "Leaving Trump's America." Along with Jill Heinerth, Robert publishes a free weekly newsletter at ExplorersMindset.substack.com

ALLIES WITH THE SHADOW

DANA RUPRECHT

I am no longer scared
and cold
in the shade
of that which rises up
to block the sun

Instead
we meet as old friends
eye to eye
hand in hand
like allies

Take me to the darkness,
I say,
where I will cradle the child
of my heart
and bathe in golden light
once the shadows
have flown

I will dine with nightmares
and toast the demons
as they dance

For soon enough
we all return
to fitful sleep



DANA RUPRECHT is a teller of stories through many mediums: writing, photography, social media, craftwork, Tarot readings, and occasionally performing on stage. She lives with her family in an old Victorian house high on a cliff, in a beautiful and lonely little ghost town. Most days, she feels like a character in a gothic novel, living a magickal life of tea, crystals, Tarot, and cats. A few centuries ago, she probably would have been burned at the stake.

THUNDER BAY

KENTUCKY

A brick, a tire iron
it doesn't matter now
at the last second i saw it coming
a silhouette in a headlight
the darkness of my dreams in
the darkness of the light

i woke up dead
my first thought was on surviving it

i could go to the vatican and receive my apology
and probably not feel as good as this
like a braid upward upon which my palms never grow raw
i was unleashed into heaven

the coroner said it was racism or worse
i could hear some tsk-tsk-ed-ly disagreeing on top of each other
many lit up their phones to explain why
all i know is that the sisters are sad in that way that you can tell they expected it

in the glare of the moonlight off the road to the river
in the darkness of the light
i had my moment to consider
the random nature of
having been born at all

i don't remember if i thought it was good
i don't remember anything
i don't get to remember anything now
i don't have to remember anything anymore

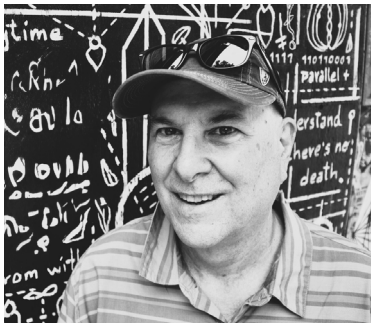


KENTUCKY is a singer/songwriter and published poet who lives and works out of his studio in Almonte, Ontario with his wife Jodi and their three children. His songs and visual art can be found on Spotify and YouTube under "I Am Kentucky", and his poetry can be found on Substack under the same name.

STALWART WARMTH

ROBERT MCCLELLAN





ROBERT McCLELLAN is a former combat photographer and photojournalism instructor. Robert's unique viewpoint of the world is evident in the details of his provocative images and multimedia art pieces. He is the writer and producer of several award-winning documentary films, an acclaimed podcaster, and his recent books include "Boom Baby Boom" and "Leaving Trump's America." Along with Jill Heinerth, Robert publishes a free weekly newsletter at ExplorersMindset.substack.com

YOU, THE IMAGINER OF WORLDS

WEST WESTON

Your feet find themselves on an infinite expanse of black, pierced through with points of glittering light. All of space spreads beneath your toes. You are not wearing shoes. Something calls you forward, softly, gently. More a thought than a sound, it drives you to walk into the endless expanse of stars.

"Where am I?" you ask. Your words come out so small, swallowed by your surroundings. "What is this place?"

A small laugh comes from behind you. No, it comes from all around you. "Sit," the voice says.

You listen. Resting on an invisible, impossible ground, you watch the stars above you. They are moving, glowing bright and flickering out. A new one appears. Your hand raises, a finger tracing between the fleeting pinpricks of light.

"What do you see?" the voice asks. An elderly person sits beside you. They are beyond age, beyond description. You dare not look.

"I see stars," you reply. That is all you can see here: darkness and stars.

"No," the voice says. "You see more."

"I see constellations," you admit, fingers once again tracing shapes in the sky. "I see lights that are moving, flickering…dying and reborn each second." You pause, looking down at the sky beneath you. "What is this place?"

"You see life." The elder smiles. Something inexplicable radiates from their presence. Kindness, wisdom, power. You cannot look. "What constellations do you see?"

"There is a brave warrior," you say. Your fingers outline the warrior's bow, her strong stance. "Next to her is a minx." The long, sleek body of the minx shines bright behind the warrior's heel.

"Does she have a name?"

Your eyebrows furrow. "How would I know? She is just a shape in the stars; she's not real."

"Am I real?" The voice chuckles as you freeze. You cannot answer that question. Your hand drops to your side, fingers finding new patterns on the invisible floor.

"What is this place?" you ask again. "Why am I here?"

"You don't ask who I am?" the voice teases.

You shrug, that is not important.

"You're wise, little one. Take a walk with me."

Now, you are standing, and you are not where you were before. The stars are gone; all is black. The elder stands next to you, their warm skin glowing in the darkness. You look down; you glow too.

"Where are we?" you ask.

"The same place as before."

"But there is nothing here." As you speak, you realize you are wrong.

There, floating before you, is a small ball of glittering light — not one light, but many. In front of you floats an infinite amount of shining specks compressed into a sphere no larger than your palm. You reach a hesitant hand towards it.

"Go on," the voice says. "Don't be afraid."

You are not afraid; you could never be afraid here. Here is peace and darkness and a whole globe of twinkling lights. The ball of light floats into your palm. It is warm and delicate. Fragile.

"What is this?" you ask.

"Yours," the voice replies.

"How?"

"Tell me what you see."

"I see lights; they flicker and change and move. They find each other and break apart every second." You pause, bringing the ball closer to your face. "I see groups like cities and families and couples — an all-encompassing network." You pause again. The darkness around you is vast and solid and empty. You think of your home, so unlike this place.

"You see life." The elder tilts their head in the corner of your vision. They are so unlike anyone at home. "What families do you see?"

"Big ones and small ones; ones of birth and ones of circumstance. They are full of love and happiness." Your thumb runs along the smooth sphere.

A ripple shakes the lights in its path. “I could change that. All it would take is a bit of pressure, and they would scatter. No more happy families.”

The voice laughs openly at this. “And so you could. You could also draw them together again.”

“Why?” you ask. The power and possibilities are endless. Your nerves are taut with excitement and responsibility. “Why can I do this?”

“That world is yours. Those lives connected to your very own,” the voice says. As if it were simple. Maybe it is.

You turn to the elder; their eyes are dark and vast and knowing.

You smile. “I can see it, every one of them. I can lead them, build them, destroy them and bring them back to life.”

The elder nods as you slowly close your eyes. “It is a power few can have. Use it well, imaginer of worlds.”

When your eyes open again, you are alone. The world glows brighter in your hand. You laugh. You throw the globe into the air, and the lights burst outwards. Glittering, flickering stars surround you. They glow bright and flicker out. Your hand raises, a finger tracing between the fleeting pinpricks of light. Life upon Life, all at the tips of your fingers.

You, the imaginer of worlds.

FIN



WEST WESTON teaches high school French and English in the small town of Almonte, Ontario. Writing has always been their greatest passion, and they love dancing the line between prose and poetry in their short stories, poems, plays, and longer works. West is very grateful to the LAM for this opportunity to be published locally!

THE FLEETING BRIDE

PAULINE GAUTHIER

You were enamored
by the front porch
and so we bought it
this little fixer-upper
bereft of care

Evenings we sat there
in easy silence
amid the drone
of honey bees

Filtered sunlight
through crab apple trees
bursting with sweet scent

You in shadow
me in light

Too soon
our last porch-time
together

Alone now
in uneasy solitude

A sudden gust of wind
strews white petals
in my hair
and at my feet

A fleeting bride
the wedding
we never had



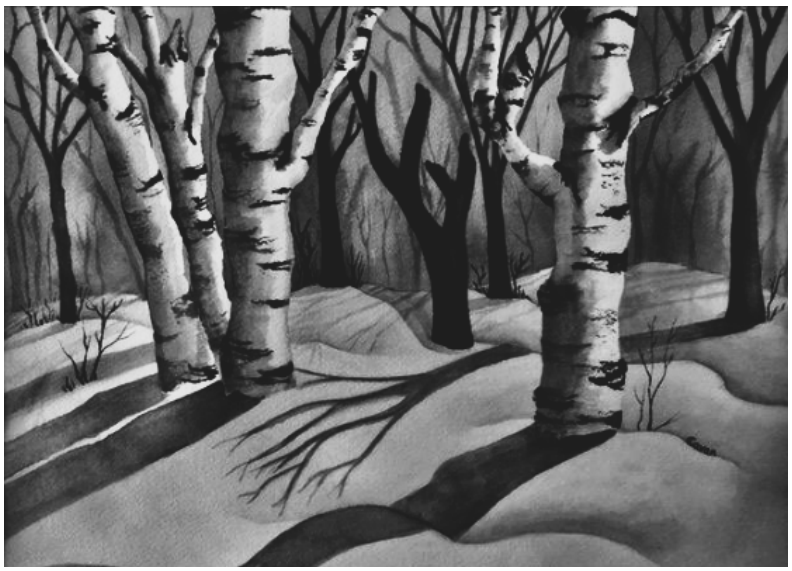
PAULINE GAUTHIER has been writing prose poetry, haiku and short stories for 30 interrupted years. Some works have been published in literary magazines and read on CBC Radio. A short story, "The Missal", read on CBC Radio/Outfront, was shortlisted for the New York Radio Awards. Pauline would like to thank her mentors: Frances Itani, Isabel Huggan, and Carol Shields.

SHADOWED ILLUMINATION

CHRIS CAVAN

old ones standing in the shadows
what stories could you tell
of rings and roots and fallen leaves
if i sit with you awhile?

ancient elders who light the way
with secret whispered spells
wisdom shines in frosted shadows
in the darkness will you tell?



many branches of your visions
reach out for starry skies
silent sentries of the forest
do you hear us when we cry?

your timeworn arms reach for the light
to touch the milky way
does more truth lie in layered earth
than star patterns in the sky?

in the shelter of your shadows
in deep bright snow of day
what might your rings reveal to us
if we'd let you have your say?

burrowed roots wrap dark earth's rocks
hide bones of long-lived tales
what bright deeds and hidden stories
lie along these snowy trails?



CHRIS CAVAN is a grandmother, poet/writer, watercolour and mixed media artist who stays rooted to the sky among trees and by water. She creates art in the Ottawa Valley to delight, inspire and promote healing reflection.

CENTO OF OPTIMISM

DAGNE FORREST

You must not believe me when I say
doom exists—sometimes
in the morning, dropping
everything worth forgetting
is going to remind you
how to get by post-truth. I learned

no matter how many times
we all live under
too much light,
hugging the fencelines
like a cat pacing a bathtub,
there is magic left,
a future beyond this past,

retreating into our extinction
within the clamor of live oaks,
even when you can't stand it.

You see again how far away
sunshine pours like polished grain.
So much sky, what does one person do?

Don't ask don't think.
A penny in the shoulder's weeds,
wonder is skittish, like cottontails.
The lucky find reinvention
with a fever,
faith that for every hurt
is the opposite,
pulling us closer into its orbit.

For a while, this is how
we soak up the sun,
finger the next page,
for a while, this is how—

The lines in this poem are from: "Lying My Head Off", Cate Marvin; "I Want to Die", Tariq Luthun; "Vulture", Ted Kooser; "Takedown", Ariesha Mais; "This Living", Amber Tamblyn; "Post--", Corey Van Landingham; "Ella's Beads", Kim June Johnson; "Refuge", Nahassaiu deGannes; "Paper Birch", Jennifer K. Sweeney; "Rabbitbrush", Molly McCully Brown; "A dead whale can feed an entire ecosystem", Rachel Dillon; "An AI takes in ten thousand cat videos", Manahil Bandukwala; "Gorgon Loves Googie's", Rebecca Morgan Frank; "oracle", Duriel E. Harris; "Wasteland: on the California Wildfires", Forrest Gander; "Reasons to Live", Ruth Awad; "Telescope", Louise Glück; "The Dream of Reason", Jenny George; "I'll Write the Girl", Jan Beatty; "From Late Summer", Deborah Landau, "Abide", Jake Adam York; "Work", Aza Pace; "This Time of Night", Michelle Bitting; "Towards the End of My Mother's Life", Jessica Greenbaum; "In Perpetual Spring", Amy Gerstler; "Of Flight", Ilya Kaminsky; "April Moon", Cathy Song; "Family Portrait as the Golden Mummies of Bahareya", Andy Young; "We Have Trees Now", Prageeta Sharma; "Hope on the Line", Katherine Koller; "Family Portrait as the Golden Mummies of Bahareya", Andy Young



DAGNE FORREST's poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and Canada's National Magazine Award. In 2023 she won first prize in the Nick Blatchford Occasional Verse Contest run by The New Quarterly. In 2025 she was selected as a finalist in the Marvin Bell Memorial Poetry Prize judged by poet US Maggie Smith for december magazine. Her chapbooks include "Un/becoming" (Baseline Press, 2025) and the forthcoming "Falldown Lane" (Whittle Micropress, 2026). She belongs to Painted Bride Quarterly's senior editorial and podcast teams.

HOPE AGAINST HOPE

DANA RUPRECHT





DANA RUPRECHT is a teller of stories through many mediums: writing, photography, social media, craftwork, Tarot readings, and occasionally performing on stage. She lives with her family in an old Victorian house high on a cliff, in a beautiful and lonely little ghost town. Most days, she feels like a character in a gothic novel, living a magickal life of tea, crystals, Tarot, and cats. A few centuries ago, she probably would have been burned at the stake.

THANK YOU FOR READING

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for a successful first issue.

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Look for the call for submissions for
Issue II: Flight and Fog
in early 2026!

