

THE JOURNAL OF Creative Aging

# SAGE-ING

with Creative Spirit, Grace & Gratitude



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KNOW YOURSELF. BE YOURSELF.  
LOVE YOURSELF. SHARE YOURSELF.  
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## FROM THE EDITORS

The thoughtful sharings presented in Issue 51 frequently mention how deep creative exploring can be strongly related to interactions with nature and its lessons. Searching understanding of the spiritual and emotional life of the individual inspired 19th-century transcendentalists who advocated soul growth through nature rather than books. *"Nature is not only all that is visible to the eye, it also includes the inner pictures of the soul."* – Edvard Munch.

Theirs was a reaction to the materialism and rationalism at that time. Two centuries later there is growing interest in their beliefs and their explorations through creative works. For this issue we invited contributors to share how nature inspires creative expression and invites introspection. Hailed as the "father of free verse," Walt Whitman, in the preface to his seminal work *Leaves of Grass*, calls on readers to "re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem..." With this quote, Whitman urges us to create what resonates with our souls.

For many, words to 'shout out' our enthusiasm for nature inspire the poetic expression of soul. A review of *Field Play* by British Columbian poet Susan McCaslin honours the connections calling to her and the interconnectedness of all humanity when we seek beauty. In *THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE* Patricia Keeney proclaims nature to be her first muse and shares how she was affected by poets whose fierce passion for nature had inspired them to write. Penn Kemp shares her enthusiasm in *CO-CREATION IN MOTION: EQUINOX IN THE GARDEN*: "Nearly all my poetry stems from contemplating the seasons and translating that appreciation into words that best reflect such abundance." After a lifetime of being a 'creative' Stasha Powell in *WHISPERS OF THE RAVENS* still remembers the words of her teacher when she was eight years old: "You see the world differently, don't you?" Fortunately she wasn't deterred, as so many are by others' opinions. Accompanied by her beautiful photos Jennifer Wenn in *NATURE AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION* recounts her late-life journey into poetry. "The natural world has always been essential as friend, comforter, playmate and inspiration" rejoices Katerina Fretwell In *NATURAL CREATIVITY* as she shares her photographs and poetry. In *HEADING INTO THE FLOW* Johanna Beyers presents a deeply

intriguing and thought-provoking look at her lifelong study of nature through education and creative expression. Our experiences become so much richer and more fulfilling when we share our stories with others. As the reader journeys with Meredith Stephens in *DOING ZION EN ROUTE TO LOVELAND* and Ellen Lewinberg in *INFLUENCED BY THE KONTOMBLE* we experience the richness of reflection. Recalling mythical fairy tales Jacques LeBlanc in *ONCE UPON A TIME* brings back memories of moments with himself now cherished years later because he felt intertwined in a sense of oneness with Mother Nature. A *COLLABORATION* between Laura David with Jim Demchuk recalls that, although their playful intuitive process had no conscious intention to be inspired by nature, with intuitive expression we are often affected by nature on a subconscious level. It is not so much in imagery, but rather an inner sensibility with nature's way. *FROM WILDERNESS TO WONDER: Nature's Spark* by Shelly Siskind vibrates with her enthusiasm for paying attention to nature, "the doorway to our unconscious mind: home of our deeper – and often unfiltered – Self," to burst forth in poetry, photography and animation.

*"There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique."* – Martha Graham

2025 begs our actions. Creativity is a powerful tool for generating new ideas and innovative solutions, unlocking new perspectives, and navigating uncertainty. In *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* author Natalie Goldberg posits, "write what disturbs you, what you fear, what you have not been able to speak about. Be willing to be split open." Her advice helps all creators to get away from what is expected, and get down to the essence of self-expression, your life force. In our next issue we invite you to share how your creative spirit has been called to react to 2025. As Martha Graham notes, Art and Culture in the 1920s was all about testing the status quo and producing something innovative and dynamic. Are you thinking differently in reaction to our times? Perhaps you may have been called to write to your local editor. In the 1920s a new understanding of painting based on abstraction emerged. Please share how you have felt a new spirit emerging.

– **Karen Close, Laura David and Johanna Beyers**

## HOW TO SUBMIT

The theme to consider for our next issue will be in the FROM THE EDITORS in each issue. Your story is to be original, related to creativity in any of its many forms, as a path to gaining self awareness and wisdom, and/or the act of harvesting your life's wisdom as a legacy for future generations.

Please attach it as a word document (.doc) – not a PDF - to enable editing, using calibri font, 14 pt, 1.5 spacing. 500 – 1500 word maximum (use word count).

Please attach 3-4 photos, separately, including: Your headshot, 2-3 photos related to your article. All photos should be numbered, given a caption, and attached in high resolution jpg. format. Insert the word "photo #" with its caption within the article where you would like each image placed (we'll try to honour this request as layout permits). Please include a brief bio note, written in the third person (one or two short paragraphs of up to 200 words). Your bio will be placed at the end of your article and is intended to give the reader an idea of who you are, your passions and/or what you do and have done with your life that feels relevant to the article. Please include your preferred contact information, including email, website, blog address – whatever you want included in the publication. In your cover email, please share how you found your way to submitting to Sage-ing. Please email your article and photographs to Karen Close at [karensageing@gmail.com](mailto:karensageing@gmail.com)

Quarterly issues of The Journal go online around a solstice or equinox: March, June, September, and December. We need to receive your intention of submitting an article by the first day of the preceding month or earlier. **Your complete submission is required by the first day of the month preceding publication.**

## WHO WE ARE

### Karen Close, Editor,

taught English and Visual Arts for 30 years. Retirement in 1995 gave her the opportunity to meet vibrant senior Canadian artists and to hear their stories.



Indigenous cultures teach us, "All Elders have medicine—physical, emotional, musical, story. Let's give our unique medicine to the world." In 2011, believing in the medicine inherent in creative expression, Karen began editing the free online arts and aging journal *Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*. She is the author of two books. *Unfinished Women: Seeds From My Friendship With Reva Brooks* and *The Spirit of Kelowna: A Celebration of Art and Community* profiles a community art project in Kelowna, BC. In January, 2015 Woodlake Publishing released *Creative Aging: Stories from the Pages of the Journal Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*. Karen is the recipient of the 2016 City of Kelowna Honour In The Arts award.



**Johanna Beyers, Copy Editor,** is a poet and mixed media artist. She began her career as a marine paleontologist, and holds a PhD in environmental policy

and a Master's of Social Work. She is a certified sandplay therapist. Johanna is the author of *Sandbar Islands* (The Caitlin Press, 1988) and *Wearing my Feathered Hat* (Wind Oak & Dove, 2013). Her work has been published in *The Capilano Review*, *Sage-ing*, *Room of One's Own*, *CV2*, *Waves*, and elsewhere. She has been copy-editor for *Sage-ing* since 2018.

### Laura David (Foster), Assistant Editor,

Artist Laura David (Foster), MPS, CCC, formerly a registered art therapist and clinical counsellor (with Foster Art and Wellness in Edmonton/Kelowna) is now retired and enjoying life as a grandmother. She has worked therapeutically with individuals and groups in various organizations, but now has chosen to return to her first love: to focus on her own work as an artist. She has developed a passion for the healing power of art that stems from her lived experience of mental health issues, recovery, spirituality, and creating and teaching art. She pursued this passion by completing a Master of Psychotherapy and Spirituality degree at St. Stephen's College with an Art Therapy specialization. Laura agrees, "Feeling is the power that drives art" (1991, David Milne).



**Robert MacDonald, Designer and Publisher,** has lived by his wits, some hard work, and a good lashing of luck. Almost completely

unschooled, he has, over several decades, invented identities as graphic artist, typographer, printer, community activist, publisher, information architect, program director, programmer, and designer. He hasn't finished with inventions. Having spent most of his life thoroughly urbanized (Toronto, New York, San Francisco, Vancouver) he is now nestled into the grasslands and orchards of the Okanagan valley. He finds profound solace in the virgin wilderness upland from his habits. His works have appeared in the journals *Kosmos*, *Image*, *Sage-ing*, and more, and he has chapbooks: *Dead Drop* and *Headwinds*, with more anticipated. He is transcribing several decades of writings from notebook to manuscript, and is otherwise biding his time.

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# FIELD PLAY

BY SUSAN MCCASLIN

Reviewed by Karen Close

**an urgency of words  
demanding her poetic  
voice to engage with  
their mystery.**

Poet, writer, educator, Susan McCaslin's poems first appeared in *The Journal* in 2017. Since then she has been a strong contributor to our Sage-ing community, enriching our lives with her words. Her first article, in March 2019, was a response to my suggested theme of creativity as a rhizome connecting us through the deeply rooted inner callings of heart growth, which I suggest with trepidation, shoots forth as if from a rhizome. Life's truths, invisible, hidden in the rhizome, are released by creative expression. I hear an echo in the concluding poem in *Field Play*, McCaslin's most recent book of poetry, where she describes her source root as an urgency of words demanding her poetic voice to engage with their mystery.

## Poesia

an entering into mystery  
the zone of the unspeakable  
that desires to be spoken

In *Field Play* McCaslin's almost conversational and uniquely personal style connects us to four fields: Kith & Kin Fields, Gaia Fields, Warfields, and Cosmic Fields. She opens her heart to all she encounters whether old friends or the tragedies in the Ukraine, and, as we feel with her, we hear her resilience fed by the eternal lessons of nature that help us endure.

From the last lines of *Hopelessness Hopes*:

Despite the hells  
occasionally the heart rests  
soaking in greening power  
intuiting that somehow love  
deeper than tears  
rises endlessly in sunflowers and galaxies  
in the stenciled wing of a monarch butterfly  
communing with lupins and lilacs

## Listening to Mountains

Impossible to hold such massives in mind  
All their unnameable names  
Black-tailed deer flicker across slopes  
lingering in lichened crevasses  
Nighttime, the mountain becomes stone music  
in the heart        where the listening falls

## Field Play



Susan McCaslin

*Field Play*, published by Ekstasis Editions in 2024.

**I am drawn to ...  
experience poetry as a  
musicality arising from  
silence.**

### A Prayer

Let me not  
Let me not be  
Let me not be among those  
who have seen and  
who have seen and turned  
who have seen and turned away

Let me be  
here now  
where both  
witnessing  
and doing  
either do together  
or die

### When Words Fail

Lines drawn from greening winds  
fall on the page  
assert themselves  
flirt, shape, form  
delight in surrendering  
another temporal construct

Ultimately the poems in *Field Play* speak to our hearts, awakening awareness that each of us is uniquely linked to the connections we've made, the environments we've explored, the events that repel us – the vast, limitless universe. Humanity is a mysterious network of being that is glued by love when we play with exuberance in the fields of our lives' paths. In the spirit of Walt Whitman's seminal work *Leaves of Grass*, which praises nature and the individual human's role in it, *Field Play* focuses on the interconnectedness of all humanity when we seek the beauty in all we encounter.

**SUSAN McCASLIN.** Poet, writer, educator

"I have been writing since the age of twelve when I discovered the magic of great books and the power of poetic language. In graduate school at Simon Fraser University in 1969, poetry found me again and became my life's deep vocation. My 'luminous companions' include William Blake and the Romantic poets, Rainer Maria Rilke, Vernon Watkins and Denise Levertov. I am drawn to the mystical traditions of many cultures and religions and experience poetry as a musicality arising from silence."

# THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE



## Patricia Keeney

I think my first muse was nature.

And it continues to be, evolving to combine the erotic and the sensual, the cultural and the spiritual. Indeed, to represent the intensity of life fully lived.

For me, the first vivid manifestations of life were found in nature.

My earliest models for poetry were male partly because there weren't many female models around from whom to choose. At least not with big reputations and certainly not represented in undergraduate university classes.

Two poets particularly stimulated me. Irving Layton and Ted Hughes who, despite their problematic reputations as somewhat chauvinistic males, were inspired nature poets. What attracted me to their work was the power they found in nature. It wasn't soft. It was strong. And somehow it reinforced them.

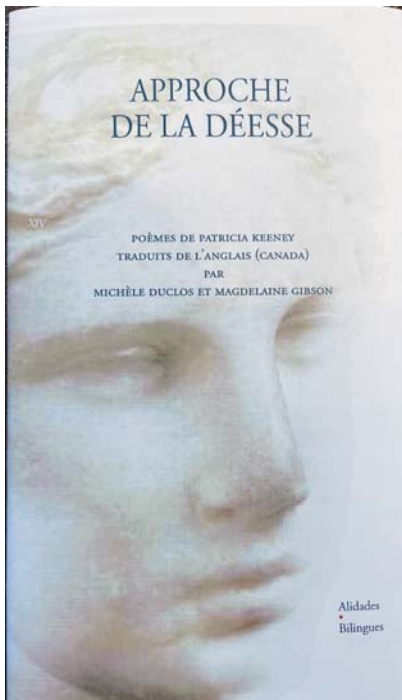
I felt that power, a toughness in lines that reinforced me, and not in traditional female ways. Layton's chipmunks, "break[ing] like flames from the bleak earth", transported me back to my family cottage along the Ottawa River where I'd always been happy and felt most myself.

I was also affected by the fierce passion of these poets and the strong sense of self they seemed to find in the natural scenes and creatures that inspired them to write. Here is Hughes's "Jaguar." The poet is looking at the animal caged in a zoo, who "runs...through prison darkness after the drills in his eyes/ On a short fierce fuse.../ His stride is wildernesses of freedom: the world rolls under the long thrust of his heel. / Over the cage floor the horizons come." Something in me identified with the cage and the darkness and the cry for release and transcending.

My female equivalent is a poem called "Swimming Alone," the first poem in my first book.

**For me, the first vivid manifestations of life were found in nature.**

They warn you not to  
dangerous they say  
what if you get into trouble  
what if  
in the early morning when pellets of rain  
rip the mist like whispered rumour, loud  
in the dark fir circling  
what if  
the majesty of one  
deliberately fracturing glass  
moving down through pools to make  
a footprint on mud that's swallowed whole



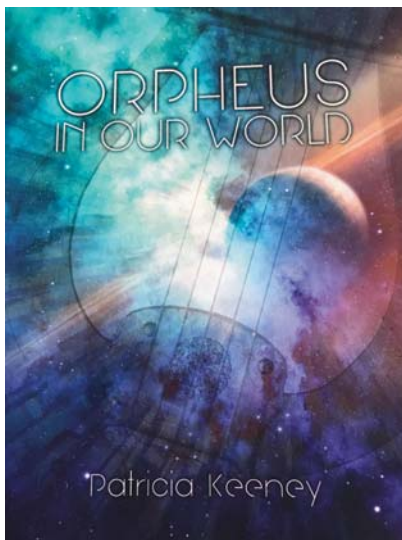
slipping behind the raft and out of sight  
breathing under the whirled pearl smoke  
brooding and dreaming, what if...

As the poem goes on the (female) swimmer is cautioned, over and over again, by the anonymous solid world “they” (which could be society, systems, the patriarchy) against diving into an unsolid world that could harm her. Against risking the leap of faith into an unknown element that could represent the deeper instincts or the subconscious self that requires acting alone. So with this poem I am perhaps finding a female equivalent to the strength of the male poets whose voices had spoken to me so clearly.

\*

I came to understand that what I was seeing and feeling through nature was also goddess power. Recently my French translator published a selection of my poems in France under the title, *Approche de la Déesse*.

She took the title from my poem, “A Touch of the Goddess”, a poem inspired by the unique natural beauty of Prince Edward Island and, of course, my own ongoing quests. Here is the first stanza.



Crouched low in oven sand dunes, hiding  
dry as desert waves  
I find the goddess again  
baking in beige.  
I know she's there  
as the grains blow.  
Moving methodically underneath  
changing geography  
while ants march over prickly grass  
boring in and biting.

She has pale sea-green eyes  
and hair burned white.

Further on in the poem, “She is red earth and billows of grain/ the moon whispering to wheat/ ducks chortling darkly.” By the last stanza, the longed-for goddess has fully arrived because the speaker has let her in. A first step.

I feel her when there's space and time  
between us. It is emptiness  
the sacred lady occupies  
shining and blind.

Many mythologies are fed by nature's force. In my creative work this aspect has evolved into a sequence of lyric poems and dramatic dialogues called *Orpheus in our World: New Poems on Timeless Forces*.

The book is based on ancient Orphic hymns and the first iterations of the Greek deities. Gods and goddesses abound. Here is one of the earliest deities.

Top: Cover, *Approche de la Déesse*

Above: Cover, *Orpheus in Our World*

**My latest novel, *Emptiness and Angels: A story of the Divine Feminine ...* explores the power of the link between the natural and the spiritual inspired by ancient goddess culture.**

## Gaia (Earth)

matter mere matter  
all matter

earth is the matter  
deathless

spinner of stars  
flower-faced demon  
smiler in the rain

heal us through pain

load up your lap with beginning

nurse our new forms  
into being again

The modern dialogue in response to this hymn follows.

**he:** what is the matter?

**she:** dying  
the centre burns out  
melts down

Fair ecological warning. The ancients caution us to care.

My latest novel, *Emptiness and Angels: A story of the Divine Feminine*, is based on the true life story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the modern feminist academic who discovers that story and whose own life it radically alters. Among other things, the novel explores the power of the link between the natural and the spiritual inspired by ancient goddess culture.

★

In “What the Eye Sees,” a suite of short poems from my collection *First Woman*, I am trying to get back to basics, concentrate on the visual, let it speak for itself without making metaphors (a tough call for a lyric poet). Here is one of the poems, inspired by where I live now, near Lake Simcoe, with nature all around me.

Lusty lake



inside the lusty lake  
fragrance slants sun wise  
hauls satin mountains up  
to spuming ecstasy  
airy dissolves

wind and wave invent horizons

wantonly posture peak and trough  
cut glass shatters  
weed deep





Blossoms in sunlight

**Patricia Keeney** is an award-winning poet, novelist, theatre and literary critic. The author of ten books of poetry and two novels, Keeney's books have been translated and published in French, Spanish, Bulgarian, Chinese and Hindi, while her *Selected Poems* (Oberon) carries an introduction by the distinguished Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko. Keeney continues her critical work for national and international journals. Her latest poetry volume, *Orpheus in Our World* (NeoPoiesis), is an exercise in poetic archeology connecting the earliest and rarely translated Greek hymns with a postmodern theatrical dialogue. Keeney's second novel brings her longstanding theatre knowledge into play. Based on the life of a Ugandan actor with Africa's most experimental theatre company, Abafumi, *One Man Dancing* (Inanna) is a story of politics and art set on the world stage. She has just completed her third novel, *Emptiness and Angels* – a feminist satire, a Biblical mystery and a spiritual search involving a modern female academic, a 19th-century nun and Mary the mother of Jesus who all meet in a time-travelling tale of mystery, adventure and quest. A longtime professor of Literature and Creative Writing at Toronto's York University, Keeney has also taught and lectured extensively in Europe, Africa and Asia. See Patricia Keeney's website: <http://www.Wapitiwords.ca>

along uncertainty  
edging endlessly

★

This poem reminded me of an earlier piece I had written while visiting Japan, entitled "Nature is Not a Symbol", from my volume *Global Warnings*. It was inspired by, though not limited to, the Japanese reverence for nature as a sentient and spiritual entity. Here is part of that poem.

Here in the ornamental garden  
I think that nature is not a symbol  
of something else

watch big black crows  
shake delicate berry bushes down  
pink patterns on the ground

their cries clawing air

know cold gums and fins on a slab  
want to wriggle away  
a current of sound with the sea in it

arrive deep in the mountains of summer  
lone cuckoo singing  
sad songs through the night

and my bloodred mouth.

We cannot invent  
What that language contains

.....  
Fuji: a stillness  
a slow dripping cone  
its wounds always filling  
with snow  
so high  
over purpose  
appropriate action  
so stunningly useless.

My own language stretches.  
Long tremulous syllables  
trail off  
to dense gesture  
so spare  
I cannot see it move

close my eyes  
in this garden and turn  
stony skull  
under shadow and sun.

And so, ultimately, I know nature speaks for herself. Blossoms in sunlight.

# CO-CREATION IN MOTION

## Equinox in the Garden

### Penn Kemp



Nature sure does inspire creative expression! Nearly all my poetry stems from contemplating the seasons and translating that appreciation into words that best reflect such abundance: “the duty of such beauty is to bloom”. I’d like to live by my own adage, especially as I age into a time of life when the cycle of mutability becomes apparent.

To celebrate Spring at the March Equinox, I honour the four directions, bowing to each in my garden. That ritual became a poem:

### What Matters

I enter the garden its ground  
celebrating spring. I stand  
at the centre into which all  
flow, from which all emerge.

Wind in the upper birch stills.  
The garden’s breath so long  
it is immeasurable. But I wait,  
offering awareness as witness.

Pivoting, I pray. North, grant us  
your clarity and strength. West,  
your surrender and acceptance.  
South, your joy and creativity.

East, your initiation, inspiration.  
Sky, your broad view. Earth, y  
our ground, your holy round.

The moment is held in a bowl  
beyond comprehension, beyond  
belief. May we carry balance  
lightly on each step of the way

till it recurs six months off. May  
we find a way to become whole.  
May the earth find her stability.

May the light of Equinox be yours  
be ours be hers all ways.

**To celebrate Spring at  
the March Equinox, I  
honour the four  
directions, bowing to  
each in my garden. That  
ritual became a poem.**



There is light to be found in every season, even the darkest, as in this verse from my poem, "In Light":

"Let us eat light  
like plants. Let us chew  
the bright air till we can  
swallow light like  
fire eaters!"

*Barbaric Cultural Practice*, Quattro Books

You can hear the whole piece on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=groiPy9t81M>. The cello seems the perfect instrument to respond to "In Light" in this collaboration with Luc Julian, filmed in my living room. Behind us is a painting by my father, Jim Kemp, of Brighid, the Celtic goddess of Spring, of poetry and inspiration. She presides over the house.

Often, the forms of creative expression interact, reflecting one another back and forth. For example, a painting by Canadian painter L.L. FitzGerald inspired me to write this:

### From an Upstairs Window, Winter

after a painting by L.L. FitzGerald

The sky is about four o'clock bay.  
Icicles have dropped heavy white  
tulips onto back kitchen roofs.  
Soft snow is rising onto the air.  
Maple buds set in their pale limbs  
almost as if ready. Our cultivated  
tree prepares to join the bush outside  
familiar lines where sharp angles collide.  
Time to leave the window to its own  
reality, condensed flat beyond the pane.  
Supplies are low. We have been so long  
in winter, we are running out of sun.  
On the shelf inside the storm, an empty  
pitcher of light awaits sage and summer  
savory. All puns are planted. Let me present  
these things as if saying were enough  
to conjure the perfect illusion of presence.

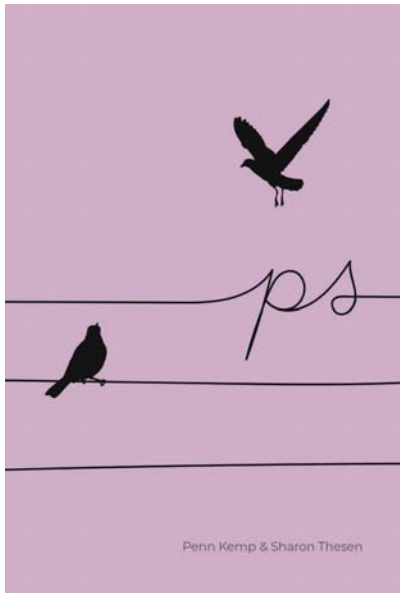
This poem was commissioned by Ottawa's National Gallery for *Vernissage*, their magazine, to accompany L.L. Fitzgerald's painting. "From an Upstairs Window, Winter" then became part of my *Luminous Entrance: A sound opera for climate change action*. A performance of the poem was filmed by Dennis Siren at The Aeolian Hall, London, Ont., with actor Anne Anglin, dancer Ruth Douthwright, singer Brenda McMorrow and me:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBjqShE4pyM&t=12s>

I love the dance between forms, all inspired by the season. "All puns are planted" in this photo I took in December from my kitchen window. The



Top: "From my kitchen window"  
Middle: Fall flowers10.  
Above: Greenhouse



Left: *P.S.*, cover, Kemp/Thesen

Right: *Intent on Flowering*



image reflected the line from the poem, “On the shelf inside the storm, an empty / pitcher of light awaits ...”

My writing desk looks out on my garden, so the shifting light is always an inspiration, as are the flowers that I gather throughout the year, often from my greenhouse.

Collaborations are another way in which poets conspire with nature. Two recent chapbooks illustrate such a celebration. *P.S.* is a monthly exchange of poems, often seasonal, over a year, between Lake Country poet Sharon Thesen and myself: <https://www.gapriotpriess.com/shop/p/penn-kemp-sharon-thesen-p-s>

These are poems in conversation with each other, grounded in nature. In the note that accompanies the text of *P.S.*, we observe that our “ways of knowing are different but validated by one another.”

*Intent on Flowering* is a similar collaboration of voices reflecting on the natural world: <https://rosegardenpress.ca/intent-on-flowering/>, with poets Jessica Lee McMillan and Katie Jeresky. My suite celebrates roses. I am writing in deepest, snowiest December, when roses are a faint memory and the dark gathers close. But even then, we know the cycle continues.

## All Things Considered

Now. At the turning of the year after nadir of deepest darkness, the small Moon of Long Night turns to beam over the orchard above the frozen lake. The sun stands Solstice still, holding its breath, biding its time until released to start once more in utter clarity of cold. In that perilous moment before cycles start up again, we all can fall through cracks. Interstices of ice drag us down. We grope from dusk to dark to light. We slip between stars, drawn out beyond what we know, considering, *considerare*, to be with the luminary. Night rustles outside our window, murmurs and squeaks. Whimpers follow outraged raccoon yowl. Orange and black streak across the dark pane I can't see through conjuring night creatures' obscured world, Scent leads a trail to territorial war, deep

**These are poems in conversation with each other, grounded in nature.**



Left: *Kit on Solstice*

Right: *Brigid, the Celtic goddess of Spring and poetry*



enemies nurtured throughout the long wee hours before dawn lifts that velvet cloth to reveal grey, seeping shade back to clarity.

There is much to contemplate in the cozy dark, where all is possible; all waits. And slowly, slowly, more light returns each day. Whatever form it takes, the natural world demands our close attention, especially in these perilous times of climate change. But truly, it always has. The connection with nature has informed my entire being since earliest childhood. *SAGE-ING* Issue 51 published my piece on how the natural world first stoked my imagination in the form of a fox, so I've attached the cover of *Fox Haunts* (Aeolus House) for my headshot. I'm holding the book beside my beloved Antler River, London's Thames. Since no actual fox presented itself for a photo, here's a raccoon kit from our resident family, taken on Summer Solstice.

**Penn Kemp** has participated in Canadian cultural life for 60 years – writing, editing and publishing poetry, fiction and plays. Her first book of poetry, *Bearing Down*, was published by Coach House, 1972. She's since published 30+ books of poetry, prose and drama, seven plays and 10 CDs of spoken word, and edited a number of anthologies by Canadian writers. Her work explores environmental and feminist concerns, though she is best known as a sound poet. Delighting in multimedia, poet and playwright Penn is active across the web. Her concrete and sound poetry, *Incrementally*, can be seen as an e-book and album on <https://www.hempresbooks.com/authors/penn-kemp>. See <https://seaofpo.vispo.com?p=pk> for animation. Two new collections, *Lives of Dead Poets* (<https://abovegroundpress.blogspot.com/2025/02/new-from-aboveground-press-lives-of.html>) and *Ordinary / Moving* (<https://www.silverbowpublishing.com/ordinary-moving.html>) are out now. Updates: [www.pennkemp.weebly.com](http://www.pennkemp.weebly.com), [www.facebook.com/pennkempopoet](https://www.facebook.com/pennkempopoet) and [www.pennkemp.substack.com](http://www.pennkemp.substack.com)

# WHISPERS OF THE RAVENS



## Stasha Powell

As a child, I didn't just play with toys: I created worlds for them to live in. My shared bedroom was a realm of shadowy forests and moonlit ruins, where stuffed animals weren't just toys—they were daring adventurers, tragic heroes and mysterious spirits. Every night, as I settled under the covers, I whispered stories into the darkness, spinning tales like spider silk. I'd often speak in rhyme to Merlin, the cat, and Molly, our dog. This is a habit I must have picked up from Dr. Seuss or Shel Silverstein. I didn't know it then, but those whispered words were my first spells and my first poems and, to this day, I still find a good rhyming poem swoon-worthy.

When I was 8, I wrote my first poem. It wasn't for school or anyone else—it was for a blackbird I had seen perched on a power line, its feathers glossy as ink. I called it "The Raven's Shadow," even though it wasn't a raven. In the poem, the bird became a messenger, flying between life and death, carrying secrets too ancient for humans to understand. I showed it to my teacher, who read it twice and said, "You see the world differently, don't you?"

I always have.

When I contemplated entering college, I always tried to follow the language of poetry. As a teenager, there was no help for my higher education, so I decided to get a degree that would help me get a higher-paying job. Every adult in my life thought following poetry was a losing life plan, and now I'll never know if they were right because I didn't dare to follow poetry all the way.

Years later, after the tragic loss of my best friend, my world shattered into pieces. I didn't know how to fit back together. The grief was sharp, almost unbearable, but then the words came back to me this time as fragments, shards of sorrow and longing I could barely hold. I began to write in earnest. The poems weren't easy; they were raw and jagged, like the grief they carried. I wrote about blackbirds and cemeteries, the weight of ash and the lightness of a cat's purr. Writing became both catharsis and resurrection. It brought life to me once again.

When I published my first collection, *Sidewalk Sanctuary*, it felt like stepping into the light after a long, dark night. In the process, I realized that grief, like creativity, demands to be felt fully. When you think about it, you can create something new that holds both sorrow and beauty. Writing came to me to save me from a traumatic childhood. I became a weaver who could turn something seemingly dark and frequently

Ravens in Pacifica, California





Poetry-inspired art

**Writing is how I make sense of it all. It's how I build worlds from whispers and find empowerment in the macabre.**

morbid into an unusual beauty.

I write in a small room with soft lamplight and an old desk scarred by years of use. I am 49 and working on my BA in Creative Writing with a concentration in Poetry. I'm doing it for the greatest love I've ever known, words. Blackbirds still visit me in my poetry, and I still find myself drawn to shadows, loss and the strange beauty that grows in the dark. Writing is how I make sense of it all. It's how I build worlds from whispers and find empowerment in the macabre. I recently put out an anthology of darker poems inspired once again by nature and the birds that bring solace to my often chaotic life as an advocate for the homeless. *CAW: Poetry by a Murder of Writers* showcases the different places writers go when they visit the dark side. All proceeds benefit the Ohio Bird Sanctuary as I was desperate to give back what I could to the birds whose presence keeps me grounded. For the first time, I began painting mini-watercolours to accompany my writing.

Every time I finish a poem, I feel the same thrill I did as a child, spinning stories in the moonlight. It reminds me why I write—not just for myself, but for those who might find a piece of themselves in my words.

## Sacred

Forget the glow of higher truths.  
Rest where shadows gather.  
Listen to the wind threading whispers  
through the hollow of your marrow.  
Feel the weight of longing,  
the shiver of fear,  
the fire of love etched in your bones.

Open yourself—not to what you aspire,  
nor to the idol of perfection,  
but to the rawness of now:  
the creature beneath your ribs,  
the shadow in your breath,  
the trembling hands of your soul.

All of this is sacred.  
You are the ash, the ember,  
the flame yet unseen.  
Exhale,  
descend inward,  
and disentangle

Whispers of the Trees  
The trees bare their souls  
when my feet are grounded  
Into the soil.  
They tell me stories—  
old and new.

It might look like I'm staring  
into space or disassociating

**Her unique voice is shaped by personal experiences of grief and resilience, particularly through the profound connection she shares with animals.**

but I'm truly in deep conversation.  
They teach me how to lose it all,  
like they do ever fall.  
Then come back in the spring  
more beautiful than before.

Befriend those that sting,  
like the bees,  
as they mean no harm at all.  
Let the wind whip through  
and shake the bad loose.  
Reach for the rays of the moon.

Bask all day,  
under the sun.  
Drink deeply from the rain  
when it comes.  
Entertain all the creatures who  
shelter beneath your canopy.

Let your roots entwine with  
those of your neighbors,  
you're all stronger that way.  
When things feel difficult  
let your branches dance and sway.

If you stay planted long enough  
you'll find the trees  
have quite a lot to say.

**Stasha Powell** is a poet whose work delves into the macabre, the morbidly beautiful and the empowering, drawing inspiration from gothic themes, blackbirds and the haunting echoes of loss. Her unique voice is shaped by personal experiences of grief and resilience, particularly through the profound connection she shares with animals. From a young age, Stasha was captivated by storytelling, crafting tales of shadowy forests and moonlit ruins for her toys. This early love for language grew into a passion for creating evocative poetry that captivates readers with its imagery and depth. Stasha is an advocate for the homeless and believes housing is a human right. She shares her adventurous spirit with her partner, Andrew, and their beloved pets. You can find more information at her website [www.stashapowell.com](http://www.stashapowell.com)



# NATURE AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION



## Jennifer Wenn

Nature is, and has always been, a critical wellspring for my creative expression as a poet. The first major influence could be traced to the way Claude Monet and Walt Whitman viewed the world around them. Their genius provided me with a way of seeing, experiencing really, that connected with me spiritually, even before I began writing.

## Whitman/Monet

(an early poem I dedicated to them)

May I call you Walt and Claude?

That's very familiar, I realize,

but I feel I know you, intimately after a fashion.

The Poet, with your vocabulary, your lists,

exulting the everyday, but seeing

much more through and beyond,

joyfully singing the body electric,

claiming all humankind as brothers and sisters,

dancing through time,

immersing in your Leaves becomes wonderful meditation.

The Painter, playing with light,

subjects as deceptively simple as a wheatstack,

or as vaulting as a cathedral,

shades of meaning within the changing sun and fog,

finding magic and insight in water lilies,

claiming everything around you as worthy of adoration,

falling into your Impressions a mystical experience.

One, a painter with language,

the other, a poet with brush and canvas,

two great spirits entwined by

profound vision and seductive simplicity.

I claim you as muses, as ideals,

not to be achieved, but, perhaps,

approached, in my own way.

Monet's famous water lily pond at Giverny.

Photo credit: Sarah Wenn



I did not begin writing poetry until the summer of 2017, by which time I was turning 58. One major factor behind my (very) late start was that I am a transgender woman and for decades was not in touch with my true spirit, which was imprisoned deep within. This changed quite suddenly in the fall of 2012, and my gender presentation transition (social, legal and medical) took place over the next few years. Being a whole person for the first time in my life was

**I needed one more push to find my poetic voice. Nature played the critical role: in healing,**

transformative, but I needed one more push to find my poetic voice. Nature played the critical role: in healing, through memories of a visit to the incomparable Carmanah Walbran on Vancouver Island, and via the extraordinary exhibit *Mystical Landscapes* at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

### (excerpt from) **Phoenix**

Healing found in the patient, calm souls of trees  
and the dancing, gentle spirits of birds,  
all whispering hymns of serenity;  
Precious balm found in art,  
*Mystical Landscapes* triggering  
sunlit reflections to pierce the dark;  
Startled by glorious Carmanah Walbran,  
sacred realm of primeval forest giants,  
bursting through my memory's vault  
and calling for expression;  
Startled by the unlocking, deep within,  
of another door,  
my voice modulated again,  
evolved, revolutionized, poeticized,  
verses piling up in my soul's inbox.

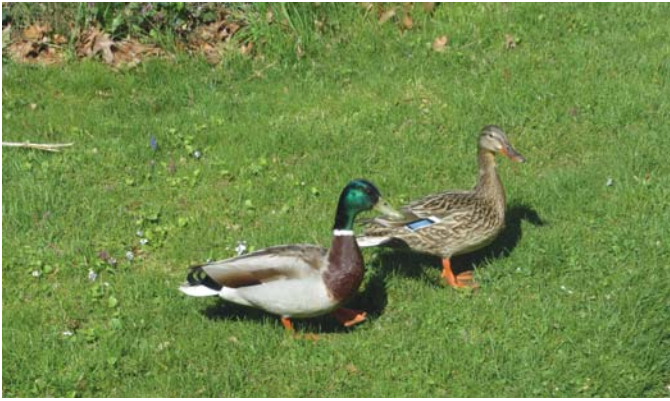
**Carmanah Walbran** was my very first poem. Here is a portion of it:

Soaring Sitka spruce,  
the largest impossibly high,  
magnificent Douglas fir,  
enormous red cedars that  
have seen a millennium of  
rain and sun come and go;  
will we have the wisdom to  
let your realm remain, in peace,  
for generations unborn to  
rediscover, to feel in their turn  
the kinship, the embrace,  
to find anew that doorway and  
the connection.

Since then, I have continued to find direct inspiration in nature, not infrequently in birds, as reflected in:

### **Mallard Family**

While happily writing  
On the Gaia House patio,  
A relaxed recovery in New Hope,  
I noticed the pair of you eyeing me,  
Speculatively waddling past,  
Gently throating to each other in Mallard.  
Seemingly satisfied with the intruding guest  
You issued beckoning quacks  
But the three adolescents hanging back  
Plaintively yawped teenaged refusals.



Mallard couple. Photo credit: Jennifer Wenn

**I have also found in the natural world the keys to unlocking poetic puzzles quite unrelated to what I was observing.**

Beaking avian sighs, Mom and Dad,  
You toddled a retreat and led the  
Crew the long way around.

I have also found in the natural world the keys to unlocking poetic puzzles quite unrelated to what I was observing. One example that leaps to mind was when I was struggling to portray the Commandant of Auschwitz for a poem cycle ultimately published as *Auschwitz Threnody*. How it all finally came together is described in:

### Tierce (the third part of a piece called “Triplcity”)

To the backyard, virtual employment left inside,  
mid-September glowing all around  
while I drifted off to a poetic confrontation  
with a ghastly shade haunting a dark literary mountain  
whose ascent required grappling with the lost soul  
responsible for monstrous evil, finding myself  
drifting in Blakean imagery as I searched for a route  
to portray an inhuman, warped psyche.

Filtering through the struggle, the gentle rattle  
of a small foot on the eavestrough, then a  
hopeful fluttering as I glanced up  
to find a young cardinal touching down  
scant inches away on the patio table.  
Startled back to sunshine,  
caressed by an inquiring, nascent look,  
I said hello, was answered by  
a wing-borne dancing spirit  
radiating little seraphs of light that  
illumine those dark crags winding upwards.

After an infinite moment of communion  
the herald was off to the cedar hedge,  
leaving me a path, discernible, daunting and destined.

And now we find beloved nature, our home, our source of life itself,  
threatened as never before. I will close with my plea:

### Listen to Mother Earth

Listen to Mother Earth.  
Listen to her breathe.  
Listen to a gentle draught  
    sigh across a flowering meadow;  
to a squirrel tiptoe through foliage;  
to an acorn nestle onto embracing soil,  
to a welcome shower setting gardens adance,  
the pulse of waves rolling ashore,  
a burbling creek in attentive woods,  
new snow whispering underfoot.



Listen to Mother Earth.  
 Listen to her call.  
 Listen to her cry.  
 Listen to a sere wind rattle through withered  
     underbrush,  
 then to insatiable fire howl triumphantly  
     over acre after doomed acre;  
 listen to a starving bear tear into suburban detritus,  
 to the crack and crash of ancient forest guardians  
     felled by screaming chainsaws;  
 listen to rain patter on parched ground,  
 then to a hail-infused deluge pound the window;  
 listen to furious gale-driven breakers  
     hammer a defenceless coast,  
 to a roaring flood sweep away all before it,  
 to sleet and ice rip into naked trees.

Listen to Mother Earth.  
 Listen.

Look In Our Waters. Photo credit: Jennifer Wenn

**Jennifer Wenn** is a trans-identified writer and speaker from London, Ontario. Her first poetry chapbook, *A Song of Milestones*, was published by Harmonia Press. Her first full-size collection, *Hear Through the Silence*, was published by Cyberwit. Coming spring 2025 from Wet Ink Books is her second collection, *Emergence*. She has also written *From Adversity to Accomplishment* (a family and social history) and has published poetry and essays in numerous journals and anthologies. She is the proud parent of two adult children. Visit her website at <https://jenniferwennpoet.wixsite.com/home>

# NATURAL CREATIVITY

## Katerina Fretwell



The natural world has always been essential as friend, comforter, playmate and inspiration. Walking in woodlands – in Long Island and Irvington, New York; Sunapee, New Hampshire; in Wolfville, Halifax and Dartmouth, Nova Scotia; Stanley Park in Vancouver; Banff, Alberta; and Parry Sound area and Niagara region in Ontario – have sustained me for 80 years. Visitations by butterflies, frogs, toads, dragonflies and bluebottles, not to mention the occasional bear, beaver, otter, partridge, rabbit and fox, as well as wildflowers of all hues and shapes offer a sense of continuity, companionship and creativity.

I hugged my Crying Hemlock tree through my second husband's journey through cancer. Jack wanted his ashes spread over the Atlantic. Since I couldn't afford the trip, I guiltily spread them in Parry Sound harbour. Astoundingly, they formed a six-petalled white rose, the exact shape of the *Rugosa* roses he tended every summer: *Interment*.

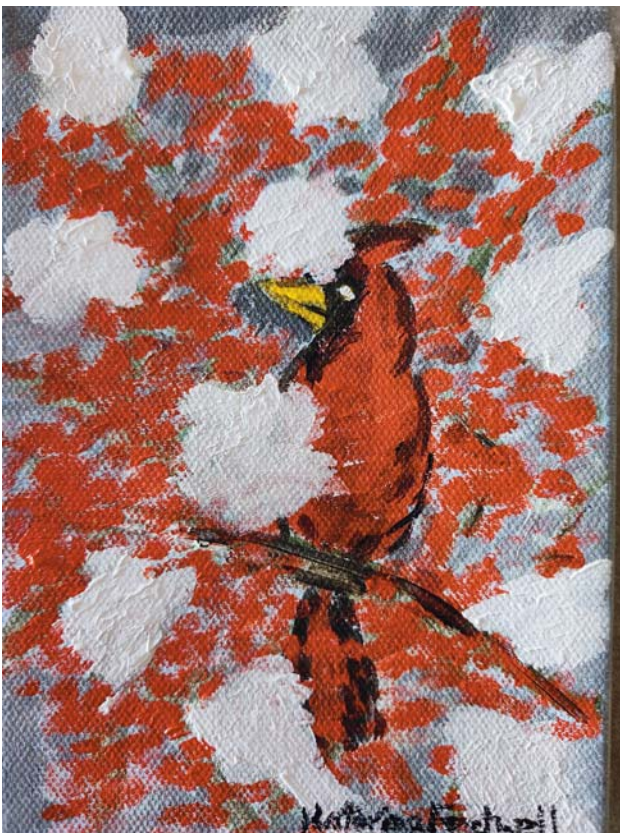
Nature also offered me companionship, especially after living in the Parry Sound area for over 40 years and then moving to St. Catharines to be close to my daughter and grandson. Getting to know people and establishing

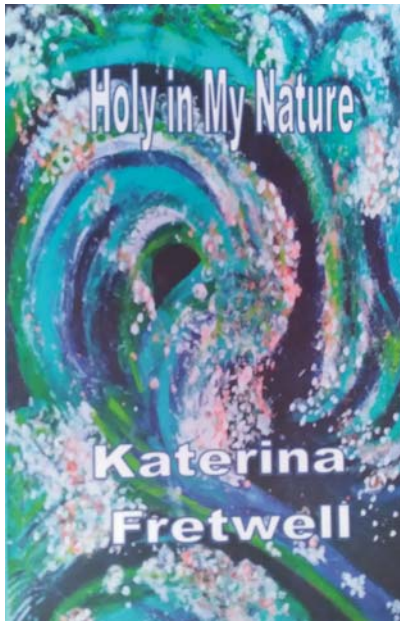
intimacy takes time. A wayward dandelion gave me a sense of belonging and the promise of friendships to come: *Recently Moved*. Expressing wishes and healing for my family I am inspired by nature: *Blessings for My Grandchild*.

Creativity in the natural world erupts in spring, cuddles dormant under snow in winter, sighs a colourful hurrah in fall and luxuriates in summer's sumptuous full display. Ambling through such seasonal splendours, I delight as the perfect word materializes for a troubling spot in a poem, or even, like the woodpecker's staccato or Morse code blasts, calling me to a symphony of sounds in poetry. A while back, two sets of chickadees put on quite a show, addressing each other in thirds: *Harmony*. The impromptu concert enlivened me to reach for my pencil and compose a poem. A close, unhurried study of nature always rewards me. On a recent snowy stroll, I stopped at the one colourful bush brimming with red berries, saw what looked like a clump of carmine, peered closer, and beheld a cardinal! *Clumped Red Berries*

The act of creating and its manifestation are also holy, making something new out of disparate entities that were

*Clumped Red Berries*





*Holy In My Nature*, cover art

**In 80 years, I have safeguarded my own health as I age, having witnessed a horrific decline of natural abundance, both of plants and animals.**

never considered together before. The creation offers a fresh look at life, a novel way of seeing. Water, as wave, ocean, lake, river ... nourishment, enralls me. Many of my poems in *Holy in My Nature* pay homage to this life-sustaining substance.

One of my recurring dreams involved the kind of gigantic wave that surfers love in Hawaii: *Anatomy of a Wave*. The sheer magnitude of power in Hawaii's tumultuous waves pounding the shoreline or the mysterious creations below surface sing out and show the wonder of fashioning anew, celebrating diversity: *South Pacific and Mid-Atlantic*. They also call forth my responsibility to honour, preserve and conserve our beautiful blue planet. Diana Beresford-Kroeger, *Arboretum Borealis*, and Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, have intensified my desire to be a steward of nature, through my poetry and painting commemorating the natural world and through these authors' respect and regard for all the plant and animal kingdoms as nonhuman persons, each being referred to a she/he rather than it: *To Be a Bay* and *Honourable Harvest*.

In 80 years, I have safeguarded my own health as I age, having witnessed a horrific decline of natural abundance, both of plants and animals. I have also watched invasive species take over, such as Japanese bamboo and phragmites ousting roadside columbine and blackberries, algal blooms depleting blandings and snapping turtles, and developers scaring off moose, deer, fox. I hope that the beauty, wonder and diversity of nature can still enlighten and delight the cellphone-addicted generations so that my grandson and his descendants still have vistas to appreciate and champion, so that my daughter and her age-mates have places to calm and sustain them.

## Interment

*"we're mostly only powder /from the dust /of teeth and bones"* – John B. Lee

Weeping into the woods, from your ashes  
I sculpted a crown around my Crying Hemlock,  
your white bone-bits blending on the piney-ground,  
my woods chapel where I mourned your slow slippage,  
dementia robbing us of Jack, bit by bit.

Before your cancer and after your angina,  
and diabetes death knells, we recounted last dreams.  
You pined for burial over the Atlantic  
where we met and you floated thirty naval years.  
But after you died, I couldn't afford the sea.

I poured the rest of your ash into the Bay, hoping  
they'd scoot from Parry Sound to your desired site.  
Then something uncanny overrode my regrets  
and recalled the special roses you nurtured:  
your ashes, just below the water's surface,

floated a six-petalled, pale Rugosa Rose ....

## A full-stop allowed my absorption of a gift:

### Recently Moved

*Farewell to Friends of Forty Years*

Lone dandelion, you tilt your blazing face,  
sighting a cluster of sisters far away,  
their sunhats waving to each other.

Your petals droop, aching to join them.

Grouped, they share mist and shine'  
keep out pointy-petalled and purple-bibbed  
interlopers.

You welcome any wildly spreading blooms,  
assured that sun-colour blends  
can share your patch.

Over a few more sun tilts, your mimicking petals fade  
into snowflake-white spores,  
each globe a geodesic wonder.

You risk a powerful gust, breeze upward  
over the paved trail edging  
violet colonies, creeping phlox 'hoods,  
aging tulips' bent shawls.

Another gust, your spores sail  
blissfully to the middle of the dandelion cluster  
you long to call home.

### Blessings for my Grandchild

May you juggle joy like water laughing over landscape,  
may you stream outward kindly tributaries,  
may you unearth your artistic self buried in adolescent caves,  
may you witness stars rising in oceanic light shows,  
may you attract starfish shining your self-hood on shore,  
may you enliven your soul with a sunbeam's nutrients,  
may you absorb the peace of a star's immortal glow,  
may you shimmer into friendship like sea-grass sashaying to tides,  
may you code an ode to yourself like hermit crabs' flowing designs.  
Love always,  
Grandma

### Harmony

*"And it seems to me, separated from my own species, that I was nearer to others." – Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Gift From The Sea*

I sipped ginger-root tea on my twilit porch,  
the setting sun slowed colour, sound, motion.

A full-stop allowed my absorption of a gift:

two groups of chickadees chorused  
in the Burning Bush, the first flock  
sounded a third higher than the second.

Communing, they dispersed, still in harmony  
and still in their separate sets –

I parsed what the two distinct pitches conveyed:  
A message to me or a birdland barbershop duet?

My tea tasted zestier, squares more chocolate.  
The chickadees choral an evening jazz, steamy, sweet.

So much I don't know, humans eons ago  
lost the ability to talk with trees. And birds.

What would we say to one another?  
Love your sound but not at 5am;  
Stop stealing my nesting space ...

### Clumped Red Berries

Strolling past denuded skeletal branches  
the colour of the battleship-grey morning,  
I stopped at the bright bush  
brimming with oval fire-engine-red berries.  
On the left, a carmine clump halted me.  
Dropping trekking poles and gloves on the snow,  
I crunched closer – black-rimmed eyes, fat yellow beak  
and glorious Canada-maple-red stared at me.  
A cardinal!  
Swiping my phone to capture the moment  
scared the showy male out of his bivouac.  
I vowed to paint and plump poetic the instant sighting.  
Not only a flag-sharp hue in a grey-entrenched day,  
but also, this brief dazzle turned my thoughts  
away from dire and dolorous world news.  
Every day of rollicking squirrels, resting birds  
and fertility's subnivean promise under snow  
fills me with hope that other humans  
also delight in preserving clumped surprises

### Anatomy of a Wave

*" ... bringing the sense of what was and of what is to come ... music ...that ...explodes  
against the rocks below ..."* – Rachel Carson, quoted in *Figuring*

The ocean speaks, if I just listen  
to its thunderous, sucking intake of breath.  
Waves curl, crest and crash, heaving  
an elegy – of life as I know it.

Boards glide on the concave, briny green,  
attuned to the sudden snap.  
Surfers become the combers' caretakers,

cringing at thoughtless humans  
dumping sewage into crystalline waters.  
Gulls squawk, eyeballing the banquet.  
This roiling mirror is a sad reflection  
of human neglect, no longer benign.  
I gaze from the shore, transfixed.  
Plastic glares back.

**The ocean speaks, if I  
just listen**



**Imagine a language  
that allows a bay to be  
a bay, How do I escape  
the system of dominion  
over the nonhuman,  
and heart-trust**

## To Be A Bay

*"Only 30 percent of English words are verbs, but in Potawatomi that proportion is 70 percent ... A bay is a noun only if the water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans." – Braiding Sweetgrass*

Imagine a language that allows a bay to be a bay,  
not just a lump on a map,  
but a nonhuman person  
singing to cumulus and conversing with mergansers.

Georgian Bay is more than a biosphere  
designating at-risk species, she was my home  
for 40 years, a residence,  
housing not just cottages stuffed with objects,  
but also pike, pickerel weed, snappers, swimmers.

The English language reflects our obsession  
with things,  
as if naming controls their nature.  
In Potawatomi, things are named nouns  
only if separated from living beings.

A basket, woven from black ash and sweetgrass,  
reminded me that they walk together, chemical-free.  
This living art held blueberries and pine cones,  
gifts gracing Georgian shores – and my trail  
hugging Lake Ontario in St. Catharines.

## Honourable Harvest

*"Never take the first plant you find, as it might be the last – and you want that first one to speak well of you to others of her kind." – Braiding Sweetgrass*

How do I escape the system of dominion  
over the nonhuman, and heart-trust  
they feed, cure, and house all, teaching reciprocity?  
My former forest taught me to hope.

I trekked to a hillside flush with plump, green leaves,  
trillium trumpeting wild leek season.

The first two ramps resisted, replying: No  
to the permission I sought.  
So I harvested only three per patch.

Those thick-stemmed, big bulbs mellowed  
my seafood and veggie medleys;  
their leaves peppered my salads.

Grateful for this bounty, I mothered my haven.  
Mindful of ironwood's life-pulse, I chanted:  
Save this tree, this forest, this planet  
a prayer that moved with me  
to the garden city.

But it's all in the respect – thinking leek,  
pine, and toad,

or mulberry, catalpa, and squirrel,  
as he or she, not as it,  
takes time,  
time to soften but activate my footstep,  
what's in my vision to insure there are still

trees to breathe, soil to flower, water to float life ...

**Katherina Fretwell**, poet-artist, published two books of her poetry and art in 2024, choreographing the role of nature in her life: *Familiar and Forgiveness* (Ace of Swords) and *Holy in My Nature* (Silver Bow Publishing).

**trees to breathe, soil to  
flower, water to float  
life ...**

# HEADING INTO THE FLOW

**Johanna Beyers**

The window was tall, and through it I could see the façade of the house across the street brushed unevenly by the sun. I was an infant in my crib in my parents' bedroom. I remember that warm light and how it made me feel connected to the street life below, lifting me out of my aloneness. Two years later, there was the encounter with the North Sea and its beaches, wind in my hair, a summons I answered with unfettered awe and enchantment. I was learning the feeling of "being with"; nature and I together were planting seeds of love. Later still, in my upstairs bedroom at the back of the same house, in a rare, unsupervised moment I quietly opened the window to look out on our backyard, taking in the houses and gardens beyond our own. In my memory it was June, a warm, green day, and I was five years old. I glimpsed hidden, unseen parts of other people's lives, lives I had not been invited into. Although there is no tangible evidence to support me in the assertion, I believe it was my first felt instance of dwelling in what Robert Henri called the "wonderful state" that enables art-making, my first poetic venturing, an act of imagination that leapt out to touch the world.

Today these vignettes read like wayfinders on the map of an inner realm that began to assert itself in me. The map enfolds the sounds, colours and textures of the way nature spoke to me and imprinted itself – the lilt of a self. Each encounter is marked with an intuition of having been saved, saved from being lost to myself, from choosing what is not me, but rather preserving something essential that resonated with the larger objectivity of nature and therefore was true. To be clear, I have tried on what is false, have tried hard to make fit what is not me, but I always struggled to correct the course. The internal map is a homing signal. When I opened that window I was prompted by an inner longing, knowing my mother would not approve. I stole for myself the vital, necessary space to reach into the unknown, as if the unknown in me sought the unknown in the other, and it reciprocated. Given the restrictions of my upbringing that was brave. Listening to what called allowed me to turn wholeheartedly towards it.

When I was 10 or 11 I choreographed a piece for my Girl Guide troupe. It was a province-wide competition, perhaps to celebrate an anniversary in the Girl Guides' community. The music we were invited to engage with was Ronald Binge's "Elizabethan Serenade." At that time my age category was known as the *Kabouters*, "Dwarfs" or "Little Ones," so I set my dance in a forest, with the dwarfs emerging from their mushroom-shaped homes to start the day. It was elected to go to the Provincials; we didn't win, and I remember being disappointed, although we placed respectably in the top five

**The map enfolds the sounds, colours and textures of the way nature spoke to me and imprinted itself – the lilt of a self.**



"Line Performance," 1977

**I grasped vaguely a sense of kinship, a kind of underground connection between me and Earth's hidden darkneses, a living mystery and its own truth.**

or so. It was the first time my imagination was recognized and valued. Two or three years later I wrote my first poems.

I forgot all about the dance until, decades later, at my desk at home in Toronto, Binge's tune suddenly came to mind. As a child, its sweeping, joyful airs had awakened in me a sense of mystery and pulled me headlong into the flow of artful expression. Remembering it reclaimed a precious part of me. I had also suppressed the impulse to write poetry after I married and moved to Canada, because I could not see how to be a poet and wife simultaneously. My culture had not prepared me for such a possibility. When I came to Canada there was too much to take in anyway: new land and customs, new language, family and responsibilities. I fell in love with the Skeena country of northwestern British Columbia, where we had moved, and it was there that the "wonderful state" asserted itself again. While my family were away visiting in the Lower Mainland – the area around Vancouver – I scooped up the children's stuffed toys, washed them and hung them up on clothes lines under the hemlock trees, and this act satisfied me. Perhaps it was around then that the first English lines of poetry walked into my head out of silence. Within three years of the 'line performance' I left my marriage. Poetry and art had recalibrated my person, and now I could no longer look the other way or deny the knowing muse, even while upsetting my life and my children's lives in a grand way, with many difficult changes in tow.

I went to college. In second year a course in geology caused an entirely new development. Geology is the science of Earth: the study of strata and their history, how heat and pressure, air, water and ice shaped them, of creatures that flourished once in vanished oceans, of unseen workings, shiftings and tensions at depth. Most of all I was taken by the geologic concept of "deep time" (a term coined by John McPhee), which seemed to me to contain all possibilities, all 'inconceivables', and arrived like a revelation. As revelations are wont to, this one wrenched me off the track I'd laid for my future. Without any clue where it would lead, holding its own measure of fear, I decided geology was where I needed to be. I grasped vaguely a sense of kinship, a kind of underground connection between me and Earth's hidden darkneses, a living mystery and its own truth. Geology remains an inextricable part of my imagination and understanding, a resonating membrane.

I left geology eventually to become a psychotherapist. In between lay a doctorate in contemporary forest policy and ecology, and this led me to discover the therapeutic modality of sandplay. Like poetry and art, like geology, sandplay came into my life entirely naturally. Sand is the product of the erosion of rocks and is usually carried by fluvial action to the ocean. I think it fitting for a former geologist and forest policy analyst to become a therapist specializing in a sand-based medium. I certified in 2010. Back in B.C. from Ontario since 2015, I now practise as a registered social worker. Specifically, I am a Jungian-oriented psychotherapist. Carl Jung embraced psyche and its ways, including dreams. "Psyche" is Greek for soul, and in Jung's (and



Top: *Victoria Garden #1*. Acrylics on paper, original photograph. 6" x 4", 2024

Above: *Textile Collage with Roses #1*. Bark paper, textiles, yarn and garlic stalks on paper. 10" x 8", 2024

Freud's) world it is known also as the unconscious. Like Earth, psyche appears to be structured in layers, some close to the surface, others so remote we may never have even an inkling of them or of the influence they exert. The deepest, unreachable darkness of psyche is mirrored in deep time, those swirling, generative abysses out of which this planet and we humans arose. It is all nature.

In the moment of loving a tree I may drop down into the geological time segment known as the Permian Period (about 300 to 250 million years ago); in the moment of loving rocks I am at one with Earth's traverse through time. "Dropping down" happens at the body-mind level; it is not usually a conscious action. Geology for me was never simply a body of knowledge: Earth's history is fascinating, but mainly it aroused my imagination so that what I learnt became a true part of who I am. I draw on it – this body-mind understanding – whether I am writing a poem, making art or working as psychotherapist.

"I've to do my own work" is a line I have told myself many times. It is what I've always sought, even as a five-year-old, because I have to, need to. It is, it seems, my way of being with Isness, with Self, within that beautiful, animating relationship that sums up for me all there is. These days "doing my own work" pulls me to the meditative, open-weave spaces that allow for art and poetry to come about, facilitated best in the presence of or somehow touched by nature, and here I include dreams and intuition. I have long tried to understand how it is that I am poet, artist and psychotherapist at once and always find it next to impossible. There is help, all the same. My Greek dictionary renders the word "therapy" to mean primarily "to serve in the cult of the god" – i.e. Asklepios, god of healing, whose cures often took place through a dream; the Greek word from which we derive "poetry" means "to create," and a poem or work of art is seen as "the work of the spirit." Finally I went back to a quote from a poem by Kenneth Rexroth (in *The Signature of All Things*), sent to me by a friend: "And this is what a poet is, children, one who creates sacramental relationships that last always." These words suggest to me how I can view what I am most clearly. However I express it, sacramental relationship with nature, psyche and spirit, an indwelling that gives rise to poetic being, is the thread that unites each of my domains. They are mirror states; each gives me life, each leads me to mystery. When I work from within the mirrored state there is no separation.

**Johanna Beyers**, PhD, is a mixed media collage artist, poet and practising psychotherapist. She is the author of a collection of poems, *Sandbar Islands* (Caitlin Press, 1986), and a memoir, *Wearing My Feathered Hat* (Wind Oak & Dove, 2013).

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# DOING ZION EN ROUTE TO LOVELAND



## Meredith Stephens

“Wake up! Time’s a tickin’,” Alan urges while prodding me. He turns on the lights and shortly after thrusts a cup of coffee into my hands. It’s still dark and I really want to indulge in slumber but Alan is insistent. We are on an urgent visit to Colorado from California, a dash at the end of our American holiday to see our dear friend Angelina, who is ailing but well enough for us to see her. If we don’t leave now we will miss Zion National Park, here in southern Utah. It’s 50 minutes away from our accommodation, and by the time we arrive the sun will have risen and we will be among the first to enter the park. As anticipated, the sun rises as we drive, and we arrive at the park gates in daylight. Our car is the third in line. Soon we reach the entrance station.

“We only have two hours. What do you recommend we see?” asks Alan. “Go home!” replies the officer with a wry smile. “Or take the shuttle bus. It’s in front of the visitor centre.”

Clearly we can’t do Zion in two hours. Only a few weeks earlier, we had marvelled at our American friends who claimed to do Europe in a week or two, but now we are beating them at their own game, trying to do Zion in two hours. Our ticket is valid for seven days, and I wish we could stay here for that long. We head to the carpark and manage to find a space at the end. Then we walk to the shuttle bus. “Standing room only!” warns the bus driver.

We gratefully leap into the bus, and shortly after it takes off. Some of the other passengers advise us that if we have limited time we should alight at the terminus, Stop 9. As the bus makes its way along the track we listen to the driver’s commentary, and I crane my neck to gaze out of the windows at the ochre cliffs rising to the sky. Many of the passengers are carrying wooden sticks and are donning waterproof gear and waterproof sandals. They must know something we don’t.

We alight at Stop 9 and make our way along the trail as fast as we can. We have to be on our way in two hours and cannot savour these magnificent cliffs or enjoy the meandering creek at the bottom of this canyon. We try to find a space between the other tourists so that we can take selfies with no one in the background, pretending that we are alone in this sacred setting.

Alan clutches my hand, ushering me on, and I try to match his long stride by walking as quickly as I can. I am no longer capable of running. We reach the end of the path and notice other tourists continuing past the end of the trail as they wade in the stream. This is why they have donned their waterproof gear and are holding their wooden walking sticks. We are neither

**Clearly we can’t do  
Zion in two hours.**



Hikers in Zion National Park. Photo by Alan Noble

equipped for this nor do we have time, so we head back along the path to take the shuttle bus back to the park entrance.

We walk quickly back along the path, but there are many more tourists walking towards us, and the route has become crowded. We arrive at the bus stop, and shortly after the shuttle bus arrives to take us back to the entrance. Once we are at Stop 3 the driver makes an announcement. "If you alight here you can walk along the path along the river back to the park entrance. It's a mile and a half and downhill all the way. There are seven bridges." Alan and I look at each other.

'If we are delayed we will keep Angelina waiting.

We can't afford the time."

"But we've come all the way here. Can't we make the most of it, especially if it's downhill all the way?" I counter.

"Okay. Let's do it."

We alight and head down the path, maintaining a brisk pace. The scenery is unlike Stop 9. The canyon is wider at this point.

There are many tourists heading towards us on e-bikes. We persevere, walking on the right side of the path following the protocol in America. The scenery is stunning but I am worn out. Perhaps we should have stayed on the bus. Finally we reach the end of the trail, having crossed the seven bridges. We must cross the pedestrian crossing to get back to the carpark. I check for traffic and am greeted by the wide smile of a lady in a four-wheel drive, urging me to cross; I smile back and we cross the road. We walk back to the carpark and I am so tired that I can barely place one leg in front of the other. Where is our car? I spot the kind lady in the four-wheel drive.

"Are you leaving? Can we use your park?"

"Sure!" Alan replies. "But I don't know where our car is. Follow us."

"Are you Australian?" she asks.

This question is a bit random. Our accents must have betrayed us. We confirm that we are indeed Australian. We weave our way among the parked cars trying to find ours. The lady in the four-wheel drive follows us. Then another driver shouts out to us. "Can we use your car park?"

"I can't find it," replies Alan. "But someone else has bagged it."

They follow us nonetheless. Then we find our car and inch out. One of the passengers in the second car ushers us out. Oh no! They have claimed our spot. We drive out as the four-wheel drive heads towards us. I cover my mouth as a sign of apology. We had promised them the spot but it was seized by another car.

"Sorry!" Alan calls out to her.

"That's okay. Have a lovely day!" she replies, smiling broadly.

We drive back out of the park, back along the streets lined with tourist



Lookout in Utah. Photo by Alan Noble

accommodation. By now, crowds are surging towards the park. There is even a shuttle bus in these outer boundaries of the park full of tourists waiting to depart. I wish we could linger. I'm jealous of these tourists who are arriving at the park, but we head out, not knowing whether we will ever be able to return.

We continue on the main road in the direction of Colorado. Much of the road passes through canyons, with layers of ochre strata laid down over the eons. A sign heralds a viewing point, and we depart the road to take a look. There is a valley of geological strata that is just as stunning as the national park.

As we continue on the road to Colorado, we pass through otherworldly landscapes, and I wonder whether some resemble the moon and others resemble Mars. Limiting our visit to Zion National Park to two hours is regretful, but we have eight hours to drive through the Utah landscape, and much of the state can be considered a national park. We press on to Loveland and arrive at Angelina and Scott's house. Scott ushers us inside, and Angelina opens her arms to embrace us from her position on the couch. It has been worth it to see Angelina well enough to welcome us. Not only that, we got to do Zion in two hours.

**Meredith Stephens** is an applied linguist from South Australia. Her recent work has appeared in *Borderless*, *Syncopation Literary Journal*, *MockingOwl Roost Blog*, *The Font – A Literary Journal for Language Teachers*, *Mindbrained Think Tanks*, *Ultramarine Literary Review*, and *The Writers' Journal*. In 2024, her short story *Safari* featured as the Editor's Choice in the June edition of *All Your Stories*. In 2022, with Yudai Aoki, she received the Michelle Steele Best of JALT award for Extensive Reading.



# INFLUENCED BY THE KONTOMBLE

## Ellen Lewinberg



Nature and gardens have been my passion ever since I was young. I can remember as a four-year-old spending hours and hours in my great-aunt's garden in South Africa. It was a very overgrown garden with all sorts of exotic plants – gardenias with their intense scent, strelitzia, agapanthus, hibiscus, poinsettia, frangipani (my favourite), avocado, banana, lychee and mango, all growing in profusion. It was a riot of colour and scents. I loved the time I spent there and especially the cork tree at the bottom of the garden. I was convinced I could see and converse with fairies. My great-aunt, who was a very practical woman, told me there was no such thing. I continued my conversations anyway.

My parents' garden was a wonderful place as well. It had many fruit trees as well as jacarandas, poplars and others whose names I have forgotten. There was a rose garden, a rockery and a fish pond. Again, a profusion of colour and scents. It was well tended except for an area behind the fish pond where bushes were allowed to grow wild. I would spend a lot of time there, again with the fairies.

Being in the wild part of these gardens made me feel happy and alive. As I got older, I was always fascinated with plants and seemed to be able to recognize them wherever I travelled. I always wondered where that knowledge came from. I only knew one master gardener when I lived in South Africa. Perhaps I learned from her. It certainly wasn't her teaching me formally.

I read all I could about plants and came across Findhorn, an ecovillage in Scotland, and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy McClean's work there and the incredible vegetables they were able to grow with the help of the plant devas, or plant spirits. I wondered then if that was who I was talking to when I was young.

When I finally settled in Toronto my husband and I bought our first house. I was thrilled to have a garden. I felt enlivened when I worked in the dirt. I began to experiment with growing local plants and those that I remembered from my childhood. As a result, in winter my house was overflowing with tropical plants that would not otherwise survive Toronto's winters. The result of my experiments was that my house got more and more crowded. I couldn't leave my plant companions out in the cold to freeze. A friend once said, "One day I'll come to visit and not be able to get in as the plants will have taken over."

Johannesburg Garden





After a few years, we moved to a bigger house with a bigger garden. I was in heaven, especially when I discovered that my next-door neighbour was also an avid gardener. We took down the fence between our houses and gardened together. We had a communal rose garden. I had a fish pond and a vegetable and berry garden. The birds flocked to the fish pond to drink. We grew all sorts of perennials.

Soon the neighbours on the other sides of our gardens wanted to join in and two more sets of fences were taken down. It felt as if we had created a park for our kids to play in. There were places to hide and trees to climb. I felt expanded and joyful whenever I was working or just sitting there, enjoying the scents and sounds.

A few years ago, I returned to South Africa a number of times to work with a shaman there. We were doing a ritual in Cape Point, almost the southernmost tip of South Africa. It is mountainous and very scenic. In some places the sea crashes into the rocks and, in others, the waves roll onto a sandy beach.

We were completing a ritual there when the shaman suddenly said to me, “The Kontomble are following you around.” I had never heard of Kontomble before. She told me they are elemental beings, known by the Dagara Tribe in Burkino Faso, where she had done her training, as the “Little People from the Forest.” In other cultures they are called leprechauns, fairies, gnomes, dwarfs, elves. I kept looking behind me, but couldn’t see anything.

A number of years have passed since. I feel the Kontomble’s influence has been very prominent in my life since then (and maybe before as well). I have read all that I can about trees in the last few years. Along the way, I separated from my husband and have a new partner. We spent the next 20 years in



Top: Howland Garden 3

Above: Second Toronto Garden

condos, growing wonderful exotic plants indoors. I loved that, but it was not as satisfactory as having a garden. Last year, we moved into a new house. The amazing thing about our purchase was that neither he nor I had noticed a huge blue spruce that occupied a prominent place in the front garden. I feel the Kontomble wanted us to buy the house because, had I noticed it, I would not have bought it. I was looking for a house with lots of light. As it turned out, I have the best of both worlds – a huge blue spruce dominates the front of the house but it doesn’t block the windows.



Cape Point, South Africa. Image by wirestock on Freepik

My partner and I spent the first summer creating a front garden. Working together on this project has enlivened our relationship and brought us much joy. I am having a great deal of fun planning a “Miyawaki forest” (mini-forest) for our backyard. I have been inspired in this project by a Japanese botanist, Akira Miyawaki. The Miyawaki forests were planted in tiny spaces in Tokyo and have made a huge difference to the air quality there. I look forward to meeting the Kontomble as they help to bring life to my mini-forest.

The other gift I have been given since I remembered the Kontomble is that I have become much more creative. In particular, I have been able to write, something that was very difficult for me previously. It seems that working in the garden has inspired my creativity in a new direction. I am writing blogs for my website, children’s books and a memoir. The words seem to flow in a way they never have before.

**Ellen Lewinberg** was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, and is a graduate in Social Work from Witwatersrand University. She also has a Master of Social Work degree from the London School of Economics. Ellen has trained as both a child and adult psychoanalyst and worked in the field for over 30 years. She is currently practising as a bioenergy healer in Toronto. She has a keen interest in nature and the world around us and in sharing it with young people and their families.

# ONCE UPON A TIME

**Jacques G. LeBlanc, MD, FRSC**



Traditionally, fairy tales have started with the words, “Once upon a time”. Those words, for me, immediately evoke visions within my imagination of fantasy worlds where nature and humans are interacting seamlessly. It is as if human nature and Mother Nature are intertwined in a sense of oneness.

As a small boy, I played with rocks on the beach in front of our cottage on the St-Lawrence River. I looked for ones that were smooth and just the right size to skip multiple times across the surface of the water. I learned to throw the rocks at different angles, changing the speed and force to hit in just the right way. I imagined myself as the champion of rock rebounding. It was always a fascinating exercise.

Contemplating the vast water in front of me, I dreamt of becoming a sea captain on a large boat. When the river was calm and the sun was shining, I could, in my little boy’s head, imagine navigating the great St Lawrence Seaway. I had seen those boats coming to port in my hometown, emptying their bellies of all kinds of cargo, taking on new containers and then floating away into the vastness of the river. Filled with a desire for adventure without attachment I wanted to leave with them. My heart yearned to conquer new horizons.

In the summer, travelling with my younger brother and my mother to visit our grandparents, I would sit on the back seat looking through the side window, marvelling at the beauty of nature and green farmlands, cows grazing in the fields, red barns and silos in the distance. I imagined being a farmer taking care of this beautiful land. I did not really understand the complexity of these feelings, but this was my first sense of respect for the land, which still inhabits me.

I believe nature and creativity are deeply intertwined. Nature has always been a major source of inspiration for artists, musicians, writers and creators of all kinds. The patterns, colours and rhythms found in the natural world can spark new ideas, and being in nature itself often fosters a sense of clarity and creativity. The complexity of what we see, the organic shapes, textures and colours in nature often lead to innovative approaches in everything from architecture to fashion.

Unfortunately, like many, for many years, as I completed my schooling and developed my career, I forgot those dreams and imaginings. I was busy living my day-to-day life with little thought to my becoming Sea Captain or farmer until I retired and began to revisit these experiences, turning to nature and engaging my own creativity.

The beach has always had a major effect on me. The sound of waves

**Being in nature itself often fosters a sense of clarity and creativity.**

**The way the leaves move ... promotes introspection, leading to creative insights that stem from my unconscious mind.**

crashing, the vast horizon and the feeling of sand between my toes all create a calm, sensory experience that can be really grounding. Time seems to slow down, which can open up space for deeper connections within myself, fostering inspiration and new ideas. The natural patterns of the water and sky, the colours that shift throughout the day and the unique textures of shells, rocks and sand — all offer endless possibilities for artistic expression. Plus, the beach often has a meditative effect, which can help clear mental clutter, allowing one's mind to wander freely to places it might not otherwise go. The endless horizon, shifting patterns in the sand and the play of light on the water provide a rich source of visual inspiration. The colours of the beach, especially during sunrise or sunset, the feel of sand, the coolness of the water, or the wind on your skin can create new sensory experiences that trigger fresh ideas. This sensory engagement can help ground creative work in a more visceral, tangible way.

I have called myself a beach bum many times as I enjoyed walking in the warm sand, waves coming over my feet and basking in the sun. With my mind floating over the horizon, many times I found myself thinking about my surgical practice, how to improve my skills and patient care. The beach, the blue ocean, the waves and the sun have always had a soothing effect. This restoration of mental energy allowed me clearer thinking and the ability to move forward.

Being with palm trees also has a deep creative influence on me. The long, high and skinny trunks appear somewhat weak, and yet their flexibility and strength in high winds is remarkable. Way above the ground, the leathery large leaves are waving in the wind, clapping together, yet I find that sound so peaceful. Many times I sat in the pool at our home in Palm Springs, listening to the sound of palm trees swaying in the wind—like a soft rustling that blends with the atmosphere. It is such a unique sound. It is almost like nature's version of white noise, isn't it? The way the leaves move with the breeze is as if the trees themselves are gently whispering, and for me it often promotes introspection, leading to creative insights that stem from my unconscious mind. The solitude helps me break away from the noise of my daily life, allowing my thoughts to settle and my imagination to flourish. Even today, at home in B.C., I cherish those inner moments with myself because I felt intertwined with Mother Nature.

**Jacques LeBlanc** retired after being a paediatric and adult cardiovascular and thoracic surgeon at B.C. Children's Hospital in Vancouver. Realizing that he had a lot to give back to his profession in the way of experience as a doctor, a teacher, a student of life, a husband and a human being seeking wellness in this rapidly changing world, he created [leblancwellness.com](http://leblancwellness.com). For the last few years he has been a regular contributor to The Journal, sharing a belief in recovering the connections we have lost and engaging the new skills we have gained to mitigate loneliness and create wellness.

# COLLABORATION

## Laura David with Jim Demchuk



Jim Demchuk

Although I enjoy writing, sadly, like everything else when it is not urgent, it can fall to the wayside. I confess I work better under pressure. However, when I take time to go for a walk and enjoy nature, see the lake, the sky and all the flora and fauna, I am inspired to get creative, in writing and painting. Although at present I do not intentionally paint landscapes or representational work of the natural environment, I have found my inspiration from elements in nature emerging in my work.

Seeing other artists' work in galleries and workshops in person or online also gets me inspired. Recently, artist Jim Demchuk and I discovered artist Nicholas Wilton, and we've enjoyed his approach as we follow him on various social media platforms and listen to his podcasts. It makes for great conversation and often informs each of us in our work with new ideas, techniques or directions. One YouTube video in particular that caught our attention was where Wilton and one of his studio assistants work together in creating one large abstract painting together; we were intrigued by this collaboration.

Both of us enjoy abstract expressionism, allowing for compositions to emerge intuitively, and we encourage each other as we are influenced by this genre in our art practices. However, collaborating together to create one large painting was an interesting idea that we had not considered before. We were a little apprehensive at first: could we manage to do such a project? We decided to take on the challenge, and the following is the result: a 48" x 36" acrylic on canvas, which now hangs on the feature wall over my dining table.

The painting contains a lot of subtle details in the many layers of acrylic paint. We had a lot of fun as we improvised, keeping the painting loose and playful as we listened to our favourite music playlists. We collaborated in a series of painting sessions working on a horizontal surface rather than vertical

Untitled. Acrylic on canvas, 48" x 36"  
collaboration Jim Demchuk and Laura David



on an easel, which allowed for each of us to move around the painting easily during each process as is apparent in the photo of the painting in process.

Jim got the first layer started, and I joined in with line work using acrylic pens. It was the "icebreaker" in the project we shared, which seemed to lay out a framework for the rest of the art. From there we continued by painting various areas of colour, playing up complementaries by situating them together. We used various-sized brushes but also many other tools, such as drywall putty knives and sponges, which added variety and fun. We enjoyed creating fully saturated as well as toned and tinted hues; we mixed



Top: The painting in process  
Above: Close-up 1, 2, and 3

up neutrals and variations of colour. There is also variation of shapes, some rectangular and some more curved elements in the composition. We used the other end of the brush to etch into the wet paint, creating more lines, and ends of paper towel rolls, corrugated cardboard and bubble wrap for varieties of texture. We took time between layers to consider the composition and what might be added to it or taken out. During times in between painting sessions we discussed the elements of composition and design: line, shape, value, texture, variety, unity and balance. As mentioned previously, in each session we painted intuitively, improvising rather than with a lot of discussion.

We had extra fun deciding in the last stages what the painting needed to bring it together to finalize the composition. In retrospect, we feel that, rather than having any preconceived idea, having an intuitive process and allowing the painting to emerge through this process kept the painting from being contrived. It also kept us from being concerned with the final product. Having a sense of humour, being able to laugh and having some oohs and ahs along the way kept things light – for the most part. We did have some surprises and perplexing moments wondering what to do next. But we managed to resolve any conundrums and had a great time overall. We were excited with the resulting painting and I'm proud to display it in my home.

While we may or may not use the same playful intuitive process to create another collaborative work, we see it as a jumping-off point as each of us carries on in our own art. We learned a lot that we could each take into our own work. We are enthused with the learning we had working together and how much we simply enjoyed collaborating on such a project. In later reflection on our work and on this issue's theme of inspiration from nature, a quote by artist Edvard Munch resonated: "Nature is not only all that is visible to the eye, it also includes the inner pictures of the soul." We were surprised to find that, though we worked with abstract imagery and without directly having intention to be inspired by nature, when the painting was complete we could feel how nature affects us on an unconscious level. In fact, we concluded, how could it not? As we sat with it, we could see how it was in a sense like an aerial view of nature.

We are enthused to have the privilege to share our process and final painting with the *Sage-ing* community, and we invite you to see if you feel the influence of nature as you sit with the image.

First generation Ukrainian-born and raised in Saskatchewan, **Jim Demchuk** completed a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Administration (with honours) at the University of Regina and later obtained a Chartered Management Accountant designation. Although primarily a self-taught painter for over 40 years, Jim has taken numerous painting courses/classes/seminars through universities and community colleges and from painters-in-residence, supplemented by studying painting techniques from books and the internet.

# WILDERNESS TO WONDER

## NATURE'S SPARK

### Shelly Siskind



The serene splendour of Mother Earth's untouched corners is a sublime, yet breathtaking majesty of wild, untamed realms. Nature's canvas is, for me, a living masterpiece of beauty and mystery: both a stimulus and a container for new thoughts and writings. She can be calm and energizing; her engagement is never static. The symphony of elements is what captures my attention the most: a piece of rusting metal becoming an ersatz piece of art; the engaging patterns of critters' feet imprinted in the sand to amuse the passersby; the ever arresting, shifting, shimmering daylight. As I gaze skyward, downward or all around, I am mesmerized by the degree of illumination or shadow it lends to objects and landscapes, the shapes and designs of clouds, and observing these effects on children. If it weren't for this frigid snow, I'd be tempted to lie down and look upward, right this minute! Whether chronicling these impressions in my adult or children's poems, the source and inspiration remain the same: the magical, mystical serenity of nature. When addressing and acknowledging nature, I think of her as either the natural world, as in 'the home of Mother Nature,' or as the habit of noticing and being affected by what surrounds and arrests us, as in 'the nature of things.'

## AIRBORNE

To view the mountains from the air,  
gives rise to unlinked imagery  
confounding the linear mind.

Open stretches, dusted white peaks,  
taupe coloured origami –  
potters clay waiting to be fashioned.

Fields become mosaics – spirals, diamonds, squares,  
patterns and patchwork:  
a collage.

What is big appears small.  
What is small shrinks and disappears.

The plane, a small tin container, suspended.

As a writer and poet, nature inspires both my soulful introspection and creative expression. I am often alone, observing all that surrounds me. I gaze out into my backyard, which abuts a floodplain, and enjoy the tranquility and





## UNEXPECTED HEARTS 2024

Top: The serenity of Georgian Bay. A place of inspiration

Middle: *Unexpected Hearts*

Link: [https://www.facebook.com/p/](https://www.facebook.com/p/Unexpected-Hearts-100064569344825/)

[Unexpected-Hearts-100064569344825/](https://www.facebook.com/p/Unexpected-Hearts-100064569344825/)

Above: The hearts I find in nature inspire the collages I create

visits from wildlife: birds, squirrels, raccoons, deer and the occasional coyote. From this vantage point, I am acutely aware that nothing is static. There is always a dynamic interplay between critters and nature's backdrop. As I view these recurring, peaceful scenes, shifting... day by day, moment by moment... the 'new' emerges. For me, this routine monotony can be as inspirational as the exotic. Each day is a new opportunity to discover the magnificence in the mundane.

The solitude of nature provides me with much fodder for my poems and prose. "Dare to be boring," said my bodywork teacher, Dr. Milton Trager. He knew that engaging in repetitive patterns bores the conscious mind, and it quickly stops paying attention. Herein lies the doorway to our unconscious mind, home of our deeper – and often unfiltered – Self.

Being in nature with other kindred spirits has always been paramount to presenting me with new experiences and helping to lead me into unexplored areas that infuse my creativity, and writings, with new material.

One of these revelations emerged as I became more vigilant of what I called *Unexpected Hearts* after observing, collecting and photographing random, emergent hearts found in nature and in the wild. In 2007, I started sharing this awareness and my discoveries with my seven grandchildren. They all joined me enthusiastically and quickly became avid 'Heart Hunters'. When they stumbled upon unexpected hearts, they would photograph and share them with me. I described these delights as 'the physical manifestation of love in the world'. After all, love is everywhere and inherent across all nature.

The expansion of my own heart continues to this day, via this whimsical project and through the collective

sharing with my progeny. Seeing nature's fanciful hearts through the twinkling, wide eyes of my grandchildren has taught me to understand the universe better, when seen through the creative and unfiltered lens of a child. Though now all adults, they continue to inform me, inspire me and expand my creativity. Their whimsy, innocence and wonder make them, individually and collectively, inspiring muses for my writings. Each Valentine's Day, I make a photo collage of the past year's treasures and trinkets for each, with an accompanying poem.

My grandchildren spent many hours in nature with me, whether by the river on the floodplain by Stoney Creek, at cottages in Ontario, at Toronto's Riverdale Park or along the Lake Ontario waterfront. In all these priceless, memorable excursions, unexpected hearts appeared reliably. Precious hours

## HEART POEM

Hearts on the ceiling  
 Hearts on the ground  
 It's amazing  
 How many hearts abound

Heart-shaped rocks and pebbles  
 Heart-shaped bark on trees  
 One time I even had a heart-shaped cut  
 on my left knee

Okay, I made that last one up  
 The heart was on my dress  
 Cuz finding hearts is sooo much fun  
 It really is the best!

I gave these hearts a name  
 Unexpected, a fun surprise  
 To find them you just need to have  
 Heart detective eyes

Look up to see a white cloud heart  
 Look down on the ground  
 Find a squishy mud-shaped heart  
 Or candy wrapper squished not round

And when you find them, share them  
 Take a picture of what you've found  
 Let everyone know your secret  
 Hearts show all the love around

## ALL'S WELL

Dolphins leaping  
 Sand crabs creeping  
 Possums upside down are sleeping.

Tigers pacing  
 Monkeys racing  
 Children wearing shoes are lacing.

The sun is shining  
 Stars are twinkling  
 Squid and octopus are inking.  
 All the earth's alive and well  
 What better news could a grandma tell?

were spent together hunting for snails, swinging on swings and, most delicious of all, having sleepovers. These times afforded so many opportunities for reading, playing in the backyard, chats over breakfast and fun outings such as adventures into the sugarbush. All experiences were propellants for the poems that sprung from these times, poems that would eventually blossom into stories.

These adventures and escapades with my grandchildren, especially while out together in nature, really highlighted to me how unfettered the imagination of innocence could be. They also made me realize how important it was for them that each child's voice be heard. These experiences, and this period in my life, were filled with wonder, excitement, joy. My writing intensified, my poetry blossomed and the pure joy of grandparenting exploded. As I collected all this material and filtered it through the eyes, hearts and brains of my delightful muses, a natural byproduct of this love and creativity was to develop a children's book series, inspired by them, and sharing the adventures, lessons and musings that are universal to most kids. In 2023, I launched *The Limitless World of Magnificent Mimi*, a book series (with animated social media reels) showcasing a curious, adventurous 8-year-old girl, off to explore the world outside her bedroom, her house and her street.

Every Magnificent Mimi story begins from the perch of her 8-sided bedroom window and ends in her backyard, a small but cozy, grassy and safe space. From here, she explores landscapes and panoramas, real and imagined – setting off on exciting and wonderful adventures with her family and



Right: *The Limitless World Of Magnificent Mimi*



Mimi cranking up her heart machine!

Links:

Magnificent Mimi

<https://magnificentmimi.com/>

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

[magnificentmimibooks/](https://magnificentmimibooks/)

friends. The essence of Mimi stems from my heart. In creating Mimi, it was my wish to amplify the love that children infuse in the world.

In one of Mimi's first vignettes, she worries that the world needs more love and so builds and shares her Heart Machine. Mimi's Limitless World is filled with wonder, excitement, innocence and magic ... Imagination is her Superpower!

**Shelly Siskind** is a published poet and author, passionate community leader and mental health advocate. Whether as an engaged community board member or co-founder of Block Parent (the National Child Safety Program), her focus has consistently been on the betterment of conditions for children and their families.

As a mother, she was inspired by the innocence and wonder with which kids view their surroundings. She watched as the world burst through the eyes of her own children, and then grandchildren, and wrote poems and stories that captured the magic of those moments and memories.

After a lifetime of learning, teaching and writing, Shelly co-authored *Uncharted Corners of Consciousness: a Guidebook for Personal and Spiritual Growth* in 2012. She was published in *Poems in Response to Peril*, an anthology in support of Ukraine following the invasion in 2022.

Shelly had been gathering her hundreds of poems into thematically linked collections for some time and began turning them into whimsical stories. These quickly blossomed into the proud personification and loving combination of all the little humans in her universe, and she launched her children's book series, *The Limitless World of Magnificent Mimi*, in 2023. <https://shellysiskind.com/>

# The Journal of Creative Aging

# SAGE-ING

WITH CREATIVE SPIRIT,  
GRACE & GRATITUDE

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## Our Manifesto

This journal (and our associated website) is about you, and the possibility of you creating the next chapter in the book of your life.

You're familiar with how the other chapters worked: early, childhood, teenage, tempest, tragedy, trial, temptation, partnering, breaking, birthing, making, solving, earning, learning, building, growing, mentoring, celebrating, wising up, and ending up here after all that.

The road of life goes on from where you now find yourself, you're still on it, and the vistas that open before you promise more and maybe better rewards, but only if you engage in the possibilities.

You now get to decide if this next chapter will be a rich and fulfilling one for you, or only the last.

Rather than fading into that good night, might we offer an alternative?

Creative aging is a powerful social and cultural movement that has stirred the imaginations of many communities and people. Also referred to as sage-ing, creative aging takes many forms, and elevates people in many ways.

Most importantly, creative aging encourages and facilitates individual and collective creative pursuits, including writing, crafting, painting, dancing, and an almost unlimited number of other ways to express your creative energy.

It encourages you to find your inner artist, to discover the opportunity to celebrate and elevate, to make the most of the wisdom you've accumulated through the lessons of your life. It pleads for you to speak the truths you've learned, to share your wisdom, to be wise, to sage.

Creative aging helps you discover the source of wellness, which is in your spirit, your will to be, to be well, to share your gift, to explore, to create, to be whole.

Creative aging encourages you to engage with your inner life, to experience the grace of knowledge, to express gratitude for your gifts, and to share them with others on the same journey. By doing so, you open the door to the creative person that lives inside you, the insights you possess, the lessons you can learn through your experience, the discoveries you can share with fellow creators, and the wisdom you can gift to future generations.

**Sage-ing:** The Journal of Creative Aging exists to help you document your creative pursuits with care and integrity, to honour your truth. It's time for you to join us. Tell your story, make your next chapter.