

THE JOURNAL OF Creative Aging

SAGE-ING

with Creative Spirit, Grace & Gratitude



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KNOW YOURSELF. BE YOURSELF.
LOVE YOURSELF. SHARE YOURSELF.
ONLINE AT www.sageing.ca

FROM THE EDITORS

Our suggested theme for this issue was to share *how levity and humour lighten your spirit and influence your creativity. Like Einstein we believe that: "Creativity is intelligence having fun."*

Humour serves as a vital defence against life's pressures as it allows us to see 'the delightful weirdness of our world' and lets us have fun. Creating humour is an action, while levity is a state of coming alive by focusing on viewing life from a lighter, more easy-going perspective, especially in serious situations. During the past months we have been delighted to see submissions for this issue come from around the globe, yet there is a discernible unity in their messages that creativity has indeed brought fun and wisdom

into the contributors' lives. There is an undercurrent of understanding that wisdom evolves when we allow humour and levity to colour how we recall even painful past experiences. This is sage-ing navigating life's challenges without taking oneself too seriously and appreciating that we are always learning. Viewing from a humorous perspective makes the task of learning easier, more fun.

Our themes are always suggestions, but we have enjoyed seeing the common thread of levity expressed by contributors diverse in geography and in their chosen forms of creative expression. The Journal, *Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*, exists to honour the transformational power of creativity by satisfying inner gnawing and transforming it to knowing and action. Perhaps the most creative mind in recent times was

Steve Jobs, and there is wisdom in his advice: "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life ... Creativity is just connecting things."

As we pondered our suggested theme for the June issue of The Journal words from a man whose life spanned earlier centuries called out. Early in the 20th century Howard Thurman urged, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." We invite you to share how your creative spirit has led you to 'come alive' to yourself, your environment and the joy of being. When we live from our bodily experiential centre we feel new inspiration.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

We welcome you to join our community of storytellers by sharing your experience of creative expression.

We require your story to accompany any submissions of your creative expression. We strongly encourage individuals to write their own stories because the process of reflection bringing forward memories now, into their current lived perspective and writing about them is very much part of a creative experience. Taking time to ask oneself honest questions and then to deeply consider the responses that emerge brings both personal benefit and a compelling story. Genuine self-expression is what works best. If you feel you need help editing and bringing order and flow to your mind's meanderings this is available, but only you can draw forth the wisdom of your own life's experiences and expressions. It's your enthusiasm that inspires others to explore themselves and that harvests your wisdom as a legacy for future generations. We find a pairing of examples of your expression within your

story most effective.

- Please attach your story, including examples of your work, as a Word document (.doc) **not a PDF** to enable editing, CALIBRI font, 14 pt, 1.5 spacing. **We leave only one space after a period.**
- 500 – 1500 word maximum (use word count)
- Please attach:
 - o Your headshot
 - o 3-4 **JPGs** of photos related to your article. Not necessary for poetry submissions, but if you see relevance please include
- 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.

Please email your article and photographs to Karen Close karensageing@gmail.com and Laura David ladida336@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 as early as possible. Your complete submission is required by the first day of the month preceding publication.

Please note: The Journal operates as part of the gift economy. We are about sharing the wisdom of original thinking as our life experiences nurture our mutual 'soul' growth. For this online journal there is no receiving of payment by anyone. Robert MacDonald gives his publishing/layout talents and we editors give our editing skills to those who share their stories with us. In "payment" contributors have their articles professionally edited and published online and may share their articles however they might wish.

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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Cover image: detail from *We Are Family* by Kel Taylor

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FINDING COURAGE

Paula Charter



“Creativity takes courage.” – Henri Matisse

As an abstract artist I find myself constantly reaching for courage. My paintings are not simply a matter of applying technique and composition; they are an act of vulnerability. To paint without a clear reference point, to dig deep and create from feeling rather than form means exposing yourself completely. It’s laying bare the quiet corners of your mind, the memories, fears and hopes you may not even have words for and letting others look, judge or misunderstand. In abstraction there is nowhere to hide. And yet, I believe that the most powerful art comes from this very place. Creating from a place where you are genuine, raw and fearless. Creating not from safety, but from truth.

My own courage to create came late, in my forties, after years spent in a life that prized control over curiosity. Before becoming an artist, I worked in human resources and climbed the corporate ladder. I became skilled at mediation, efficiency and leadership. Those years required strength, but of a very different kind, the strength to contain and apply order constantly. My days were spent smoothing over tension, anticipating others’ needs, creating structure to keep people and systems running smoothly. I was a constant people-pleaser. The job demanded that I stay composed and logical under pressure, and always professional. I became excellent at reading the room, at mediating, at saying the right things, even when they weren’t how I truly felt. Slowly, these learned skills became a form of armour.

I worked hard, moved up quickly and became “successful” in the way the world measures such things. The more “successful” I became, the farther I drifted from myself. What I marketed as professionalism was often self-erasure. It felt like accomplishment at the time, but looking back I see that I was choosing to trade authenticity for approval.

Even during those hectic years, I did my best to maintain an art practice. I squeezed evening classes and weekend workshops into my schedule—courses on drawing, composition, even metal-smithing. They taught me skills, rules and best practices. I learned how to make things look right, but not how to make them *feel* right. I was always seeking something more, something that would allow me to create from within, not from a reference or to mirror a particular style.

Motherhood was the beginning of my unravelling, and of my reawakening. The armour I had so carefully built cracked open. Love, exhaustion and raw vulnerability flooded through. Emotions and moments I had kept neatly buried awaylike grief, wonder, tenderness erupted all at once. It was over-

Caged, recently exhibited in Kelowna Art Gallery’s *The Stories You Tell*





Balancing Barefoot

Through the creative process I am learning to trust myself and trust my voice.

whelming. I felt simultaneously broken and alive, and I needed a way to make sense of it all.

During that time, I stumbled across an online course about living creatively and finding one's voice through art. The description spoke directly to what I was yearning for and what I was feeling. I signed up. That class encouraged us to paint without fear, to lean into emotion, to dare to paint ugly, to release control. So, I let go. My pieces began to feel raw; almost too honest to look at, but they were thrillingly real. For the first time, I was losing myself in my artistic expression, and my paintings felt like me.

Abstract painting became a language of release, a way to process, to heal and to reconnect with the world. Each piece untangles another thread of who I was and who I wish to be. Some days painting leaves me trembling; other days calm and introspective. Through the creative process I am learning to trust myself and trust my voice.

As I am becoming more aware of myself and my surroundings through my art, I realize that my story isn't unique. We all live inside a culture obsessed with speed and efficiency, one that measures life by output and achievement. In the constant motion and overstimulation by technology, we forget to take time for stillness, to notice the small things, to feel. My paintings emerged as quiet rebellions against this reality, small reminders that emotion matters, that presence matters, that being human is enough.

In 2023, I decided to share my abstract art publicly for the first time. Few things have ever scared me more. Abstract art can be polarizing. I knew people would have strong opinions and reactions to my raw expression. For an introvert conditioned to please, the thought of being on display, vulnerable for all to see, was horrifying. Yet I also knew that if I wanted to be true and authentic in my life and art, this was part of the journey.

My first exhibition was at a large, juried art show, with thousands of visitors. I painstakingly planned every detail of my booth, certain that presentation would show I was a "real artist." Many people smiled politely, some walked past in confusion, and a few bluntly declared that abstract art "isn't real art." Their words stung, but I stayed. Then, one woman stopped in front of my small painting titled *Balancing Barefoot*. She asked what it meant. The painting was created from memories of going fishing as a child with my dad. I tried to capture the wonder, the presence and enjoyment we experience as children. The cold rigid feeling of the rocks as my foot curved around it, the quiet and silly game of trying not to fall splashing into the water. She smiled softly, and after a pause said, "I can feel that." She bought the piece on the spot.

That small exchange stays with me. It reminds me that art is a conversation, not a performance. My job is not to convince anyone of its relevance. It's simply to speak and create from a place of honesty and let my work find those who need it.



Top: *Against Protocol*

Above: *Echoes of a Life*

Since then, I've embraced my identity as an artist fully. I've applied to juried shows, grants and residencies—celebrating the acceptances and surviving the rejections, but above all not letting these results direct or control my creative expression. My studio has become both sanctuary and testing ground. When pieces fail, I start again. When they succeed, it's because I've managed to paint from a place of honesty and vulnerability.

Courage, I've learned, isn't something you achieve once. It must be practised daily. Every canvas I create carries a whisper of doubt, but as I continue to show up and create, a gentler, yet more confident voice comes through, encouraging my path of authenticity. Today my paintings remain raw and emotive. I'm not interested in matching someone's décor or fitting a trend. The world already has enough polished surfaces. I want my work to breathe, to feel human in its imperfection.

As author and artist Tracey Emin said, "*Being an artist is a vocation, not a job.*" For me, that vocation arrived late, but precisely when I needed it most. Painting is no longer something separate from life; it is my life. Through it, I've learned that vulnerability and strength are not opposites but partners. That revealing what's inside is how we truly connect.

Now, in my middle years, I approach each day with curiosity and courage. I know that courage doesn't always roar; sometimes it simply means showing up, brush in hand, ready to create. Now when someone pauses before one of my paintings, I don't brace myself for their reaction, instead I hope they sense my quiet invitation to slow down, to feel deeply, to remember what it means to be human.

If my work can spark even a brief pause, a moment of connection or stillness amid this chaotic world, then it has done what I hoped.

Paula Charter is a contemporary abstract artist based in Kelowna, B.C., working primarily in acrylic and mixed media. Her tactile, process-driven practice draws on themes of pace, presence and emotional reconnection in a world consumed by speed and technology. Before pursuing art full-time, Paula built a career in human resources while maintaining an art practice on the side. Her corporate experience informs her exploration of vulnerability and authenticity through painting and installation.

Since 2023 she has exhibited in juried group shows across the Okanagan and in Vancouver, and recently completed a ten-month self-directed residency at Studio111 through the Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art. Her upcoming art shows include a dual exhibition, "Beautiful Together", with artist Kel Taylor taking place at Peachland Art Gallery in April, as well as a small dual exhibition at Kelowna Community Theatre in October. Her current projects continue to merge painting, material experimentation and sound to examine how abstraction can express feeling without language.

Connect with Paula through:

Website: www.paulacharterart.com

(you can sign up for Paula's newsletter to stay current with her art and projects)

Instagram handle: @paulacharterart

Facebook page: paulacharterart

FINDING MY WAY BACK TO ART

John Leinemann



The Portland Woodturning Symposium in the spring of 2024 changed everything. Surrounded by pieces of extraordinary quality, I listened to their creators describe pushing themselves to the limits of their capabilities. Each story resonated with a truth I'd been avoiding: I was a craftsperson when I longed to be an artist.

I left Portland determined to stop mass-producing items for craft markets and start creating art for myself—the way I used to play in my dad's workshop as a kid, building toys with scraps of wood and unfettered imagination.

I've been an artist for as long as I can remember. I thrived in art classes throughout school, so when my parents asked what I planned to do after graduation, my answer came easily: "I want to go to art school." Their response was just as swift: "No. We're sending you to cooking school." I went grudgingly. But I discovered I had a talent for it, spending six years working as a cook. Those years taught me something valuable: I liked cooking, but I didn't like being a cook.

I pivoted to cabinet making and finishing carpentry, then completed a carpentry apprenticeship. I worked for my dad's construction company doing commercial office renovations for eight years. Then a succession of life events left me questioning my purpose and re-evaluating what I wanted from this life.

Around that time my sister Liz discovered and told me about the Inside Passage School of Fine Woodworking on the Sunshine Coast in British Columbia—a high-quality woodworking school remarkably close to home. I signed up for an intensive six-week summer program and fell in love. The teacher, Robert Van Norman, was an incredibly skilled craftsman and an excellent instructor. I graduated in August 2009, invigorated that I could make a living creating functional art. But after a year, the economics of the

arts and crafts business caught up to me. I decided to launch my own modestly successful renovation business and ran it for a decade, followed by positions as maintenance manager at a retirement community, carpenter at UBC Okanagan, and now commercial property manager. This current role offers something precious: flexibility. I can carve out time for my turning and sculptures, returning at

Left: *Untitled*, side A
Right: *Untitled*, side B





Left: Assembly of Boxes
Right: New Adventure



last to the creative work that's always been calling me home.

One of the pieces (shown above) embodying this journey I recently submitted to the Kelowna Art Gallery's member show. Crafted from apple wood harvested at a local orchard, it began as a log I cut into slabs with a chainsaw. Through improper storage—a mistake that would ruin wood for turning—the piece devel-

oped significant cracks. But what's useless for one purpose becomes perfect for another: those fissures look stunning in sculptural work. I hand-carved the void at the piece's centre, torched the sawn portions, cleaned them with a coarse wire brush and sealed everything with spray fixative. The process was simple, but the meaning runs deep.

This sculpture is me: grown in Kelowna, a little cracked and broken, somewhat charred on the outside, but with a beautiful void at the centre. Not emptiness born of sadness, but openness—space to discover new things, to explore, to create, to play. After decades of practical work and detours, I've finally carved out room for what matters most.

**The process was simple,
but the meaning runs
deep.**

Born and raised in Kelowna, **John Leinemann** grew up in a large family that nurtured his problem-solving skills and an appreciation for quality workmanship. This upbringing shaped him into a versatile artist and craftsman, with interests spanning woodworking, wood sculpture, furniture making, drawing, basket weaving and culinary arts. Among his diverse pursuits, woodturning stands out as his primary passion. Inspired by the unique qualities and natural beauty of wood, John's work showcases a harmonious blend of technical skill and artistic expression, reflecting the character and intricate textures of each piece. Through his craft, he continues to explore the rich possibilities of wood, opening viewers to appreciate its inherent artistry. In the summer of 2026, John will attend the Emma Collaboration in Big River, Saskatchewan. He is super crazy excited because 100 participants are selected from around the world to come together for seven days of spontaneous and collaborative art making in a variety of media. Oh the possibilities!

John Leinemann <john4468@hotmail.com>, Instagram handle: @Broken Arrow Studio

TWO OLD KIPPERS IN A BOX

(from *Under Milk Wood*, 1954 radio drama by Dylan Thomas)



Martha Ellen

I have a Master of Fine Arts degree, but it is in painting and drawing. Several years ago I sustained an injury to my central nervous system that has affected every part of my life. I had loved painting on huge, shaped canvases with lots of moving around but that is no longer an option. I picked up an old interest when I was forced into bedrest for about 18 months...long ago now. I thought of “painting” with words. And I got started with smaller things. I always believed that the universal lies within the incidental, and if I had the courage of vulnerability with words, as I did with paint, I would be on the right path. With any luck at all my words may reach out to others in some way along the human connection that had been severely diminished due to my disability.

I found that as I wrote I was able to heal in many ways, even old unresolved emotional experiences as well as new ones. One theme has been the grief over losing my sister. She was too young, way too young to leave us. The truth is I did dream about her on the night she died; she smiled to me, told me I would be okay, and I used that as a path to tell more about us that was not in the dream. She was born when I was six. She was premature 3 pounds and 12 inches long but she made it because she was truly strong. Our home life was challenging, but we always had each other. And now I keep our memories, which I refer to as “hours like diamonds.”

I realized that with words I could tell about the difficult as well as the joyful, and the poems and prose pieces became like little packages that held experiences to share or keep or pass along to future family members I will never meet. In fact, I have written prose pieces about my ‘gggg’ grandmother, all from an 1815 police report describing her painful decision to relinquish a newborn she could not care for due to the circumstances of her life. Sisters of the night, nuns who had tried and true plans to save babies left with them and to deliver them from desperate lives. I found the parallel with my own profession in social work interesting, as it often led to adoptions, as though Oma were speaking to me over the years.

I also write about my injury and the persistent disability with the hope that it can reach others struggling in the same ways and provide them with education and comfort.

Essentially, I have come to see writing as a way to share and connect and to process the pains (losses, broken hearts, unexpected detours that led to disasters) and joys (children, grandchildren, hummingbirds, my fig tree and my dear friend Jack the Crow). I write about my life, and maybe that is a good thing for me to do at this stage of life. I have never had writer’s block.

I always believed that the universal lies within the incidental, and if I had the courage of vulnerability with words, as I did with paint, I would be on the right path.

"Mar, find us a new coffee shop."
 [So we can go when she gets better.
 I didn't, but I told her I did. Liar.]
 ... I'm weak.

To see my sis today.
 She loves when I tell
 her stories. [Laugh.] So I'm
 wearing my fossil bracelet. A
 chambered nautilus [66 million
 years old]; amber [I'll make up
 a date]; a shark toothnot a fossil.
 Removed from some poor
 shark or surfboard. I'll tell
 her "If I ever meet a shark
 I'll show him I have one of
 his teeth, but he has none
 of mine...yet."

pick her up at her sheltered residence//
 smiling that goofball smile as though she
 hadn't seen me in ages. [It was just
 yesterday]// waving that frantic wave of
 excitement// we're going out for coffee for
 Pete's sake// she thinks it's a big deal// I
 hold her hand to keep her out of traffic//
 [actually she's holding mine to let me know
 she loves me and I'm pretending to take
 care of her]// get her situated at the table//
 bring the "coffee and" she likes// same old
 same old// "you know, Mar, I'm doing
 alright"// endless tedious stories about
 Prince Harry "the naughty Prince" ha ha
 ha// and the Royal family blah blah blah//
 "Check out my bracelets."// "Oh, wow"//
 she always says "oh, wow" about
 everything// could probably tell her
 "scientists discovered the earth really is
 flat." [cruel but funny]// "Oh, wow"// hope
 she doesn't have any coupons - all expired,
 but she never knows // hope she doesn't
 want to go to The Dollar Tree for more
 crap// "you know, Donna, we're just 'two
 old kippers in a box'"// she laughs// she
 loved that line from *Under Milk Wood*//
 only read it to her once// "Thank God
 there's a cure, Mar// she doesn't know// I
 don't tell her// weak, like I said

Also wearing other bracelets.
 The cartographer's coordinates
 of Chicagour home. The prayer
 of St. Francis. "Make me an
 instrument of Thy peace"
 [Though I've never proclaimed
 any success at this.] First

a little Sonic Reducer.
 Sex Pistols. [Angst.] Next to
 meditation, Episcopalian
 style. [Grief.] Finally, the
 best - my dearest sister. Have
 happy days. They are
 ... numbered.

[I put her in hospice, finally.
 I couldn't give her up when
 the ER doc called. "She might
 not make it through the night." I
 let them do the painful
 procedure. I'm selfish. She
 made it that night, anyway.
 I visit. The last visit. She's
 lying on her side. Can't move.
 "Mar, we're two old kippers in a box."
 ha ha ha I sob all the way home.]
 ... and now.

Illuminated Places

The night she died
 I had a dream.
 I saw her walking
 in a pleasant landscape
 on an uphill footpath
 toward an illuminated place.
 Her back was to me.
 She turned and saw me
 watching her leave
 for the last time.

Thrilled to see me,
 she smiled and
 waved with the familiar
 excited anticipation
 I had seen so many times before
 when I arrived
 at her sheltered home
 and we would go for coffee.
 There were days I thought
 this a chore, a boring task
 that subtracted
 from my important life.
 But, in that moment,
 in her joyful smile, clarity.
 She knew I feared
 to carry on without her.
 "You will be OK.
 I will wait here for you."

Everyone had believed
 I was the stronger sister.

Martha Ellen is a retired social worker living in an old Victorian house on a hill on the Oregon coast. She relocated from Chicago in 1972. She has a history of social justice activism, including work with the NFWA (National Farm Workers Association) and Cesar Chavez. She has an MFA from Portland State University. Her poems and prose are published in various journals and online forums. She writes to process the events of her life. Contact Martha at momsrights239@gmail.com

I'LL SEE YOU NEXT WEEK, DARLING



Henry Vinicio Valerio Madriz

The first beams of the rising sun guide him. Step by step he goes, walking slowly with no rush. He's contemplating the spring's greenest grass like the perfect carpet; the new shapes of the trees that invite their friends (birds and squirrels) to come back and to stay; the colours of the new flowers whose natural perfumes call colourful butterflies and fast hummingbirds to have their best banquet. His moderate walking allows him to watch everything in slow motion and to notice and appreciate this world's details genuinely.

This early morning, Carlos took a long, hot bath, then he shaved carefully, combed his hair the way she loved him to do it and dressed up; he even wore his best cologne. They had decided to meet always on this day of the week. Thus, today he meets his sweetheart, the love of his life, and his first and only love: Mia.

Mia and Carlos met for the first time at a friend's birthday party. They were young and full of life.

"Hey, Carlos!"

"What's up?"

"Haven't you noticed?"

"What, man?!"

"You're such a case! Someone is looking at you, I mean, staring!"

"Don't you dare start with your weird things!"

"No, bro, for real! Turn left slowly, and you'll see Emma and her beautiful friends; they've been talking and giggling. I think Emma's flirting. They all are dolls, but Emma, man, she's the prize for any man."

"So, what?"

"Right, you're right, Carlos. I just forgot to tell you... I've been observing them. First, I thought it was me Emma was paying attention to. Then I realized Emma is VERY interested in you, which, quite frankly, I don't understand since I'm much PRETTIER than you, man. Lucky bastard you are! Turn slowly; don't let them notice you're looking," the good-looking blonde boy with blue eyes said.

"All right, all right. I will."

Emma and her friends were, indeed, very attractive town girls. Any boy would have gone crazy knowing Emma, the most popular girl at school, was having some kind of interest in him, especially when that boy just arrived in the USA. Being a new student at school doesn't help much with achieving that task.

Emma and her friends were, indeed, very attractive town girls. Any boy would have gone crazy knowing Emma.

Even though Carlos was interested in flirting back with Emma when he turned, Mia's eyes trapped him.

God has given me the perfect companion to share my lives with, Mia complimented.

Believe it or not, Mia's spirit is there with Carlos.

There were five girls; Emma was standing at the left end. However, even though Carlos was interested in flirting back with Emma when he turned, Mia's eyes trapped him. Mia was standing at the right end, and Carlos couldn't continue looking at the rest of the girls. His look was stuck right there, within Mia's look. He wasn't able to fight Mia's love's call. He just surrendered at that moment, and from that moment on, and for always!

That was the beginning of Mia and Carlos's story.

Carlos kept walking slowly. He's been carrying a bouquet of petunias from home all along. He always remembers to take some flowers with him, but petunias are Mia's favourites. That's why Carlos is always busy in their garden, providing Mia with all kinds of flowers.

Some more steps... and she's right there.

"Hello, sweetheart! I'm on time, am I not?" Carlos said, kind of worried about being late. He wouldn't allow himself to make Mia wait for him. He'll never waste a minute without her. Time is a precious element!

Mia smiled at him, her real love.

"I've been walking a lot, so I'm kind of tired. I'm sorry. But you know that, don't you, darling?" Carlos explained.

"Yes, I know, honey, but I know your love will always bring you back to me, and that's what matters," Mia replied, accepting his tender apology.

After catching his breath, Carlos added, "Honey, I'll set everything for breakfast in a minute."

Carlos put his picnic basket and flowers down on the grass. First, he set a tablecloth on the ground. Then he set everything else aside. Finally, Carlos put a vase in the middle of the tablecloth, then poured some water into it to put the bouquet of petunias into the vase.

"Everything is set and wonderful, right, sweetheart?" Carlos exclaimed.

"Everything is perfect, darling... just the way you are! God has given me the perfect companion to share my lives with," Mia complimented.

Carlos started to prepare a sandwich for Mia, turkey and ham, and a sandwich for himself, peanut butter and jelly, despite his doctor's disapproval! He even brought some fine Costa Rican coffee, Ateneo, to spoil Mia and cheer him up! (Carlos breaks into tears every time he is with Mia; there are so many emotions he cannot refuse.)

Carlos starts his talking routine when he visits his wife's grave at the cemetery. He tells her about all the events during his week, how their two children and the grandchildren are doing, how much they miss her, and how much Carlos misses her. That's when he breaks into tears.

"Darling, I know Heaven is timeless and endless, but I'm counting the minutes to be with you. Your death turned our heaven into hell. Don't misunderstand me, honey, but it hasn't been the same since you... passed away. I keep praying to the Lord to deserve His forgiveness and love to be with you, then with Him."

Believe it or not, Mia's spirit is there with Carlos. Mia pays attention to every word Carlos has to say. She also misses their conversations and making

With her heavenly young eyes, Mia watches his wrinkled hands working. She's waiting for him to share her lives

love with him. Carlos is her heaven, and Heaven understands it! That's the reason why God gives Mia a little earthly paradise to be in every Sunday morning, with Carlos.

Every Sunday, after talking to his wife, Carlos stands up and picks everything up. Then he cleans his wife's gravestone carefully and slowly, while Mia's spirit floats in the air above him, always watching him from above. With her heavenly young eyes, Mia watches his wrinkled hands working. She's waiting for him to share her lives (earthly and heavenly ones) forever... for always!

"I'll see you next week, darling."

Carlos starts to walk his long way back home slowly, with no rush, according to his old body's pace. His only hope is to see his wife soon, in the cemetery and beyond.

"I'll see you next week, sweetheart," Mia says.

Holding Hands

Both have held hands for hours, loving each other for ages... and ages to come.

Through the window, the moon had already shown its silver smile to set the mood for romance, and as approval of everlasting love... a divine witness of love that was not easy to battle for.

"Honey, I'll always remember the first time you held my hand. I fell off my bike; you helped me up... I fell in love with your smile," Susan said.

Arthur smiles behind his oxygen mask.

"Many years later you held it tenderly for me to wear the engagement ring; months later, a wedding ring," Susan continued.

Arthur wished to tell his true and only love, as he always explained to others, everything his heart wanted Susan to note with her struggling mind, building up unique and sweet memories, as they have always done. He just wishes she could also treasure this moment as a farewell on Earth but the next greeting in the afterlife.

"You're holding mine, sweetheart; we'll hold hands in Heaven soon," were the words Arthur's last breath allowed him to say.

Susan looked him in the eyes with so much love, with a world of things waiting to be done, with endless words of love that don't need to be pronounced, with... that Arthur understood she understood his willingness and faith for their future with this end, as they had always done.

After his death, Susan closed her husband's eyes, which didn't quit looking at his true and only love, as he always explained to others; she kissed her husband's forehead first, then her husband's wrinkled lips for the last time, and said goodbye.

"That's good news, darling... that's good news!"

One tear was born in each of her eyes but didn't roll down. Susan tenderly smiled.

Born in 1969, in Atenas, Costa Rica, **Henry Vinicio Valerio Madriz** currently lives in Barva, Costa Rica, and is a teacher of English, Linguistics and Literature. He is a photography lover. He has published poems, short stories and photographs, online and in print (USA, Canada, UK, India, Philippines, Pakistan, Germany, Palestine, Israel, and Nigeria). He was shortlisted in *Voice of Peace: 1st Intercontinental Poetry And Short Story Anthology 2021*, The League of Poets; 'Honourable Mention' in Dark Poets Prize II, 2024; Winner, Literary Cocktail Magazine Enticing Shutterbug Award 2024 for photography; Winner, The LoveQuest: A Celebration of Love 2025 poetry competition, The Wordsmith Magazine, Pakistan; Finalist, Lumen Art Gallery November 2025 FLOWERS Photography Competition. <https://www.facebook.com/henry.valerio.58/>

THE SPRING PLANT REBELLION



Melody Hessing

Raccoons

“Three little bandits with rings around noses
Creep through the night while everyone doses ...”

When I was 12, I scribbled my first wildlife poem at our cabin at Lac Millette in the Laurentians, where we spent two weeks every summer. We would hike to the Rivière du Nord, examine raccoon tracks, torment puddle frogs, tear leeches from our legs and sneer at outhouse smells. We spent most of our time outdoors, making up games and exploring the countryside. Living in the ‘almost wild’ taught me to see the world anew, and launched a lifetime of creative expression.

Creative writing is not afraid to veer off course; it comes and goes from the everyday takes a different path to the river, sees the world through fresh eyes. At times, the creative force buffets me like a strong wind, and I lose track of where and who I am, not only in writing, but in my life. This process can resurrect the image of slimy lily pads at the lake; it can help to experience the present more fully. Being creative in my writing helps to accept change in my abilities and ambition. Writing creatively helps me to explore and better understand the process of aging and to accept this transition.

The places and plants I write about are not only the impetus to my writing but reflect the impacts of a changing natural world as well. My writing in progress includes, for example, a sobering experience with Rocky Mountain ticks in the South Okanagan. Another piece locates glacial meltdown in the Rockies from the perspective of a long-ago ski trek on the Saskatchewan Glacier. Writing creatively helps not only to craft a celebration of the wild, but to lament its demise.

Today you can find me hunched over the keyboard like a pileated woodpecker hammering for grubs. I might be writing about birds in migration the wingbeat rush of spring. I find joy and satisfaction in this creative process the unearthing and rebirthing of words and ideas, of plants and trees.

Spring Planter Mania

Every year, the truths of the human condition are revealed to me in a spring planter. On the 10th of January, a spark of colour lures me from early nightfall into the grocery store. At the entrance, a display of flowering pots rimmed with pink and purple primulas has replaced the poinsettias of December. Mixed bulbs emerge in each container; leathery fins of hyacinth and tulip surface through soil like Ogopogo, perhaps a pod of orcas. Tight tubes of

Living in the ‘almost wild’ taught me to see the world anew, and launched a lifetime of creative expression.

Last year, the truths of the human condition were revealed to me in a spring planter.



Left: At the end of Week One
Centre: Plants begin to falter
Right: Week Four



daffodil and a stubble of crocus poke at what's left of the dreary day.

It's too early in the new year to indulge in the purchase of non-essentials. Nor will these blooms replace the joy of carousing grandchildren and festive holidays. On the other hand, plants squeezed into a 10-inch planter will require little space and care. The hard work has been done, provenance assigned, sustenance ensured. I leave the store with a pastel bundle tucked in the crook of my arm. This floral bounty will steer me from solstice into sunshine.

Temperatures in British Columbia range from sub-zero lows to coastal highs that hover well above freezing; my indoor thermostat is set at 20 degrees. The planter floats into the house like a ballerina, tutu of pink plastic wrap combining classical form with contemporary appeal. I parade the oval container into the kitchen, consider exposure to both direct and indirect light as well as *feng shui*. The planter is moored on the far end of the counter, the centre of the house.

At the end of Week One, a robust hyacinth rises from the soil, whitecap blossoms perfuming the room. A slim shoot of daffodil rises to full height, its periscope trumpeting new arrivals. Behind the hyacinth, a tulip of substance displays red and gold petals projecting both grace and majesty. An "über-tuber?"

By Week Two, the primulas are obscured by other cultivars. Hot-lip crimson petals of tulips register in the line of succession. A back-up crowd of daffodils ripples the soil. There is one setback: the whiz-bang fluorescence of hyacinth has run amok. Its blossoms wilt a dirty beige. From over-watering? Too much heat?

Week Three trumpets a Hallelujah Chorus. A herd of crocus grazes at the rim of the pot, flagging antlers of short-and-fuzzy orange stigma. Daffodils skyrocket in pencil-thin, green-sheathed shoots. The entire pot erupts in full bloom:

Primula. Hyacinth. Tulip. Daffodil. Crocus.

The planter floats into the house like a ballerina, tutu of pink plastic wrap combining classical form with contemporary appeal.

Melody Hessing has lived in British Columbia for 56 years. Her writing explores the connections between society and the natural environment. As a sociologist, she taught courses on aging, environment and social theory at Okanagan College as well as the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University and Thompson Rivers University. Her scholarly work has been published in academic textbooks and journals.

Creative nonfiction writing (CNF) has always been her primary literary interest and is largely directed to the nature/human interface. She has been published in many literary journals and anthologies. Her book, *Up Chute Creek: An Okanagan Idyll* (2009), was published through the Okanagan Institute. Literary awards include First Prize in *Lake* (2005); Finalist, CBC Literary Contest; and Invited Participant (2012) in the Banff Wilderness Writing program.

Among her publications are the following: "Taking Flight" (*Zoomorphic*, 2019); "Here Grew Big Trees" (*SubTerrain*, 2018); "After the Harvest: Sustainability in the Okanagan Valley" (*B.C. Studies*, 2011). She was co-editor of *This Elusive Land: Women and the Canadian Environment* (UBC Press, 2004) and *Canadian Natural Resource and Environmental Policy* (UBC Press, 2005).

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A month-long performance of *la ville enfleurie*! Each bloom complements others while competing for light, nutrition and space. A thriving bouquet.

And yet, under my gaze, plants begin to falter, as if each has a will of its own. Green shoots head sideways, leaves embark willy-nilly, like peapod boats, into the muddle. The bedlam, the unruliness!

Taller playershyacinth, tulips, daffodils are strung together to hold their stalks upright. Alas, string theory does not work. But why such a sudden and rapid demise?

Does this turmoil reflect an accelerated, yet inevitable, demise? Does the physical restriction of the container embody the *Limits of Growth*? My mind wanders to more fanciful schemes. Could this pot harbour a school for resistance? Revolutionary tendencies? A post-colonial rejection of external control and imposed order?

To stave off further rebellion and negative thoughts, I take Plant Planet for a walk to reflect on the relative privilege of indoor life. Orbiting the living room, I hum stanzas of *God Save the Queen*, then navigate back to the kitchen. I set down the pot, dim the lights and retreat.

Week Four reveals the Mother Ship in all her spent glory. Numero Uno tulip, the flaming Queen of the Pot, wavers between chopstick supports. Louche petals extend horizontallyruby flames threaded black in surrender. Stem a foot tall, petals awry, ready to call it quits, tilting to Earth. Anarchy reigns. The first tulip petal shoots upwards in a failed inter-galactic launch, the second curves, a sail unfurled. The third swoops a scarlet farewell streak. Fourth and fifth hang over the edge of the pot, oblivious to scandal and disrepute.

The fallen hyacinth stalk has been clear-cut. In its wake, a second, smaller hyacinth carpeted in starstruck blooms wafts a faint aroma. Daffodils, now reduced to papered blooms, recall the bliss of spring incarnate. The primulas, excluded from the bulb parade, pool in a puddle of faded pink. Such chaos!

Mayday! Amidst disarray and flamboyance, papery bulbs foreclose on remaining space. The ship wallows in unsettled seas the listing-to-port of spent blooms, the ragged cut of blooming sails, the crowding in the hold. Late in its abbreviated season, the planter flounders, a vessel lost at sea.

Yet one must ask, does the spring planter not embody the imperfection and impermanence of life? Has it not achieved a Zen state, 'wabi-sabi'? Bulbs are wary of anthropomorphism.

Eventually their short season is done. Stored in taped containers, they summer under the back porch. Next spring, if they have not succumbed to rot or raccoons, these bulbs may bloom again show their stuff.

This is what they do. They get us through.

CONVERSING WITH MY PAINTINGS



Kel Taylor

I have been continually surprised at the transformative powerhouse of making art. It was something I started out of curiosity. Could I really do that? Could I really be an artist? These past 10 years have been dedicated to becoming, learning the how of making art, taking courses, practising, hiring mentors to guide and walk with me on this path, though it wasn't until some of those pesky 10,000 hours were starting to accumulate under my belt that I finally started to notice and feel the magic. At that stage I was able to relax into the journey, to listen with greater reverence and follow my inner voice, allowing it to direct what was next on the roster of images to be explored. Once a figure is sufficiently rendered, there is a connection, and from that connection a conversation, and the story unfolds.

In *The Key Holder* I set out to represent visually a dream I had while undergoing Jungian therapy. Through the act of painting, I was able to give life tenderly to and regard the archetypes, parts of myself that were calling out to be recognized and welcomed "home." *The Key Holder* turned out to be a part of me that sets boundaries and consciously discerns who will be allowed access to my inner self, represented by the house. A big wow for me and an image I still pull on to support me in my life.

I had been carrying the *Forty Reasons* photograph of myself from when I was literally 40, a photograph taken of me by my mom who was picking me up from the ferry terminal in Victoria. The image had haunted me for decades; there was just something about it that wouldn't leave me alone. After painting it into life, I spent time looking and listening to her, acknowledging the more than 40 reasons I left my first husband, my kid's dad, when I was 40. It's a conversation fraught with so many emotions—guilt and shame with conviction and courage holding the balance; and the baggage I still carry: it didn't just disappear when I left my husband as I had secretly hoped. To this day I carry and unpack deeper layers of it.

The meaning behind *We Are Family* evolved over time. I initially followed my instincts, bringing in each of the characters from several different vintage photographs. It was only later that I started to understand their significance. The women each represented a different part of me—intelligent, proud, vulnerable and edgy—as did the man. It was not really about gender per se but more the male image representing a part of me that I struggle to integrate. His gender helped to depict him as the other, standing apart from the group. The colours feel significant now as well. I associate that bright red

The Key Holder, 2024. Acrylic and mixed media, 48 X 48 in





with all the blood spilt both literally as a woman and metaphorically from an emotional perspective. The blue represents the sea, shifting and carrying me, vast and deep.

I am pretty stoked about this piece, *Love Seat*, which was selected to enter the 2025 Salt Spring National Art Prize Exhibition. I mention that not just because I am proud of an achievement, but more so because it marked my willingness to really accept myself as being an artist.

Love Seat is about an ordinary young couple coming home after work and curling up on this small sofa with two big dogs and a glass of red wine. One dog is in your face demanding and needing affection, the other seeing something out the window. It's just a slice of real life a slice of love.

In conclusion, I have repeatedly experienced the transformation that making art has served up for me, and it's not over because it keeps growing, expanding, still surprising me. Being an artist has been a chance to allow re-

pressed feelings to flow, to gain insights and, perhaps most importantly, compassion for the choices I've made for the stories that explain my life. Sharing my work has added an extra layer of transformative potential as others, triggered through my work, share their stories, and together we find even more understanding, more compassion, more open-hearted connections.

May we all be happy, safe, healthy and live with ease.

Kel Taylor is a local contemporary visual artist living on the unceded ancestral lands of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples. She found her way to these lands through a circuitous path, an iteration beginning in Vancouver, winding its way through four other beautiful and inspiring Canadian provinces before landing once again in B.C. A 30-year professional career in physical and occupational therapy explains her fascination with figurative art, her primary focus for the past eight years, working with acrylics and collage, exploring raw, unfinished or fast/slow mark making, all to convey the emotions behind her visual stories. She currently resides in Kelowna with her sherpa (life partner) and five minutes from her precious daughter, son-in-law and grandsons. She has begun a course in digital media at UBC Okanagan as a means to expand and dream into some upcoming projects. In the meantime, performance art is in the cards for the upcoming exhibition *Dear Diary* in the Members' Gallery of The Alternator, March 13 – April 4, as well as a talk show, "Live at The Alternator". The first episode was on Feb 27, 2026. So stay tuned because Kel hopes that the best is yet to come.



Top: *We Are Family*, 2025. Acrylic and mixed media, 14 X 31 in

Middle: *Love Seat*, 2025. Acrylic and mixed media, 36 X 67 in

Above: *Forty Reasons*, 2025. Acrylic and mixed media, 67 X 36 in

A WRITER PONDERERS



John Chinaka Onyeche

I have hinged my heart on this thing called faith. Every coming of a new day I say to myself: oh, thy will be done. I have said it even more than I have revised the name of the man who once walked up to me proclaiming that he was the answers that I seek. What creature indeed made this thing called language: sometimes I wonder what is the good of proclaiming anything at all. Sometimes I think it would have been better if he had left the world mute, everyone going on their own without this chaos that we call speaking and language. Have you not once witnessed silence, the blessings it offers to the one who welcomes it out of this chaotic world where everyone and everything wants to speak and to be heard? Faith, isn't it like that silence that is within, offering the troubled water of self a quietness that in the end only says that which is needed for the stillness within? With faith, I have peace. Oh, let thy will be done as all else now. The words are offered with peace and assurance. Sometimes I wonder what being indeed offered us this chaos as words, and silence, faith and peace all at once, these that I daily seek to hinge my heart there and be at peace with the word; oh, let your will be done. Sometimes I wonder; sometimes I wonder.

Radio bodies

So many such nights, I am bent like a key. The child is a porcelain egg in the hands of a clock. The realities of home are built from sugar before the jawline of the sea; the coming of the teeth erases the trace of the house built with our wandering feet that are now fossils in the rock of becoming. Some nights are black dogs, and others are drawers full of moths, of laughter and static from not touching the radio bodies of your kids, learning what frequency broadcasts your fear. If this is not the telephone ringing from inside its own coffin, where you hope the echo will answer, still, deep down the silence stretches, and even the dice have grown feathers and play their tricky tunes to the single photograph of a man wearing a shadow's clothing, a man who was never developed in the solution of love. Many such nights walk in on stilts of glass, leaping and begging for a different channel. Such nights are spent burning the screen of a cell phone, watching the smiling faces of one's kids that the wedding cake has swallowed whole.

My father's words before his voyage

I have returned to this room again. I may as well have journeyed a thousand miles away from who I used to be, to this man I work daily to become, and

Have you not once witnessed silence, the blessings it offers to the one who welcomes it out of this chaotic world where everyone and everything wants to speak and to be heard?

I remember his words of how to know myself from wherever I find myself. He said it's the art of letting go and moving on where life calls our names and circumstances answer.

away from the wishes that dressed my good old days. I walk into the living room, pick from my bag of memories and the debris of time this old portrait of myself. I hang it before a mirror, burn off parts of me that no longer make me handsome. I remember my father in one of my dreams; he held my hands, walked me into the terrain of manhood. I remember his words of how to know myself from wherever I find myself. He said it's the art of letting go and moving on where life calls our names and circumstances answer. I am here again, with the mirror and my portrait speaking different languages. None can answer life's question better than those who live the life, for if this flitting breeze darts away from this house, who will the raging sea swallow?

John Chinaka Onyeche is a husband, a father and a Nigerian writer and historian from Etche, Rivers State. As a graduate of History and Diplomatic Studies, he is dedicated to accurately representing the full scope of history through his poetry and writing. Recently, his writing has explored themes of family, separation and the death of loved ones. His work has been published in numerous journals, including the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, York Literary Review, Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival, Rigorous, and Brittle Paper. John was also nominated for Best of the Net in 2022 and the Pushcart Prize in 2023.

GREEN-EYED MIRTH

Robert Girvan



My wife Christina and I

When my mother died, my brother Neil and I cleaned out her apartment. Neil is an actor and is terrifically funny. He has our father's blue eyes; I have my mother's green. When we arrived the air felt stale and heavy, the light feeble. Every object provoked a memory of her and of our lives together. Not only her dark-toned, tragic landscapes, but also everyday objects such as her black cup with white leaves falling that she used to wash her paintbrushes.

Unexpectedly, as we sifted through our memories, we told stories about our childhood and younger years, our own screwups, our father's drinking, our mother's eccentricities, the foibles of all of us. My God, how we laughed, so hard it felt like our stomachs were going to burst. The apartment seemed to have more light.

My mother also loved to laugh. Like Cassandra, the Trojan priestess, she saw only too well. Her hatred of injustice, sense of the tragic and a moodiness, perhaps from childhood trauma, often pinned down her spirit. Yet, at times, her joy in painting or in a green-eyed mirth saved her. Sometimes my mom would visit me, then go home and call, enraged by something I'd said that hadn't initially bothered her. My strategy was an immediate, abject, apology. This worked twice. The third time she countered angrily.

"You're just saying that."

"And I apologize for that too."

She burst out laughing. Moments later, so did I. We spoke normally then, as she had returned to herself.

Whether in life or art, how often we are weighed down or walled in by some fixed idea or obsession, the mind cramped, trapped. In "Mending Wall," Robert Frost writes, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down." Walls *do* have their uses: creeds, principles, truths and forms help us to build. And stone walls keep the cows in or the rain out. Yet, there's something closing about them.

In May 1905, while on a tram, Albert Einstein looked back at a clock tower, and, in an epiphany, imagined a vision of relative time. No doubt he'd worked hard in his training and formal thinking, but at that moment, when in a pleasant reverie, his mind leapt into a new dimension. I imagine him having fun.

I didn't feel much reverie during my almost two decades as a crown attorney and defence lawyer. This stressful work was important, yet something in me longed to sail beyond the arguing, the volume and the closed rooms. This something was indestructible. It wasn't part of me, I was part of it.

At 40, I quit law and wrote a history, *Who Speaks for the River?*, then plowed another decade into writing a historical novel about Cézanne's last days and art, called *Cézanne's Wager*. It was hard work, with long stretches of rewrites and deject-

Unusually Joyous Still Life, by my mother, Marianne McLean Girvan





Top: Mom, at 55

Above: *Bronze Bird*, desktop companion

Peony Petals

The peony petals scattered there,
 were freshly-fallen white and fair,
 no longer than a day or two before
 my glance again fell to the floor.
 They were closed in, dark-stained now,
 their call of light and grace and how
 I had to learn from what was shown
 had dropped a note and changed its tone.
 How to, or so they seemed to say,
 be fresh and light and live this day,
 and when the time has come to die –
 quick-now, into the bright blue sky.

tion, then unexpected heights and runs of creativity when it seemed hope had finally fled for good. My happiness then didn't come from art, but from my sons and wife Christine. Because my wife travelled a lot for work, being home meant I was always there for my sons. I asked my son, Sacha, what my main flaw was as a father. He said, "You were always there."

I'd written poems in my twenties, but the desire or need to do so vanished when I worked as a lawyer. Unexpectedly, 10 years ago, I began writing poems again, perhaps because I'd begun reading poetry again, in the morning, with a fresh mind, before the dross of the day dulled my sensibility. This serious play with words and forms, this telling the truth, but telling it slant, moved, enchanted and woke my slumbering mind, aided by Illy coffee. Life, time, being, history, now refashioned, shone brightly again.

Early in my poetic resurrection, I worked on a political poem that was sinking. The worse things went, the more I tried to force my way, as in the law courts. A vase of flowers, of peonies, was behind me. I noticed that a petal had fallen to the floor. It was fresh and lovely, everything my poem wasn't. A few days later the petal looked rather different. I should have cleaned it up, of course, but in my lack of perfect orderliness lay my salvation. These two images stayed with me, almost speaking. A reverie arrived, along with a gentle, but insistent, call, one that it would have been easy to miss: Why were these two visions of the petal significant? A poem began to write itself in my head. I was no longer a massive oil tanker in heavy swells, pushed by its mighty and snarling engines, but a sailboat flying lightly over the immortal blue sea. I just had to note it down, then tidy it up but not too much!

This was the first poem I ever had published (League of Canadian Poets, Poetry Pause Program, 2017). Perhaps my late-blooming love wasn't a complete delusion. Here it is, at left.

When I finished, I walked around the block in rapture. A wind chime clanged wildly. I didn't know or care what would happen next. A little talisman of light and form had just been born. There are worse ways to spend a morning. Abraham Lincoln said, "I've always tried to pluck a weed and plant a flower where I thought it would grow." In sun or rain, in good times or bad, I try to do the same. And joy is allowed. Below are four poems.

The Sail and the Ship

The sail lies fallow now adrift
 in hazy blue asleep.
 The songs of birds are silent on
 the sea's widening rift.

Saltwater stings your open wounds.
 Beneath the broiling air
 the deeper doldrums darkly sit.
 You dream the call of loons.

Now a breeze ruffles the great salt sea.
 Sails belly out and hum
 forgotten tunes that dance the waves.
 Swift is the ship and free.

As a child growing up in New Brunswick, **Robert Girvan** dreamed of living by the Rockies, somehow life would be better there. For him, it was. He did move west with his family and later, studied at the University of Alberta, then law at the University of Victoria. Downtown law in Vancouver wasn't his thing, so he quit, bought a backpack, and moved to Asia. He taught English in Taiwan, and later visited many places, including the Himalayas. After returning to Canada, he became a lawyer in Toronto.

In 2024, Robert's poem "The Monument", won the "Judge's Choice" award in the Henry Drummond National Poetry Contest. He has had poems published in the League of Canadian Poets' "Poetry Pause" program, and in two anthologies, *Fear of Others* (1989) and *Poems in Response to Peril* (2022), edited by Penn Kemp and Richard-Yves Sitoski. Robert has published *Who Speaks for the River?* (2013), essays such as "Searching Cézanne's Provence," in *The Goose*, and book reviews. He lives with his wife in Toronto and in the hills of central France. Robert enjoys hiking, reading, and learning languages. 'Gli piace molto la lingua italiana.' (He likes the Italian language a lot). robertgirvan.com.

Feathering Space

I don't know how to get there these days.
 The roads lead nowhere but are very busy.
 Those orange signs forbid so many routes.
 It's enough to give you a whiff of angst.
 But back alleys have their silent paths and lives.
 You begin in a rush to reach the street.
 The trodden way is over there, they say.
 But white crocuses brave the concrete cracks.
 A falcon's soprano cries lift the head.
 Your march breaks up toward the hunting heights.
 Those uncanny cries snap the spell of steps.
 Time takes a larger wing feathering space.
 Your steps begin again and end each time.
 The garage doors flash wild-coloured graffiti.
 Messes sit beside freedom's riff and zing.
 A gift, this end and beginning, now, here.

Mother's Visit

The little cottage was graced with light
 so pure the shadows didn't dare appear.
 We sat and talked as we so often did
 on the good days, when your fluttering

heart settled briefly like a butterfly
 on a sunflower in the cool morning air.
 Your eyes, so green, flashed as before.
 I felt embraced by a love that reached

well beyond me to all that was true
 and fine, allowing my own gaze to rise.
 You seemed tired, though, and it hit me
 that one day you could die. And then,

I awoke. It had all been a precious dream.
 You had been dead for years, yet I'd
 been granted this sweet visitation
 that opened doors to views long lost.

Song of the Sea

The tide is out, the living sea is gone.
 Rocks, where water once lapped, now stand alone.
 The sands stretch low and vast toward the gulf.
 Winds howl from all directions, our eyes sting.
 The sun sinks low, and I set out again
 on level sand toward the lonely rocks,
 then, refreshed, I make the turn and gather
 my own but for a day, time's sweet gift.
 The wind is down, the sand silky on my skin.
 I dig and place, angle with gentle hands,
 building my monument of stone and craft.
 On my knees now, I bend low and listen:
 From distant rocks in pure notes the sea
 lives again, its music sounds in my ears.

THE VAST MEANING OF CREATIVITY

Michelle Droettboom



Recently, my 10-year-old grandson asked me, “Gramma, how did you know you wanted to be an artist?” I had to stop and think carefully about how to answer him because it wasn’t learning to paint that I had wanted, but finding something creative to do with my life in retirement! In fact, I had several criteria: it had to be fun and social; it had to be flexible and change across time; and it had to be bound in some basic principles but needed creative thinking to get out of the messy situations that I would inevitably find myself in if I ventured into the art world.

Working in watercolour and acrylics I discovered that the unexpected moments are where the magic happens. I get excited when I start a painting and have to turn it in every direction to try to decide “What the heck can I turn this into?” You can’t take yourself too seriously to paint with this attitude. I love that even if you try to paint the same scene again no two results will ever be the same at least not when I paint them! Further, it always excites me that, when you paint in a group of people using the same reference and instructions, no two paintings are ever the same! Everyone there is creative in their own right.

I am still painting today...after 30 years. I still am always on the hunt for the unusual medium, paper size, fluffy brush or new idea so that something unexpected and magic will happen and those creative juices can flow!

Another thing that I have learned is that in a room full of people all painting together no one really asks what you did in your working career or your “younger years.” Most of the time no one even asks how long you have been painting or if you ever sell anything. It doesn’t really matter. What is important is just painting side by side and enjoying what you learn from each other. Some painters love to sketch and plan their ideas before they begin. When I paint I’m always looking for the unexpected, but other painters want certainty and work hard to get there. I personally think that if I had chosen art as a career it might have stifled my joy and creativity!

I have also learned that the creative and generous artists of the Okanagan Valley are truly awesome. Let me illustrate this by sharing with you my proudest moment of the past 30 years as an artist. During the Covid pandemic I had the chance to go to the Sunflower Gardens in Armstrong and found walking in that huge field of sunflowers tremendously joyful and refreshing after having been inside and so careful for over a year. I came back to Kelowna wondering how we could give some joy to the hospital staff at Kelowna

Below: Kasugai Gardens
Bottom: Oregon Grapes Along Mission Creek





Left: *Peeking Out*. Quails hiding all over Kelowna on my website.

Centre: *Share the Sunshine*, volunteers hanging art for Covid Unit staff at KGH. 1

Right: *Share the Sunshine*, volunteers hanging art for Covid Unit staff at KGH. 2



General Hospital still facing tremendous struggles in the ICU with very sick Covid patients. So, in my impetuous style, I called the hospital and they put me through to the ICU. (Yes, it's crazy, but the unit wasn't too busy to talk to me directly!) I asked if we (artists) could give a small work of art to each staff member, from the janitorial staff, administrative staff and therapists to nurses and doctors, to help boost their morale. The director instantly said "YES!", and the *Share the Sunshine Project* was born. The director said that he would get back to me with the number of paintings needed. How many could that be? I have lots of artist friends...it will be possible...right?!

So the number was at first 75 people. Well, suddenly this was a big project, but I was confident we could paint that many. The local art store assisted us with a discount for 4"x4" wooden art cradles (similar to small canvases). We passed them out at \$2 each in two designated parking lots, locations chosen to keep everyone safe from the Corona virus. Artists committed to painting 150 cradles the first day. So I jumped again and called to ask if there were other wards at the hospital also serving isolation patients with Covid. We couldn't let the extras go to waste. Yes, there were more. Actually, 350 staff were serving patients altogether. Guess I had forgotten that patients need care 24/7, so of course there were 350 staff needed to help them. Now I had to organize artists from the whole Okanagan Valley! Yikes! Now I really had to get creative to make this happen.

The artists of the Okanagan from Salmon Arm, Armstrong, Vernon, Kelowna, Peachland, Penticton, Oliver to Okanagan Falls, came through with flying colours. We gave out 407 cradle boards to be painted. Now I had to get them all back! We had everyone's emails, and I had lots of volunteers to help me. The parking lots were also our pick-up point again. The amazing thing is that we passed out 407 cradles to the artists throughout the Okanagan and, within one month from beginning to end, got back 407 paintings 100 per cent returned!

Then we needed a "ta-da" moment to celebrate. We set up 40 feet of grids at the Sarsons Beach Activity Centre in Kelowna and displayed all the paintings for the hospital staff to come and choose one that spoke to them personally. Each painting also had a small message of encouragement or appreciation on the back. But, like all things artistic, things get messy before

Then we needed a "ta-da" moment to celebrate.

**I love being creative.
I'm proud to live within
the Okanagan Valley
community of artists.**

they get beautiful. Most of the staff was working or home resting! So, we immediately took the paintings to the hospital, lined the ICU director's office with huge cardboard and hung the paintings right there just outside the ICU so the staff could pick out their own painting.

It took creativity, impetuosity, social contacts, artistic skills, collaboration and *hope* to make that happen. I just don't want this community or the artists to forget what we accomplished. I love being an artist. I love being creative. I'm proud to live within the Okanagan Valley community of artists.

PS. In the spring of 2024 I found myself in the ICU after a medical issue. When the nurse woke me at 4 a.m., we started to chat. I asked her if she had been working in the ICU during Covid and did she get a small painting. Yes, she said, and she also got a painting. I told her I created that program, and she burst into tears. She told me that she had just moved to Kelowna from overseas and found an apartment when the forest fires forced her to evacuate. She knew no one, had no place to stay and didn't yet know how to access help here in Kelowna. Then she was able to choose one piece of art from a wall of beautiful art. She said that she knew then that Kelowna had nice people, and she would be okay. She also said she hung that little art piece by her door and still to this day "taps" it every time she leaves her home. You just never know what will touch someone's heart just when they need it. Get creative because that's when the magic happens.

Michelle Droettboom has been painting and teaching in watercolour and acrylics for 30 years. She is self-taught with the help of hours and hours of painting, many workshops and lots of books! She has used her creative energy throughout her life. She was a speech-language pathologist for 45 years, working the entire time with children under five years of age and their families. Her expertise was with children on the autism spectrum and with severe language disorders. Keeping therapy fun and functional requires all forms of creativity. Now retired, she loves to paint, beginning with an idea and then going with the flow of the paint. It's all about being creative and having fun. She calls her website "Let's try that!" for a reason!

www.letstrythat.ca | Michelle@letstrythat.ca

FINDING THE MISSING PIECES



Richard and Hank

Richard Stimac

Way back in the mid-1990s, when I was in my twenties and in graduate school for a master's degree in English, everyone who knew me thought that I would go on to a PhD program and become a writer, particularly a poet. I did not. The why is the purview of therapy, not fit for this brief essay. I did write off and on throughout the rest of my life. Probably hundreds of poems that ended in recycling bins. Some of them were good. I'm sure of that.

Then, eight years ago in 2018, I began writing in earnest again. Same form, the sonnet. Same theme, the past and memory. Same conceits, my childhood in a steel town, the Mississippi River and working people. I wrote and I wrote and began sending out poems. Then, in 2020, one poem was published by the *Michigan Quarterly Review*:

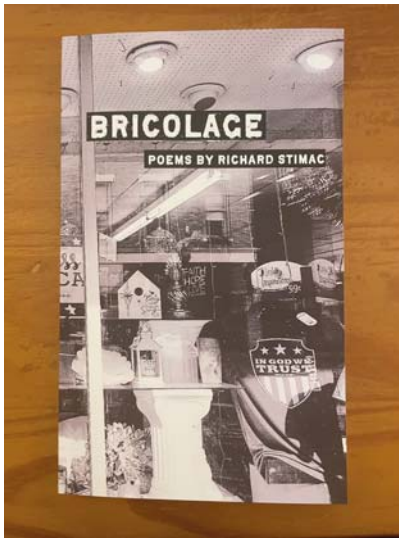
Mermet Springs, Illinois

In Little Egypt, near Cairo, Thebes, and Karnak,
 straight along Highway 57 south,
 along the current's misgiving switchback
 where the river is wider than at the delta's mouth,
 in an old stone pit, we've sunk our culture's wrecks:
 a coal car, airplane, pick-up truck, the scrap
 and waste of someone's dreams, life, foregone projects.
 Our lives' ends fit so neat and clear on a map.
 I pay to dive, to explore the rust and the grime.
 No book, no history gives guide
 to my search. I do, as you, breath, breath, in time
 see, touch what the cold, lightless waters would hide.
 We cast our lives in cold, wide, silent pools
 of fading light. Memory is for fools.

Like an insecure lover, I was shocked that someone liked my work. I messaged the editors about why they chose my poem. They answered with something about my use of language, and so on. Within five years of that publication, at the age of 54, my first book, *Bricolage* (Spartan Press, 2022), came out. My second book, *Blood, Water, and Stone* (Spartan Press, 2026), is in final production.

By now, in 2026, I've crossed the line of self-identity and come out of the roll-top desk: I'm a poet who also writes fiction, plays and nonfiction. I'm not someone who writes poetry. I am a poet. Say it loud and say it proud! Such self-identity has benefits and detractions. Writing structures my time, but much more than a hobby, more a vocation. I recently read a quote by Jean Cocteau, "Art is not a pastime. Art is a priesthood." Maybe a bit too extreme for me, but I agree with the sentiment. I write daily, submit daily, and so on.

**Like an insecure lover,
 I was shocked that
 someone liked my
 work.**



Bricolage cover

I write strong, well-crafted poems. For me, poetry is my neurotic release for the anxiety of wasted life.

I ask myself, what would I do in its place? Who would I be? Would I buy a bike, take up salsa dancing, buy a game console? And I've been very public with my writing. If I stop writing, then I'll have to answer why I stopped. I'm too old for a "poetry phase," I tell myself. Then, also, I do define myself as a poet. I am a father, but with my daughter grown and making more money than I ever did, parenting demands little from me. If I stopped writing, I see nothing but the self-distracting bourgeois wasteland of travel and dining spread before me like an endless desert with sporadic oases of bread and circuses.

An existential dread does pursue me, as the Furies pursued Orestes. When I was young, maybe even a boy, I watched the movie *Papillon* on a weekend TV matinee. Many images stuck with me and one line in particular. During a nightmare, a judge sentences Henri "Papillon" Charrière, played by Steve McQueen, for the "most terrible crime" of a "wasted life." Am I wasting my life? What have I accomplished? I write well. I write strong, well-crafted poems. For me, poetry is my neurotic release for the anxiety of wasted life. At least, I tell myself, I've added my own thimble-worth of art to the continuum that is human culture. I fear that I've begun too late to accomplish anything of note.

The current condition of my father also prompts me to write, to make something of my life, while I still can. He's in a nursing home in southern Illinois. In the late '70s, maybe 1980, when I was around ten years old, he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. For the most part, he never worked full-time again, and rarely part-time. After 20 years of appeals, the Department of Veterans Affairs granted my dad full disability as part of the Agent Orange settlement from his service in Vietnam.

Demobilized

My dad left part of himself in Vietnam. You can see them in a tourist pic: a foot under a tea house table. A rickshaw decorated in red ribbons for Tet holds forearms in the spokes. A girl, baguette a femur's length under her arm, skips quickly past a begging monk. A snapped chopstick gives the finger, angry at unpaid debt. These are keepsakes no one meant to amass. The collector of these gems is a fool. Another father, ARVN, VC, NVA, amputated names from a time when names mattered, sits in the shade on a stool and counts his own parts scattered in the grass. (*Penumbra*, Spring 2021)



My dad inside a dugout

The money was something, at least. The VA pays for the nursing home, plus some. They even subsidized the building of a new handicapped-accessible house. My mom taught at a Catholic grade school for 40 years. She died in 2006. My dad receives her monthly diocesan retirement cheque of approximately \$250. She did what she could.

Goodwill

The re-racked tops, bottoms, frocks beggared us.
Remember, bodies, once, possessed this cloth,
my mom reminisced. When we took the bus
past bodegas, the hot-press mill, the swath
of storefront churches, tarpapered shotguns,
a land of corrupting rust, engorged moth,
to purchase, for the next fall, clothes the nuns
found fitting, we, too, made out like a thief
at night. She dressed me like the rich man's sons,
and gave herself, yet attained no relief,
cried out, "Come, Jesus!" where, then, was the Lord?
Without memory, one can have no grief.
now, she is dead. My loss, my pain, I hoard
indulgence even beggars can afford.
(*NOVUS*, April 2022)

Ties

A set of rails circled my boyhood home.
I'd lie in bed at night and dream to walk
the right of way without purpose, just roam,
past shopping mall, steel mill, and loading dock.
The mall closed years ago. The mill grew cold.
Smokestacks stand like stone keeps from Gothic tales.
The rails no longer sing. As was foretold,
the world changed. Shifting market. Dropping sales.
collapsing pensions. I thought the rails led
to infinite points I would one day reach,
a world without end, terminal, or grave.
I'd come home only to lament my dead.
I still mark the ties that bind. I count each
to each, a past, that I could never save.
(*Beyond Words*, March 2021)

Both my parents did, as we all do. Each of us has dreams that, if we are lucky, simply fade away.

Given my promise in my youth as a writer, now, in my late 50s, finally returning to writing, I constantly feel pressured to play catch-up in a game that ended decades ago. I cannot, now, look back on a life-long career, with multiple books, a few awards, a feeling of accomplishment. The best that I can do is be a late bloomer. I can google "late bloomer poets," and I did. I can tell myself that both artistic skill and public recognition are still within my reach. And they are, but, to paraphrase Browning, my reach far exceeds my grasp, and I don't believe in heaven. And I remind myself of so many greats, real greats, many recent, who are so quickly forgotten.

Recently, I met someone who is writing a memoir, her first try at writing. She's excited. Writing is an adventure. And it's the story of her life. As the conversation progressed, she became concerned that she and I would be in conflict, given both of us as writers. I assured her no. She was writing a memoir, her first major writing project. I had taken on the yoke of poetry. She seemed satisfied. What I didn't say was that we were on different levels, not quality-wise. I haven't read her writing. She may be a much stronger writer than I. We are not equal in our commitment. She is having fun in the infatuation stage of the relationship. Every writing challenge is an adventure. She tells me of good days of writing where she has lots of ideas or solves a structural problem but writes no words. She has not crossed the line as a writer, as I have. She has not yet begun to suffer.

Richard Stimac lives in the St. Louis, Missouri, area of the USA. He has published a poetry book *Bricolage* (Spartan Press), two poetry chapbooks and one flash fiction chapbook. In his work, Richard explores time and memory through the landscape and humanscape of the St. Louis region. He invites you to follow his poetry Facebook page: "Richard Stimac poet".camits1@aol.com, Richard Stimac poet, <https://www.amazon.com/Bricolage-Richard-Stimac/dp/1958182214>

ON THE LIGHTER SIDE OF NOW

LIFT TO LEVITY



Puck Penn Moth

Credit: Harold Rhenisch

Penn Kemp

Humour is what I can write even when overwhelmed with emotion. What surfaces at such extremes is not joking per se but word association. Leaps of language take over rational thought in ways that surprise: the usual container of logic does not hold. In bypassing the control of mind, word play leaps straight out of a larger unconscious realm that is both personal and collective. Such a

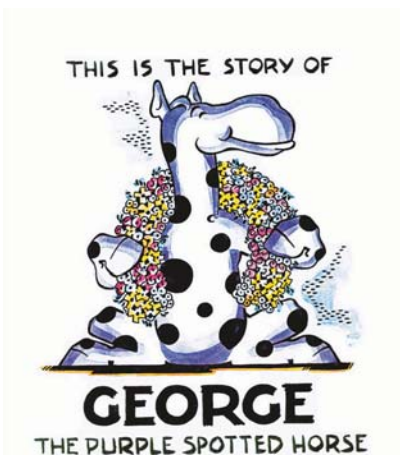
vast source often includes the etymology of language itself. And so it is the truest expression of a poem for me, when the depth of emotion cannot be contained. Amazed by what springs to mind without my intervention, I am jolted out of funk into delight and spontaneous laughter.

The resulting poems are silly, yes... but look at the etymology of that word: “‘silly’ has undergone a dramatic shift from positive to negative, originating in Old English as *slig*, meaning happy, blessed, or fortunate; it then evolved through Middle English to signify innocent, harmless, and pitiable, before taking on its modern sense of foolish, simple, or ridiculous by the 1570s, a journey from holy to daft reflecting changing cultural perceptions.”

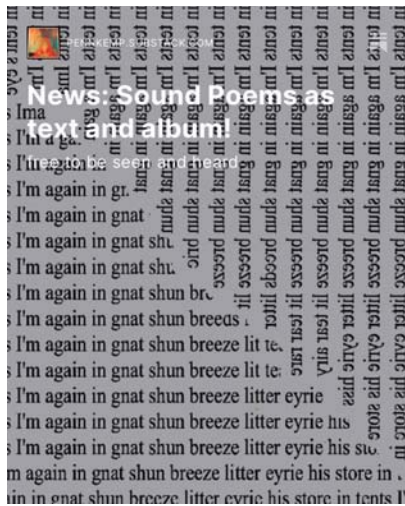
So I return to origin, evoking the holy Fool of the Tarot, jauntily stepping into the abyss, confident of support from the play of language itself. My sense of language is shaped by puns. Around my family’s dining room table, repartee claimed attention; wit was the quality most admired. Puns were not just intended but encouraged and celebrated... and endlessly repeated if so merited. Giggles ensued. So I learned to think fast. To be en garde, ready with a quick quip. To convert tales from school into family entertainment.

War stories shaped our household. As a Navy officer in World War II, language was my father’s method for deflecting trauma. Jim Kemp’s wicked sense of humour was expressed in satirical wartime cartoons, now archived in the Ottawa War Museum. One cartoon, published on the front page of *The Montreal Standard* in 1946, presents a line of green-faced sailors, leaning over the side of their corvette, a small warship, to vomit. His 1940s graphic story, *George The Purple Spotted Horse* (published by Pendas Productions), reflected this sardonic response: the hero is a horse of a different colour, wins, despite obstacles, both race and girl.

Jim Kemp was also a practical joker, the jokes sometimes on us kids. The year after his near fatal coronary, instead of a Christmas tree, he created a life-size paper mâché figure of a black vulture. Its talons grasped a polished



“Famous Couples”, New Year’s Eve, London, Ontario



Incrementally

Levity

U
 U more
 humour or
 humour or less
 humour or lesson
 humour or less undo
 humour or less undo what
 humour or less undo what U
 humour or less undo what U D
 humour or less undo what U D sir
 humour or less undo what U D serve

U
 U re
 U re see
 U re see if
 U re sieve

a
 a chore
 a chore till
 a chortle or

a
 bell
 E
 laugh

hour D fence
 a gain st
 all sere E us
 un as sail a bull
 man ooo vers

bough, the cane he leaned on at the Beaux Arts Ball in the photo I have included. Embracing and at the same time defying his status as invalid, he dressed as Old Father Time for the Beaux Arts Ball. His companion was the normally staid museum curator, Clare Bice, as the New Year baby in diapers. Their wives dressed as their nurses (!).

In the face of trauma, some of us have learned to turn to humour as default. Levity is a way of taking control when you are feeling powerless. Laughter mitigates the effect of stress on the body. Maybe you can't control what has happened, but you can always choose your reaction. Electing a light-hearted response is a way of taking action so that the trauma is somehow lightened, limited, boxed in and manageable. Once back in charge, you are free to create. Over time, the practice of levity becomes a habit and then a character trait. And sometimes a family tradition.

Dad showed me how language is malleable, elastic: meanings shift; words contain multitudes. My work as a sound poet derives in part from that sense of possibility. Words can be re-defined through sound as a homonym. This kind of language emerges in my book/CD collection, *Incrementally*. Hemp Press published a free e-book: <https://www.hempressbooks.com/shop/p/incrementally-by-penn-kemp> and digital album, <https://angrystarlings.bandcamp.com/album/incrementally>.

Incrementally is a compendium of my trademark sound poems. These works span the whole of my career: they are a crowd pleaser in participatory performance because they're such fun. I love to lift the poem off the page and plant it firmly in the imagination through humour. As poems on the page, these are concrete poetry, in which the shape and motion of the words on the page are part of the intended effect. In performance, the vocal acrobatics elicit amazed response, especially for first timers. A sounding performance in a school setting is guaranteed to jar loose the inhibitions of the most jaded teenagers.

Sounding is a hoot! As our first and perhaps our last resource, sounding allows for any eventuality. For me, sound poetry offers creative expression when words fail the enormity of emotions. Sub-verbal, sounding explores language in widening waves of individual expression until the experience becomes participatory. Between image and sound as a poem's priority, I can not choose, so the work becomes concrete and/or performance poetry, where improvisation interweaves surprising dimensions.

Each piece is meant to lift off the page as you read it. Sound it out!

Lethologica is my latest example of a poem as word play:

Lethologica up now in swirling versions with my sounding on <https://seaofpo.vispo.com?p=pk>. So much fun to perform!

Poetry comes alive when heard. Aloud is allowed, so please try these words out on the tip of your tongue!

A longer version of *Lift to Levity* will be up on *Periodicities Magazine* <https://periodicityjournal.blogspot.com/>, with more sound poems.

List Ten

List
 List ten
 List ten to
 List ten tooth
 List ten to the
 List ten to thumb
 List ten to the hum
 List ten to the hum of the
 List ten to the hum of the Bee
 List ten to the hum of the Bee Love...

List ten to the hum of the Bee Love Ed
 winging a way a cross a crow dead room
 or (rumour) heard only by spirit ears

Lethologica

The technical term for a typical type
 of forgetting: the image that squats

on tip of tongue, resolutely refusing
 to release the word we know so well.

The name you know like the back of
 your hand slides off the tongue down

the little red lane, lands in a splash
 of acid reflex not to be regurgitated whole.

O, how to put together what
 springs to mind. What pops up.

The tongue worries the hole where
 the tooth once was, where the name

is still, somewhere, lurking on tippy
 toes tongue-tied unwilling or able

to announce itself boldly, skirting
 the premises, hiding behind the molar

column next door. I know you are
 there. Nicky knocky nine doors.

You're It. Flit. And you drown in
 saliva, the flood onslaught of

thought to catch you by, word
 association won't work now. What

will? Begging, beseeching?
 Demanding?

My paralyzed tongue cannot wrap
 itself round a nickname in the vernacular.

An image beckons, nameless
 but it's the name on the tip you want.

You.

Penn Kemp has been celebrated as a trailblazer in the literary scene since her first publication of poetry (*Bearing Down*, Coach House, 1972). The League of Canadian Poets honoured her with their Inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award (2025), as Spoken Word Artist of the year (2015), a foremother of Canadian Poetry, and Life Member (2016). Penn is a keen participant/activist in Canada's cultural life, with over 30 books of poetry, prose and drama; seven plays and 10 CDs; as well as award-winning videopoems. She was London's inaugural Poet Laureate (2010-13) and Western University's Writer-in-Residence (2009-10). Her project was the DVD, *Luminous Entrance: A Sound Opera for Climate Change Action*. She has been writer-in-residence at universities throughout India and Brazil, with work widely translated. Her "poem for peace in many voices" is out in 136 languages and performed in 3,000 places world-wide. Recent collections include: *Ordinary/Moving* (Silver Bow Publishing, 2025); *Lives of Dead Poets* (above/ground press, 2025); *Incrementally* (Hem Press, 2024); *Poems In Response To Peril: An Anthology For Ukraine* (co-editor, Pendas Productions, 2023); *P.S.* (with Sharon Thesen, Gap Riot Press, 2022) and <https://publicverie.com/poems-for-barry-a-digital-chapbook/> (2026). Penn is active across the web with multimedia collaborations: see pennkemp.substack.com and pennkemp.weebly.com.

EMBRACING NATURE

Ellen Lewinberg



Last fall, in October, I was sitting on my front porch in the sun, watching kids at the school being picked up by their parents. Suddenly, there was an insistent honking. A car was slowly driving up the street, honking and the driver was yelling, “Coyote! Coyote!”

A few minutes later, this beautiful creature appeared, walking in the middle of the street. There was a lot of commotion, people shouting, picking up their kids, running. When the coyote reached the corner, it ducked onto my neighbour’s lawn and ran around to the back of her property. She had let the weeds grow very tall next to the fence. The coyote ran into the weeds and was completely invisible.

I went to the back of my house to see if I could see her. (I don’t really know the sex but because she was so regal and beautiful, I call her a female). I wanted to catch another glimpse. She looked really healthy. I stood for a long time, willing her to show herself. She did not. A couple of nights later, I heard the eerie sound of coyotes calling. I looked out of the upstairs window and saw two of them, on either side of the road.

The two silhouettes in the moonlight looked like an exotic wild life painting. Their beauty caught my imagination, filled me with joy and lifted my spirits. Their presence transported me to a world of wonder outside of the ordinary mundane cityscape. I wanted to know about them. They reminded me of the pack of wild dogs I had seen in Africa. And, I wondered what they were doing on my street?

At the time, I was reading *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingslover. I highly recommend it. Kingslover discovers a rare den of coyotes that were expanding their territories. Her descriptions of the family dynamics and of how the adult coyotes protect the pups is intriguing. Kingslover makes the family come alive to the readers. Fascinated by their beauty, intelligence and cunning, she tries to protect the den from hunters in her neck of the woods. Farmers saw them as pests, and accused coyotes of killing lambs and calves.

Kingslover’s take is that coyotes balance the ecosystem, eating small rodents, rabbits, moles etc. I thought of the introduction of wolves into Yellow Stone National Park and how that solved the overpopulation of deer and resulted in the complete regeneration of Yellow Stone National Park.

In my research I discovered that coyotes are an apex

Coyote





predator and like all animals on the planet are part of an intricate balance of nature. They regulate populations of smaller predator species, raccoons, skunks, foxes, squirrels and rats. Coyotes are one answer to our squirrel, raccoon and rat problem in cities like Toronto. Perhaps we should hire them as vermin exterminators.

For many of us who live in cities, the wilderness frightens us because we are out of balance with nature. We are afraid of being devoured by wolves or bears. It is a very ancient fear. The reports in the newspaper of attacks by wild animals make news because they are few and far between. For this reason,

people are afraid of coyotes. They accuse them of eating their cats and dogs. People with small pets buy protective jackets with spikes making these little animals look like

porcupines, waddling along the paths on a leash. They look hilarious - armadillos, trying to run in the park.

According to my research, pets are much more likely to be killed in traffic than by a coyote. There are very rare reports of coyotes attacking humans.

Coyotes are resilient, intelligent, and vital to the ecosystems they call home. They're not villains—they're survivors. Their resourcefulness forcibly reminds us of the wilderness from which we all come. Their magical presence, both fierce and tender (to their family) lightens our hearts in wonder. With respect, awareness, and simple precautions, we can coexist with them safely and compassionately.

Experiencing wildness encourages me, brings me joy, and inspires me to write so that I can share this joy with others. Wonder is so needed in these fraught times. I especially want to communicate this sense of wonder to children. In my new work in progress *Betty and the Tree Spirit*, I share the magic of nature in the form of trees and mycelium to bring children closer to the natural world.

Ellen Lewinberg was born in Johannesburg, South Africa and is a graduate in Social Work from Witwatersrand University. She also has a Master's Degree in Social Work from the London School of Economics. Ellen has trained as both a child and adult psychoanalyst, and worked in the field for over thirty years. She is currently practicing as a bioenergy healer, in Toronto, Canada.

Ellen has a keen interest in nature and the world around us, and has an interest in sharing it with young people and their families.



Top: "She was so regal and beautiful, I call her a female."

Above: Dog/Armadillo?

THE FICTIONARY

Robert MacDonald

In a fictive world, we don't die.
We live our dream one fantasy at a time,
one from many, distinct from multitudes.

In the fictive imagination, we are queens
among men, kings for ever,
princes and princesses without compare.
We don't die, we are lifted into
the heavenly sphere by the shear
force of our imaginations.
We are one with the immortals, perfect
in every way imaginable.

In the fictive, we know we are no longer
just real, and probably never were.
But we don't care. We conquer.

In fictive, we invent the future, a bright light
on every horizon.
No longer satisfied with being real, we seek
transcendence.
But that is still not enough.

In translucence we allow ourselves
to overcome the vagaries of birth, and fate,
of consequence, and destiny.

In the fictional, we are always beautiful.

In a fictive cosmos, we are the immortals,
living the long life, cheating the odds,
gaming the game..
We don't suffer, except heroically.
We don't die unless to keep an illusion alive,
to prove a point, or to kill a character.

In becoming fictive, we survive the trials by fire
that forge our character, we fare well, no matter
what the matter, of whether it matters.

In being fictive, our troubles are finally over.
We no longer need to feel the shame of not
living up to our promise.

In the fictive, there are only phantoms
and pretence.

We take matters into ours.
In a fictual reality, only the old remember
the good times, while the young
imagine that the times to come will be
cool beyond compare.

Beyond the fictive, the only escape is
into the real world.

Not that many are likely to make it.
There or back.

**In the fictive, there are
only phantoms and
pretence.
We take matters into
ours.**

SAGE-ING WITH LITERATURE

This is the first in a continuing series to be presented in future issues of the journal. Each will focus on a different author from the classics. Z. I. Mahmud has completed studies as a beneficiary of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and is expecting his degree to be formally awarded in August of this year. The ICCR is an autonomous organization of the Government of India, involved in India's global cultural relations through cultural exchange with other countries and their people. It was founded on 9 April 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister of independent India. *Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude* is delighted to present our new series written by Z. I. Mahmud.

"The aim of bringing a little more knowledge, a little more reason, and a little more compassion through literature resonates strongly with my own sense of what revisiting the classics can and should do – particularly as we move into the intellectual and ethical challenges of 2026. This 'nostalgicizes' me with the fulbrighter years studying abroad (India) from my homeland (Bangladesh) while majoring in English under the aegis and patronage of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)."



REVISITING THE CLASSICS

CHARLES DICKENS

Z. I. Mahmud

There is a peculiar stillness to winter mornings, when frost edges the windows and the world seems paused between dark and light. I often find myself lingering in that quiet, considering the lives that unfold inside the pages of books rather than on the streets outside. Charles Dickens's stories, which I return to more often now than I did in youth, have a way of making the domestic world feel monumental: the flicker of a candle, the scuff of boots on a stair, the careful placement of a spoon on a table. And yet, it is often the small, almost peripheral characters—the ones who do not dominate the plot or speak in grand proclamations—who impress themselves most indelibly upon the moral imagination.

Martha Cratchit and Dora Spenlow are two such figures. Martha, the eldest daughter of the Cratchit household in *A Christmas Carol*, and Dora, David Copperfield's delicate and fragile first wife, inhabit the margins of Dickens's narratives, yet they resonate with an ethical presence that lingers long after the main plot has been told, as they are minor in narrative prominence, but monumental in moral and imaginative weight. It is in their gestures, their attentiveness and their vulnerabilities that Dickens stages an ethic of care—a reminder that moral life is often cultivated in quiet, sustained acts rather than through spectacle or heroism.

Martha Cratchit: Labour as Ethical Presence

Martha's story is, on the surface, simple. She moves through the Cratchit household with quiet diligence, attending to chores, guiding her younger siblings and participating in the preparation of the modest but heartfelt Christmas dinner. Yet it is precisely in this ordinariness that her ethical power resides. She smooths tablecloths, arranges plates, tends the fire, adjusts a blanket on Tiny Tim's knees—all small gestures that, in Dickens's hands, become semi-allegorical expressions of care. Martha's labour is visible, deliberate and relational. It teaches attentiveness and moral presence without issuing any explicit instruction.

In the hush of the Cratchit home, where the air is rich with the aroma of simmering broth and roasting goose, Martha's actions are almost musical in their cadence. She organizes, steadies and encourages, creating a rhythm of care that draws the family together. Dickens stages these moments for observation: Scrooge, initially cold and isolated, witnesses the vitality and warmth generated by her labour. Through Martha, we see that moral life is



Top: A Christmas Carol
Above: David Copperfield

If Martha embodies ethical labour made visible, Dora embodies ethical provocation through vulnerability.

not abstract but lived; it resides in attention, in responsiveness and in the often-overlooked work of sustaining others.

Reading Martha today, I find myself recalling the women I have known who embody this quiet ethical presence in daily life: a neighbour who checks in on her elderly spouse with unwavering patience, a friend who orchestrates family gatherings so effortlessly that no one notices the labour behind them, a daughter who smooths blankets over a sick parent. Martha is fictional, of course, yet she resonates because she embodies the lived reality of ethical care. Her hands, busy and precise, model a philosophy that resonates with aging: that the ethics of life is less about grand declarations and more about the steady, attentive rhythms we maintain with those around us.

I sometimes read her passages aloud, particularly the moments where she tends to Tiny Tim, and the house seems to come alive in my living room: *“She lifted his small chair closer to the fire, smoothing the blanket across his knees, and whispered, ‘There, little one, you’ll be warm now,’ her voice a soft echo of the household’s moral harmony.”*

Reading aloud, I notice my own breath slowing, my attention aligning with Martha’s. In that act of reading, Martha’s ethical labour is not only narrative but also performative; it transforms the reader, just as she transforms the Cratchit household. There is an intimacy in Dickens’s description that feels almost like a lesson whispered across time: that moral significance is found in attentiveness, in relational steadiness and in gestures of care that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Dora Spenlow: Fragility as Ethical Provocation

If Martha embodies ethical labour made visible, Dora embodies ethical provocation through vulnerability. From the first, she is delicate, hesitant and aesthetically attuned, inhabiting spaces in David Copperfield’s life with a subtle insistence that he attend, notice and respond. Whereas Martha teaches by doing, Dora teaches by inviting observation, demanding relational attentiveness and exposing the moral gaps in those around her. Her fragility is not weakness; it is a mirror, reflecting David’s limitations and his need for growth.

Dora’s presence reminds me of the relational ethics embedded in vulnerability. To attend to her is to engage ethically: to perceive her hesitations, respect her sensitivities and recognize that love and care require patience and reciprocity. Dickens dramatizes this not through overt action but through interiorized observation. David, caught between romantic idealization and practical obligation, must negotiate the moral demands embedded in her delicate existence. Through Dora, ethical life is shown to emerge not only in labour and effort but in attentiveness, empathy and responsiveness to the fragilities of those we cherish.

I cannot help but remember moments in my own life when vulnerability became a call to ethical presence. I recall reading to a friend recovering from illness, my voice soft, careful, paying attention to every pause, every tremor

in tone. The act was not heroic; it was quiet, subtle, relational. Yet it mattered, profoundly. Dora embodies this subtlety. Her gestures—a hand pressed to the chest, a glance lingering at the hearth, a pause mid-conversation—are not ornamental; they are demands for moral awareness. They remind us that attentiveness, particularly in relation to those who are fragile, is itself a profound form of ethical engagement.

Reading Aloud: Bringing the Characters into Present Time

I often read Dickens aloud during winter mornings, the frost glinting against the windows, as if the cold demands warmth from words themselves. Martha's diligent hands, Dora's hesitant gestures—they come alive in the voice and the room. I notice how reading transforms the abstract into the intimate, the historical into the present. For example, Martha arranging the Cratchit table does not merely describe domestic labor; it instructs the reader in relational attentiveness: *“By the hearth, Martha guided her younger siblings, steadying small hands as they arranged the modest meal; the firelight danced across the walls, lending each gesture a gravity and tenderness that spoke louder than words.”*

I pause, imagining the light and warmth flickering across a room that exists only in imagination yet feels real, tactile and immediate. Reading aloud allows me to inhabit the ethical space Dickens creates, bridging Victorian domesticity and contemporary reflection on care. In that act, literature becomes not only observation but participation.

Similarly, Dora's vulnerability resonates through reading aloud. Her pauses, hesitations and relational expectations are subtle, interiorized, yet, when spoken, they demand the reader's engagement: *“She turned away for a moment, pressing her hand to her chest as if to still the quick beat of hope and apprehension mingled within her. David, watching, felt the stirrings of a moral consciousness that had long lain dormant.”*

In speaking these lines, I become David in miniature, attentive, reflective, ethically engaged. There is a moment of temporal dislocation: Victorian fiction, a room in London, a snowstorm outside my window, and yet the moral resonance is immediate. Vulnerability, attentiveness, care are enacted through reading and reflected back into lived experience.

Winter Windows and the Ethics of Attention

Juxtaposing Martha and Dora illuminates Dickens's dual vision of care: one visible and labour-driven, the other symbolic and relationally mediated. Martha transforms the material world into ethical space; Dora transforms relational awareness into ethical demand. Together, they reveal that moral influence need not reside at the centre of narrative or social life. Sometimes it resides quietly, almost peripherally, in the gestures and vulnerabilities of those who sustain or provoke attentiveness in others.

This duality speaks to me now in the rhythms of later life. To age is to

I often read Dickens aloud during winter mornings, the frost glinting against the windows, as if the cold demands warmth from words themselves.

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perceive the moral significance of gestures that are often invisible to the wider world: a neighbour helped with groceries, a grandchild listened to with patience, a note sent to a faraway friend. Martha and Dora, though products of Victorian fiction, echo these truths: that significance is not always spectacular, and that ethical life is embedded in attentiveness, presence and relational subtlety.

The Minor as Monumental

Perhaps Dickens's genius lies in this ethical egalitarianism: that minor figures, often overlooked, orchestrate moral reflection and imaginative growth in ways that protagonists cannot. Scrooge is transformed not only through supernatural spectacle but through witnessing Martha's attentiveness; David's growth is not assured by romantic fantasy but by navigating the relational demands Dora's vulnerability imposes. Peripheral figures, in Dickens, are ethical catalysts, teaching lessons that resonate beyond the page into lived experience.

And there is comfort in this, especially in aging: that one's life can matter profoundly through acts that do not dominate, command or receive applause. Influence can be quiet, ethical, relational. Attention and presence are as transformative as heroism. Minor figures, ordinary people, small gestures—they are often monumental, shaping the moral and imaginative fabric of the world around them.

Perhaps Dickens's genius lies in this ethical egalitarianism: that minor figures, often overlooked, orchestrate moral reflection and imaginative growth in ways that protagonists cannot.

Z. I. Mahmud is an ICCR Fulbrighter and English alumnus of Satyawati College, University of Delhi, India, and an independent researcher based in Bangladesh. He presents at international conferences including the International Hemingway Society Conference in Toronto, the 15th Annual Haskoli Islands Student Conference on the Medieval North, Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies (GCMS), University of Reading, and the 3rd International H/Story Seminar Communism in Historical Fiction at the University of Silesia in Katowice. His book chapter, "Ecocosmic and Cybernetic Femininities: "Posthuman Metamorphosis in *Wuthering Heights* and *Great Expectations*," will appear in *Emerging Trends and Future Directions in Comparative Literature* (Bombay, India), and his essay "The Utopian Enlightenment Of The Romantic Sublime Dissolves Into Dystopian Apocalypse Within Mary Shelley's Last Man" was submitted for the Keats-Shelley Memorial Essay Prize 2025–26. He will present "The Poetics of Frozen Glossolalia: Mystical Grammar from Hermione's Living Marble Statue to Havisham's Cobweb-Laced Bridal Spectre" at the 8th Annual Comparative Literature Conference, organized by the Comparative Literature Graduate Association, Louisiana State University. Visit <http://www.ananenglishliterature.wordpress.com>

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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.