

CSPS
Poetry Letter
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Edited by Maja
Trochimczyk

Poetry Letter

California State Poetry Society



250 YEARS IN POEMS BY ALICE PERO, PETER LUDWIN AND SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

In the first issue of the CSPS *Poetry Letter* of 2026, the year of the 250th Birthday Celebration of the United States of America, we featured artwork from the national art collections at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. and a symbol of joy, hot-air balloons floating above Albuquerque, New Mexico. The second issue is dedicated to the multicultural richness of our great nation by presenting English language poetry written in America by poets of diverse immigrant backgrounds. Of the three featured poets and one artist, two have roots in New York (Alice Pero and Vera Champion), one poet's father came from Vienna, Austria (the adventurous and well-traveled Peter Ludwin), and one was born in Malacca City when it was a part of the British Empire (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Professor Emerita at the University of California, Santa Barbara). They draw from their unique memories, impressions, experiences and knowledge to create fascinating and inspiring verse. Three of them are friends and frequent collaborators—Vera and Alice worked on two books, Alice and Peter shared many readings. Our book reviewer, Michael Escoubas, enriched this tapestry with poems by Kathleen Gregg and Lynn Fitzgerald. The whole issue is edited by a relatively recent immigrant from Poland, celebrating 30 years of living in this country as its citizen and a proud participant of Independence Day parades in Sunland Tujunga, giving out poetry postcards since 2010. Since becoming an American, I enjoy my favorite holiday, appreciating it even more because I was raised in the Peoples' Republic of Poland, a Soviet satellite "socialist" state that supposedly had embodied the principle of socialism—"to each according to their work." What a monumental lie! I much prefer the unalienable rights of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Happy 250th Birthday, USA!!!

~ Maja Trochimczyk, CSPS President

Independence Day

Red — are the rocks of the Grand Canyon
White — are the mountains, covered with snow
Blue — are the waves of Pacific Ocean

Red, White and Blue — colors of all.

Red — is the Earth from which we come
White — is the Air that fills our lungs
Blue — is the Water inside us, with Stardust

Red, White and Blue — connected in all.

Red — is pure Love, deep in our hearts
White — is the Brightness of our minds
Blue — is the Peace of well-lived lives

Red, White and Blue — freedom for all.

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"Dead Warriors" by Vera Champion (2022)

FEATURED POET ALICE PERO

Leaves Falling

leaves fall
over the telephone wires
with soft grace
with no apparent plan
or sense of haste
the yellow ones have the sun
burning in them
nothing urgent makes them
spin downward
in the passing breeze
they have mastered the plan,
the yearly dying
and what telephone lines carry
in scrambled complexity
are nothing to them
they fall in free time
and have no knowledge of the volts
and vexations of man
traveling in milliseconds
through telephone lines
they flit through these
vehicles of force,
insouciant, careless and free
mindless of electricity

Alice Pero

First published in *Poet Lore* Vol. 103 No. 3-4 (2008)

Porches

Porches
contain the sounds of summer
doors creaking
mosquitoes
carrying on tiny battles outside
miniscule batting of wings
over the pond

Porches
blur us with color
and sweetness
wisteria
dripping over stone walls
a container of honey
bees' invisible work
humming through screens

Porches
bring us back to ourselves
permeable
as are we
absorbent

taking in
every cricket
every frog

Alice Pero

First published in *Atlanta Review* (Fall/Winter 2011)

Feet

Feet tangled in pond weed
do not get confused,
they love pond muck
Feet that find small webs
in wet grass are smooth and curious
Feet that let flies flicker over them
are tickled, start to giggle
Feet moving quickly in squishy moss
know something deep and full
Feet that thump wooden planks on old docks
make peeling paint a place to jump from
Feet slippery in clay mud drop their troubles,
leaving long cool sighs in mountain streams
Feet that swish on musty floors,
think thoughtful thoughts,
make poems appear,
disappear in dust

Alice Pero

first published in *The Distiller* Vol XV, No 1]

Heat

The day sweats
Cicadas wrinkle the air
with vibrations
Trees lie drunk
in pond's rippling surface
Young birches lean toward each other
whispering like thin women gossiping
Over water lilies a white moth flies
pushed in abstract patterns
by some erratic hidden hand
Pond turns to green glass
Only a few birds are left singing
while we curl up hot and dripping
salty in late summer sun

Alice Pero, published in *Alembic* 2007

Bones

If soul is bound to bones,
then she will delight in play with them
stretch sinew, bow, pull head's bones high
in proud princess pose, click bone bells, prance
pas de chat bones, grand jeté land soft to cushion
bones
Bones don't cry or ache

She'll grab body with bones,
shove onto flying machine into vast sky
slam down again to the ground to find ski slopes
Bones are slammed around corners,
slid down treacherous passes
Oh why is it these bones don't break?

These bones don't even know their own names
yet still they hold true, straight and stalwart
Soul running bones through their racehorse paces
sticks and stones won't stop these bones
soul dancing the bones' formations
She'll do it all for bones' sake

Alice Pero, published in *Like Light*
anthology (Bright Hill Press 2017)

Wild

Is it enough
this walk in the park
where we slap each others' bottoms,
practice bird calls, caterwaul like alley cats,
roll down grassy hills, roll in muddy water,
take turns in the brambles?

Those who think they have only once chance around
cry at every scratch,
lie half-stunned in sunlight,
weep and moan at doors closing

Who is tough, the child leaping into the muddy pond?
The walking wounded who keep coming back?

Fly into the thick of it while you can
Dance in thistles, run stir-crazed in the rain
Wild horses don't have half your beauty,
words thrown madly to the wind

Alice Pero
Published in *Cholla Needles* 76 (202)

Walking Upside Down

I have walked upside down,
my feet attached to the sky
I have learned to hold onto clouds
their whispers in my ears
foretelling the future

I have left the air
my head on fire
my wings singed and crumbling
falling without parachute
or mind

I have asked the wind
for advice,
followed breezes into canyons
balanced on rocky streams
waited for lizards
to tell me their names

I have disappeared in moon's shadow
lurked in bottomless lakes
broke fast with moths
sipping honeysuckle
stained as I am
with the fathomless green

Alice Pero
Published in *13th Moon* (Vol XX No. 1 2008)



"Neighbor Anna" by Vera Campion (2021)

Gold of No Substance

The calligrapher holds the past
with each stroke, marks against time,
The dull thud of each death erased in a poem,
the permanent trace
Days that are weighted in metaphor can fly off,
careless leaves
like the memory of dragonfly flight,
heavy with beauty that has no beginning or end
The artist's will as strong as the most delicate lace,
indelible in memory,
gold that has no substance,
what we feed on
future's fuel

Alice Pero, published
in *Spillway* No. 14 (2005)

Smudged Wings

The angel with smudged wings
must scoop up God's ashes
and clean the trays
Saintry ways make for no complaint
Newspapers bray of madmen
drugs and implanted with murderous rages
Puppets kill
while masters play the strings
The soldier stands with
scraps and patches of dignity
Children in huts learn hate
This thing called life
can't be beaten
though it turns upon itself
and howls
Ashes fall from heaven

Alice Pero, published in
Main Street Rag (Vol 12 No.2 2007)

Prickly Pear

The prickly pear puts out
a tiny red blossom
to light the path
We tiptoe through
with snuffed candles
lest we bring fire

Alice Pero
Published in *Cholla*
Needles 76 (2023)

RIGHT - "Pursuit" by
Vera Campion (2025)



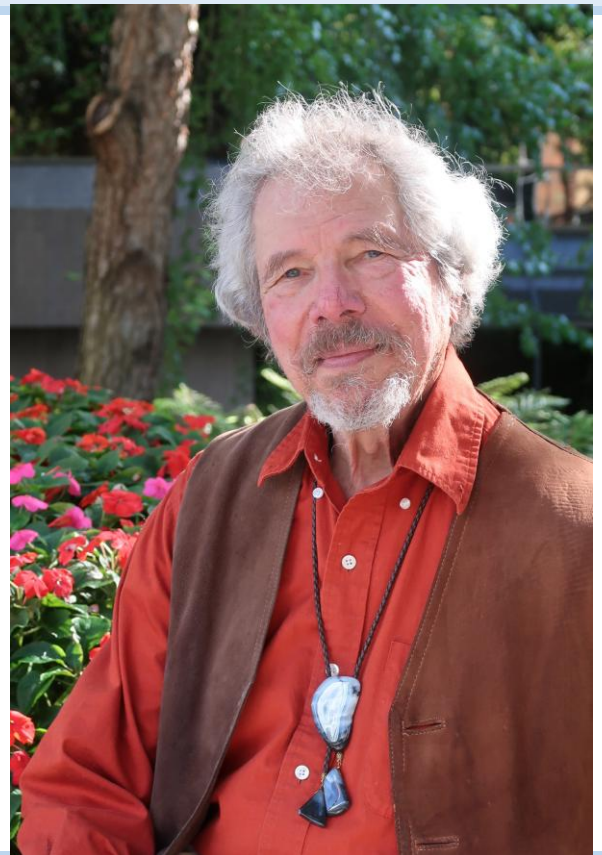
ABOUT ALICE PERO



Alice Pero is an eminent California poet, flutist, poetry teacher and cultural activist. She has published poetry in many magazines and anthologies, including *Nimrod*, *National Poetry Review*, *River Oak Review*, *Poet Lore*, *The Alembic*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Distillery*, *Fox Cry Review*, *The Griffin*, *G.W. Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Coiled Serpent*, *Wide Awake*, *Altadena Poetry Review*, and many others. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Altadena Poetry Review* and *California Quarterly*. Her book of poetry, *Thawed Stars*, was praised by Kenneth Koch as having “clarity and surprises.” She also published a chapbook *Sunland Park Poems*, written as a dialogue with Elsa Frausto. Pero teaches poetry and is a member of California Poets in the Schools, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering students to express their uniqueness through writing, performing and publishing their own poetry. She joined the CSPA Board as a Director at Large in May 2019 and became the Chair of Monthly Poetry Contests in January 2020. She was elected the 10th Poet Laureate of Sunland-Tujunga in April 2020 and in 2022 became the Artistic Director of the Village Poets Monthly Readings. She is also the founder of Moonday, a reading series in the Los Angeles area for upwards of sixteen years. Ms. Pero has created dialogue poems with more than twenty poets. She also created the performing group, Windsong Players Chamber Ensemble and performs as a flutist.

ABOUT PETER LUDWIN

Peter Ludwin is the award-winning author of four books of poetry. His newest collection, *An Altar of Tides*, won the 2024 Trail to Table Editors’ Award in Poetry from Trail to Table Press. His previous book, *Gone to Gold Mountain*, which addressed the little-known massacre of over thirty Chinese gold miners in Hells Canyon in 1887, was nominated for an American Book Award by the Before Columbus Foundation. In addition to receiving a 2007 Literary Fellowship from Artist Trust, he won the 2016 Muriel Craft Bailey Memorial Award from *The Comstock Review* for the poem “Wolf Concerto,” judged by Marge Piercy, and the W.D. Snodgrass Award for Endeavor and Excellence in Poetry from the San Miguel Poetry Week in Mexico, in which he was a longtime participant. Most recently, his poem “Terezin Concentration Camp, Bohemia” won the California State Poetry Society’s “Place” themed contest for August, 2025. An adventurer who has travelled from the Amazon to Morocco to Tibet, poems from which appear in his second book, *Rumors of Fallible Gods*, he is particularly focused on history/social justice, physical and spiritual aspects of the natural world and different cultures. He lives in Kent, Washington. Find him at www.peterludwin.com.



FEATURED POET PETER LUDWIN

Notes from a Sodbuster's Wife, Kansas, 1868

What really got us in the end—
we women who didn't make it,
who withered and blew away in the open—
was the wind. Space, yes, and distance,
too, from neighbors, a piano back in Boston.

But above all, the wind.

In our letters it shrieks hysteria from sod huts,
vomits women prematurely undone by loneliness,
boils up off the horizon to suck dry
their desire as it flattened the stubborn grasses.
Not convinced? Scan the photographs,
grainy and sepia-toned, like old leather.
Study our bony forms in plain black dresses,
our mouths drawn tight as a saddle cinch,
accusation leaking from rudderless eyes,
betrayed.

I tried. Lord knows I tried.
Survived the locusts and even snakes
that fell from the ceiling at night,
slithering between us in bed.
I dreamed of water, chiffon, the smell
of dead leaves banked against a rotting log.
I heard opera, carriage wheels on cobblestone.
Cried and beat my fists raw into those earthen
walls.

The wind. Even as it scoured
the skin it flayed the soul,
that raked, pitted shell.
And how like the Cheyenne,
appearing, disappearing,
no fixed location,
not even a purpose one could name.

Peter Ludwin
The South Dakota Review. Also in *A Guest in All
Your Houses*. Anthologized in a persona
poem volume, *A Face to Meet the Faces*,
University of Akron Press, 2012.

RIGHT – “Ten Day Challenge. Day 7. Shoulder Bird”
by Vera Campion (2022)

Satori

That night in Lajitas
I saw all we are given to see:
in your veins domed cities, empires,
and in your face dawn over Machu Picchu.

Was that a guitar where your teeth,
like Lorca's poems,
flashed diamond bits toward Mexico?
I heard gypsies shape the moon
and your hips bring languid
rhythms of the silk trade.

It was all so clear,
the way Vermeer's blues and yellows
define the very sound of color.

That's why this distance now,
with no way to reach you,
rumbles like thunderheads that threaten
but bring no rain, no rain.

Peter Ludwin
Published in *The Listening Eye*.
Also in *A Guest in All Your Houses*.



A Nun's Tale

(for Lois)

Though neither Catholic nor Christian,
you enter this church in Guanajuato.
An old, half-remembered song has drawn
you're here, a devotional candle whose pale
tongue flickers when you curl upon
yourself, a wave pouring over its crest.

You seem so natural on your knees,
a cloister child yearning for sisterhood.
That opaque mantle of silence
in which the rustle of a habit
across the cold stone floor crackles
with a kiss, a fleeting touch denied.

A routine quick to become familiar:
terce, vespers, matins,
bells tolling for a door pulled shut
as they herald canonical hours.
And all the while ecstasy mushrooms

like a fetus, a glorious weed
crowding out inferior plants.
A stalk you climb with intent:
the long, slow plunge
into a godhead of fire and roses.

But we are speaking of today, this life.
Bowed over interlocking hands,
you don't see the pigeon
just below the ceiling
flap its wings,
then plummet across the nave.

The stunning arc of its descent,
like a plane
curtailing its dive
at the last possible second,
propels it through a side door
into brilliant, windswept blue.

Peter Ludwin

Published in *Poem*. Also in his second book,
Rumors of Fallible Gods.

Skull

Long after the flesh had vanished
a shepherd found it at Deep Creek.

It belonged to one of the Chinese miners
massacred for gold in Hells Canyon.

A bullet had blown a whole section
away, but this did not discourage

the shepherd from turning it
into a sugar bowl. The sort

of relic one might find
in a collectibles store or the dusty,

web-framed attic of an eccentric
who died of cumulative failure.

Was it you, Chea Po, who contained
this sweetness? Held its promise?

I like to think you weren't one
of the bodies washed up downstream

after weeks in the river.
That you remained on a gravel bar

where you'd panned for flakes,
watched by wary bighorns. It is important

for me—a stranger writing over a century
after the murders—to imagine you there.

More than artifact the morning light reveals.
For whom water speaks a lost language.

Peter Ludwin

Prairie Schooner. Also in his third book, *Gone to
Gold Mountain*, which was nominated for an
American Book Award by the Before Columbus
Foundation in 2016.

Resurrection

Later, she would say there was no way to explain—
not that it mattered—what compelled her
to do it. After hours
playing quartets with friends, to head out alone
down an unexplored logging road, step with her
viola into a clear-cut and accompany there
a half dozen browsing elk. The piece she chose,
Borodin's *Nocturne*, caused them only to look up
from their forage, then lower their heads again,
this music preferable to the raven croaks
they knew by heart. But what began
as intimation, the contours of an ill-defined urge,
took shape the longer she bowed to the bow,
a low moon rising fat between a bull's antlers
the image that made it clear. Never mind
that his anxious snort drew the cows over a ridgeline,
their cotton hindquarters white flags of truce
that vanished like hope. Here among stumps
and slash she was performing, she understood
with each legato stroke, a sonata for hoof
and root. For that Lazarus chambered like a filbert
within its shell who slowly rose from her tomb
as if shocked back to unexpected life,
shroud ablaze at her feet.

Peter Ludwin

Published in *Poem & An Altar of Tides*. 2016 Second
Prize Winner of the Paulann Petersen Poetry Awards
from Willamette Writers Kay Snow Competition.

The Question You Asked

(for Jill)

Do you meditate before you write?

No, I don't cross my legs and gaze
at a blank screen, don't open my palms
in surrender. But what else would I call

those walks along the stream behind my house,
if not a meditation? Each time I find
a different river, each time the mind empties out

to make room for guests: a pair of mallards
sunning themselves on a tuft of grass,
a snag angled out from the bank,

the scowl of a deeply grooved cottonwood,
a gang of crows swarming the trees
like flies to an animal gone down.

Walking the north end of Orcas Island
I sting from the wind's brutal bite.
Hunched as far into myself as formal

practice would ever take me, I ask you this:
Isn't observation a form of joining,
a manifest of intent? The sound

of Basho's frog going *plop!* binds me
like a ring. What is our wealth,
our dragon hoard,

if not a moth's silky powder?

Peter Ludwin

Published in *Poem*.



To Heal a Hurt

One could do worse than plunge into petunias,
finger with delicate grip blossoms gone limp
and ease them from their sheaths—

a tactic known as “deadheading”—do worse

than clasp like a brooch the raw, fecund wild,
succor from bush and tree and stream,
from moss, from serrated ridge a salve,

an ointment menthol rich and deep.

Isn't this what seers, cranks, those visionary scolds
have always done? Starved for Truth,
for revelation, Siddhartha flees his palace

only to return years later and find, in shards of light,

that jewel heretofore hidden: the river
he forsook, always and never the same.
Thoreau builds his cabin at Walden,

unaware he hammers into planks not mere nails

but myth. Hiking the Sierra Nevada on a few
crusts of bread, John Muir inhales a balm
beyond the human, its despoliating greed.

Edward Abbey, fierce as his desert stronghold,

assails American ranchers: “The whole West
stinks of cattle!” If you clip a fading
dahlia's stalk, a woman tells me,

the plant will form new buds to replace it.

Peter Ludwin
Published in *Poem*

IMAGE ON P.8

“Life In the Woods” by Vera Campion (2022)

Rachel Expelled from Valencia, 1492

When the edict was read
I became shadow
skirting the plaza

a dark speck upon the sun

let me tell you
the torture of flesh is an old story

one goes unconscious and it ends
but the wild dog
let loose on the mind
hourly savages his bone.

Because choice rattles its empty cup
because light blasphemes
blackened windows

the reproach of the mirror
solders my dry mouth shut:

at dawn I lurch through quicksand
with my basket of eggs

a lopped limb
growing back each night.

Oh I am the musky witch
whose breasts spill sour wine

a dead leaf falling
solar and lunar eclipse

look for the goatherd in Edom
the sandy wastes of the Philistines

without rights
without compass

Gideon has fled with his three hundred
and there are none to sound her name

Peter Ludwin
Published in *Colere*

Why Lorca Matters

Because even the olive laments the ditch,
the rusted, half-buried saber. Because wind
now bullies horses grazing their shadows.

Because an old man remembers the trickster
who whittled his tongue with copper: blood fugue
in the throat, the startled fish that swam there.

Because he was *un hombre*, a *caballero* whose words,
streaked with the ruinous glory of wax,
wounded Death. Parted the burning lake.

Somewhere the slashed curtain, somewhere the pistol,
gold-plated, that scatters the breath of baboons.
And always a scarcity of water.

Peter Ludwin
Published in *Spillway*.

RIGHT "China Doll" by Vera Campion (2020)



ABOUT SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LAM



Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Fulbright and Wien International Scholar; Ph.D. Brandeis University. Her first book of poems, *Crossing the Peninsula*, received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Published twelve volumes of poetry; three books of short stories; two novels; a children's novel, *Princess Shawl* (translated into Chinese, published in Taiwan, 2009); and a selected short stories and poetry volume, *The Shirley Lim Collection*. Her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, received the American Book Award.

She has published two critical studies and has edited/co-edited many critical volumes. *The Forbidden Stitch* received the 1990 American Book Award. Co-founder of *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (JTAS), she has edited/co-edited issues of numerous journals. She served as chair of Women's Studies, Chair Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong, and is Distinguished Professor Emerita, the University of California, Santa Barbara. Lim was awarded the Feminist Press and Multiethnic Literatures of the United States (MELUS) 2009 Lifetime Achievement Awards, the UCSB Faculty Research Lecture Award, and the 2026-27 Dickson Professorship Award.

FEATURED POET SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

Pantoum for Chinese Women

"At present, the phenomena of butchering, drowning and leaving to die female infants have been very serious". *The People's Daily*, Peking, March 3rd, 1983

They say a child with two mouths is no good.
In the slippery wet, a hollow space,
Smooth, gumming, echoing wide for food.
No wonder my man is not here at his place.

In the slippery wet, a hollow space,
A slit narrowly sheathed within its hood.
No wonder my man is not here at his place:
He is digging for the dragon jar of soot.

That slit narrowly sheathed within its hood!
His mother, squatting, coughs by the fire's blaze
While he digs for the dragon jar of soot.
We had saved ashes for a hundred days.

His mother, squatting, coughs by the fire's blaze.
The child kicks against me mewing like a flute.
We had saved ashes for a hundred days,
Knowing, if the time came, that we would.

The child kicks against me crying like a flute
Through its two weak mouths. His mother prays
Knowing when the time comes that we would,
For broken clay is never set in glaze.

Through her two weak mouths his mother prays.
She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood,
For broken clay is never set in glaze:
Women are made of river sand and wood.

She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood.
My husband frowns, pretending in his haste
Women are made of river sand and wood.
Milk soaks the bedding. I cannot bear the waste.

My husband frowns, pretending in his haste.
Oh, clean the girl, dress her in ashy soot!
Milk soaks our bedding. I cannot bear the waste.
They say a child with two mouths is no good.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim
Monsoon History, Skoob Books, 1994.

Modern Secrets

Last night I dreamt in Chinese.
Eating Yankee shredded wheat
I said it in English
To a friend who answered
In monosyllables:
All of which I understood.
The dream shrank to its fiction.
I had understood its end
Many years ago. The sallow child
Ate rice from its ricebowl
And hides still in the cupboard
With the china and tea-leaves.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim
Modern Secrets, Dangaroo Press, 1989.

Learning to Love America

because it has no pure products
because the Pacific Ocean sweeps along the coastline
because the water of the ocean is cold
and because land is better than ocean.

because I say we rather than they.
because I live in California
I have eaten fresh artichokes
and jacaranda bloom in April and May.

because my senses have caught up with my body
my breath with the air it swallows
my hunger with my mouth.
because I walk barefoot in my house.

because I have nursed my son at my breast
because he is a strong American boy
because I have seen his eyes redden
when he is asked who he is
because he answers I don't know.

because to have a son is to have a country
because my son will bury me here
because countries are in our blood and we bleed them

because it is late and too late to change my mind
because it is time.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim
First pub. *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say*, West End
Press, 1998; *Fooling with Words*, ed. Bill Moyers, 1999.

Monsoon History

The air is wet, soaks
Into mattresses, and curls
In apparitions of smoke.
Like fat white slugs furled
Among the timber,
Or sliver fish tunneling
The damp linen covers
Of schoolbooks, or walking
Quietly like centipedes,
The air walking everywhere
On its hundred feet
Is filled with the glare
Of tropical water

Again we are taken over
By clouds and rolling darkness.
Small snails appear
Clashing their timid horns
Among the morning glory
Vines.
Drinking milo,

Nyonya and baba sit at home.
This was forty years ago.
Sarong-wrapped they counted
Silver paper for the dead,
Portraits of grandfathers
Hung always in the parlour.

Reading Tennyson, at six
p.m. in pajamas,
Listening to down-pour-
ing rain; the air ticks
With gnats, black spiders fly,
Moths sweep out of our rooms
Where termites built
Their hills of eggs and queens zoom
In heat. We wash our feet
For bed, watch mother uncoil

Her snake hair, unbuckle
The silver mesh around her waist,
Waiting for father pacing
The sands as fishers pull
From the Straits after monsoon.

continued in the second column

The air is still, silent
Like sleepers rocked in the pantun,
Sheltered by Malacca
This was forty years ago,
When *nyonya* married baba.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim
Monsoon History: Selected Poems, 1994.

Riding Into California

If you come to a land with no ancestors
to bless you, you have to be your own
ancestor. The veterans in the mobile home
park don't want to be there. It isn't easy.
Oil rigs litter the land like giant frozen birds.
Ghosts welcome us to a new life, and
an immigrant without home ghosts
cannot believe the land is real. So you're
grateful for familiarity, and Bruce Lee
becomes your hero. Coming into Fullerton,
everyone waiting at the station is white.
The good thing about being Chinese on Amtrack
is no one sits next to you. The bad thing is
you sit alone all the way to Irvine.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim
First pub. *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say*,
West End Press, 1998; *Fooling with Words*,
ed. Bill Moyers, 1999.

Hello

Hello, white page! Hello, dear possible!
I greet you as friend open to questions.
I greet you as sage, silent, never
to speak. I greet you as my child,
stammering, words not yet mastered,
tears in your eyes. Greet you as stranger
whose language comes from afar, lispings,
guttural, whose speakers have scattered.
I greet you as fire just breaking
in dry brush that will burn the old world.
Greet you, towering Diana, arrow
tipped to the target. I greet you as
Self, untutored, reading your blank gaze.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim
Dawns Tomorrow, SunGold, 2024.

Santa Barbara Rain

Morning after the rains, blossoms
pop up yellow among their weedy
tendrils; white in the citrus massy
branches; scarlet burning bush plums
budding; purple in the sage;
and orange, orange, orange poppies
to say, Hello, California. These,
like poems common on the page,
lowly or showy, tall sprung spiky
splurges out of succulents
that survive on dew, sky silent
sprinkled as, surprised by rain, we
forget our dry winter heat. Poetry
needs rain in drought years like creeks
need rain to murmur, like dried sticks
need rain to root, and roots to be
the trees written in their memory,
like angels need rain to praise
heaven, like babies need rain to raise
their sippy cups, like the poppy
needs rain to wave on its stem,
like I need rain to write the poem.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim
In Praise of Limes, SunGold, 2023.

In Praise of Limes

Come late March the limes appear on sidewalks
where we pick two, three, or five most mornings
for our breakfast table. Careless branches
drop sweet-sour green-yellow fruit, like flinging
gum to a crowd all through April and May,
until neighbors tire of plenty; excepting
the newcomers, for whom, decades passing,
plenty remains a miracle. Each day
unexpected, each morning miraculous
sunrise in a new country. Although want-want
blows like Santa Annas sparking ashes
on candy-striped lounges and awnings
under dry fronds above bungalows, although
coyote lairs in brittle eucalyptus
burn, although in uneasy zigzag land
rifts, although thirst and desert brown
the homeless children of plenty,
although new and old split apart, unknown
to each other, we will persist in praising
the lime tree spring, newcomers to our town,
too many for the breaking earth to tear down.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

The Hudson River School of Painters

is American identity, I was told.
Never saw why, until that morning
at the Met. Catskills, the green-bodied
and lively river, twining
on canvas, vaster than actual
dimensions: oiled depth, receding
shadows---West Point, Peekskill--,
I'd driven past, tight-assed, anxious,
by eight-wheelers. I'd been killed
nine times over in near crashes.

There, four-framed order secured,
America glows. A waterfall rushes
held up by color for all time.
The man in the blue coat stands quiet
as I do, gazing at rimmed
mountains, clouds' roving light,
like subdued sheep, nature sublime,
domestication sublime.

In these rooms,
Hudson River billow
moves, settles down to nation's
dark, white, brown, yellow:
water, air above, earth underfoot,
restless as genius, fixed, and flow.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim
*The Hudson Review, 75th Anniversary
Issue, Spring 2023.*
"In Praise of Limes" published in
In Praise of Limes, SunGold, 2023.

ABOUT VERA CAMPION

...in her own words: "Born in London during the V1 and V2 missile bombings of WWII, I spent my formative years in a beautiful, small village outside of Prague. We made our home in my grandparent's summer villa where my father converted the garden, in part, to grow fruits and vegetables. We kept chickens and rabbits. We gathered mushrooms, blueberries, raspberries, cranberries, and pine cones. We harvested firewood from dead trees in the nearby forests for cooking fires and to stay warm. In many ways it was idyllic. Fortuitously, the villa was classified as a family house by the Communists and we were allowed to retain it. We lived simply but well under the rather stressful circumstances of the Communist regime. Our 'capitalist west' connections helped us to survive and thrive."

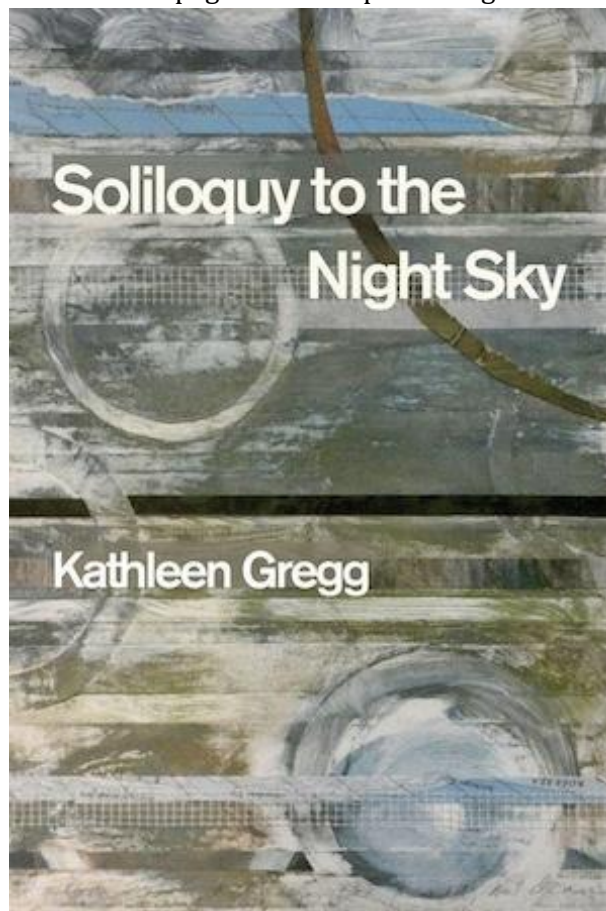
Continued on p. 17.

MICHAEL ESCOUBAS REVIEWS *SOLILOQUY TO THE NIGHT SKY* BY KATHLEEN GREGG

Soliloquy to the Night Sky by Kathleen Gregg. 35 Poems ~ 43 pages. Accents publishing

Preparing to write this review has been a challenge. I note this because I witnessed my younger brother's slow decline from brilliance to the dark night of total loss. My heart is enveloped in Kathleen Gregg's poetic cocoon of loss and the dilemma it presents for the meaning of life. *Soliloquy to the Night Sky* will resonate with thousands who have witnessed a loved one's final monolog with whom they once were and will never be again. "No False Hope," appears half-way through the collection. Nancy, Kathleen's older sister, is in the latter stages of Alzheimer's:

When I visit now, I am faced
with a body emptied of you.
Your heart still beats its rhythm,
lungs push air in and out.
If a nurse lifts a spoon to your lips,
you open, chew and swallow.
Sometimes, the aides park you
in front of the common room TV.
You stare at the screen with eyes
devoid of awareness. This is
how I find you today. I squat
in front of your wheelchair, smile,
say Hi, Nancy, it's me, your sister,
and you turn those blank eyes on me.



The poem continues describing the poet's longing that her efforts to love, comfort, and amuse her beloved will somehow reach Nancy's awareness. Notice how this poem is a series of declarative sentences, stark, rational. Nancy's life-situation has become exactly that, descriptive rather than engaging. How did we get here? Kathleen opens her collection with "No Off Ramp," a poem perfectly placed as Nancy is, "sobbing and / sobbing and / begging for her life / to make sense again." Kathleen is trying to comfort her panicked sister over the speaker phone while driving in traffic. "relentless traffic / is the only thing keeping me grounded / from the jolt / of my sister's distress." Indeed, in the moment and in the larger life-setting, Kathleen knows there is no "off ramp" for this. There is "just enough awareness / to split us down the middle."

"Nancy is Never the Same," is an early clue of what is ahead:

After her year of breast cancer therapy,
she knows it. Chemo Brain is real.
I'm not as sharp as I used to be. Still,
we believe surely, with time,
her foginess will clear up. Surely.
Then, for the first time ever, she forgets
my birthday. No card, no phone call.
I let it go.

However, these are just the first fruits of Nancy's decline; the inability to work through things that in times past were not problematic for her sister's keen mind. From there telling incidents build one upon the other. The poem "I Ignore the Signs," portrays my own experience with my brother's decline. I consistently told myself This isn't really happening. It was trivial things that Kathleen and I ignored:

my sister needs a dress
 for her granddaughter's wedding
 tells me she dreads the search
 (my cue to offer help)
 I jump at the chance
 to do such a girl thing with her

This poignant poem chronicles a series of “little things” that tell a big story in retrospect: Nancy has never heard of Marshalls, where they will shop; inside the store Nancy loses her sense of place, looks “defeated” as she browses the racks and tries on dresses; she asks, “What’s the name of this store again?” All of this and more return to Kathleen as she mourns and ponders Nancy slow, irreversible decline. “The End of Pretending” ties a bow around the phase of denial:

I feel Nancy hunt and hunt for words,
 as if she is rifling through a box of loose photos.
 Mostly she just gives up, spits out a laugh,
 Well it's gone. I try to make light of it, fill in
 the blanks, fall back on our inside jokes. That lifeline
 is fraying (face it) from the weight of my furious grip.
 Today, I attempt to reminisce about our cousins,
 the big family gatherings. Her flat voice admits,
 I don't know who they are. And I hear
 the first goodbye.

From this seed that captures Nancy's steady decline, there are moments of light. “What a Difference the Right Meds Make,” delivers momentary jubilation as Kathleen visits Nancy, now under the care of trained nurses. Nancy seems better than before. She is chatting coherently, swaying to the vibrations of Mustang Sally, joy is bubbling out of mouths encouraging her. But the joy fades, like the slow decline of a light bulb . . . “I realize my sister is still confused, / her memories jumbled, disappearing. / but her terror, my helplessness / in the face of it, has been lowered / to the bottom of the well. Reading Soliloquy to the Night Sky, I felt the gentle prodding of a shepherd, somehow knowing that I needed time to process the roller coaster of feelings she was experiencing. I haven't considered, in this review, all the poems that deserve treatment. But as I read each one slowly, savoring their content, I somehow felt renewed in my soul. This is a gift of poetry. Only poetry can achieve the solace one needs at such an hour. I think of my brother Tom as I offer these unforgettable lines from “Acceptance”:

Let my sister lift up
 and out
 of her useless body.
 Let her feel
 my love rush
 after her.
 Let her float
 in an ocean of light.
 Warm, peaceful,
 safe.
 Let her memories
 spark
 within her soul,
 brimming
 and bright.
 Let her sing
 in a blur of joy,
 I am whole.



“The Pond, Hillfield, England” by Vera Campion, 2023.

“A prayer of sorts? Indeed, it is a prayer of sorts. Perhaps my brother Tom has met Nancy somewhere in heaven's precincts . . . and with full throat they are singing, I am whole, praise God, I am whole! ~ *Michael Escoubas*

MICHAEL ESCOUBAS REVIEWS *HER DRESS DOES A FLIP* BY LYNN FITZGERALD

Her Dress Does a Flip by Lynn Fitzgerald, 27 poems ~ 55 pages. Dancing Girl Press

A Word About the Cover. I was instantly intrigued by Lynn Fitzgerald's choice of a cover image for *Her Dress Does a Flip*. For this reviewer, the image suggested fun, craziness, mystery, and a kind of wily deception. I noted that the legs projecting from the carriage wear high heels. Right then I knew I was in for the buggy ride of my life! And I was right. I would buy this book simply for its entertainment value. But this collection is so much more. *Her Dress Does a Flip* seeks to penetrate to the core of what it means to be human. I must admit that *my* life-carriage often resembles Fitzgerald's artistic life-metaphor.

A Word about Structure. The work is not divided into sections or parts. Its poems appear one after the other suggesting a cathartic journey within the poet's life. It is as if Fitzgerald has determined to get everything said and gives her muse permission to become a fountainhead of poetic expression . . . expressions that **MUST** be expelled for the last time. In support of the above observation I am struck by Fitzgerald's unconventional sonnet, "Sine Qua Non," which I reproduce in full here:

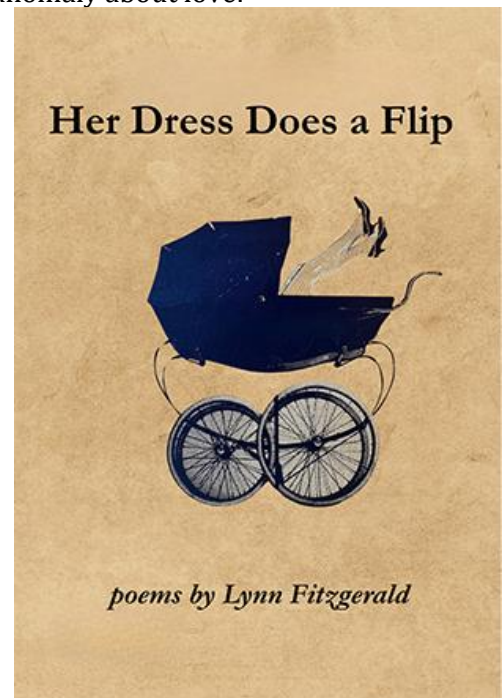
The essential element we look for, what we lack
From our genes or chemistry, culture, religion.
This gap we seek to fill or at the very least to conceal
Lest we be thought of as lacking some primordial
Quality. The definition around which all else spins,
Creating an orbit, the unbroken circle we inhabit.
A circle we walk endlessly in until we
Come face to face with that one being
Who emanates everything we have missed
And we feel our orbit stretched into an angular
Geometry, some shape not our own, a shape
We wished to be. In resignation we settle
For that which is offered: a subtle, explosive gift
For which we have no words.

This poem seeks clarity about that which is vital for life. What will suffice? What is that one thing one cannot do without that defines a "good life?" Throughout the collection Fitzgerald is conversing with herself. Examining life here, evaluating her experiences there, enjoying the journey and not especially concerned with arriving at a destination. In the collection's lead poem "il-logic" the poet creates an anomaly about love:

He can only imagine the world
She walks or wears her hair in
Love is a deprivation of sorts
Some logic lost, an interruption of integrity.
She can only imagine the world
He walks and wears his glasses in
Or how he doesn't look at life but does.

Yet she knows how his hands feel
How definite the grasp
And this holds fast the dream,
The arm reaches with the fingers for the pen
The wrist supports the words.

Is this a poem or is it life?
The man stretches his dark coat across
His shoulders, walks through the doorway
Into his world and the woman steps
Inside her life, silent as a leaf falling to the ground.



Excursions into Life with Lynn Fitzgerald. With the above poems serving as foundation, Fitzgerald’s journey is just beginning. “How My Parents Meet,” is written in present tense as if she is watching what they do, noticing special things that drew them close. These paint a picture of love:

He remembers the color of her dress, the careless elegance,
of her step. She recalls the knot in his tie,
how she straightened it as he held her body to his—
he is her land. She steps ashore, the briny smell familiar,
but this has never happened before.

This lovely oracle must have brought joy, as the words tumbled forth as from the muses’ fountainhead. The poet stows her dream in her treasure chest of memories.

As I worked through the collection, I counted six poems which were “wildly” delightful with indentations. These are by design suggesting that this poet will not be confined or defined by convention. Poems such as “Paradise of Myself,” “Scotch on the Rocks,” “Pas de Deux,” and “Les Crudités,” are so revealing, so fresh, as to defy containment in traditional structures. I spent extra time with these poems and was richly rewarded.

With that said, Professor Fitzgerald (City Colleges of Chicago) is a seasoned practitioner of her craft. Her stanza productions feature couplets, tercets, quatrains, unique stanzaic mixtures, and long and short line combinations. Additionally, I was delighted when I encountered traditional forms such as villanelle, rondeau, and cento. Taken together, these round out a superior display of poetry acumen.

“Ordinary” is a poem I kept returning to. This poem profoundly speaks to the inner core of Lynn Fitzgerald. At the end of the day, the best poets elevate what most people miss and find *Sine Qua Non*:

I know I’ve left friends and missed each one
I’ve listened to a flock of geese as they have taken flight
in search of sunlight and warm sand
and I have considered what has been missed,
what I have not said, although felt, and why
this is so. How I must live with the thoughts of loss,
profound loss, while the trees chant remembrances
and I listen to the wind. I feel a hand rest on my shoulder,
hear someone calling me and then calling in the children from play
and someone else is arriving at the door, the buzzer blaring—
and here, while I contemplate loss
is the extravagance of ordinary life.

And this is precisely why *Her Dress Does a Flip* belongs
on your library shelf.

Michael Escoubas

ABOUT VERA CAMPION, *cont.*

“After my college years at the University of Prague, I was drawn back to London to experience it as an adult. Then – yearning to become a United States citizen – I made Manhattan my home. It was as if I’d lived here before. Creativity and self-expression became unstoppable. Painting is my purpose, my passion. Those early years, spent in that picturesque environment with all its earthy sensations and natural beauty, continue to inspire my work. The hues, shapes, and textures I choose often resemble the colorful national costumes worn by the Czechs in years past and kept alive in numerous folk dancing groups.”

RIGHT – “Venus and Adonis” by Vera Campion (2025)



CALIFORNIA STATE POETRY SOCIETY

Established in 1971, CSPA was incorporated on August 14th, 1985 as a 501(c)(3) organization, so donations above the membership level are tax deductible. Donor and patron support ensure (1) the quality publications of the CSPA and that (2) our mission to promote poetry and art in California and around the world continues to flourish. Information regarding renewal and patron contributions is on the Membership page. The CSPA began publication of the *California Quarterly* in the fall of 1972. The *California Quarterly*, published four times a year and accepts only unpublished poetry. Foreign language poems with an English translation are also welcome. Submissions may be made through Submittable.com, email, website and mail (for those without access to the internet and email). Monthly and Annual Contests honor great poets.

CSPA Officers

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Vice President/Communications – Richard Modiano
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Annual Contest Chair – Maja Trochimczyk

www.californiastatepoetrysociety.org | www.californiastatepoetrysociety.com

POETRY LETTER

The *Poetry Letter* ((Online ISSN 2836-9394; Print ISSN 2836-9408) is a quarterly electronic publication, issued by the California State Poetry Society. Edited by Maja Trochimczyk since 2020 and by Margaret Saine earlier. The *Poetry Letter* is emailed and posted on the CSPA website, CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety.org. Sections of the *Poetry Letter* are also posted separately on the CSPA Blog, CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety.com. The *Poetry Letter* publishes winners of CSPA Monthly Contests, featured poets, and poetry book reviews, with colorful illustrations (possible since it is not published in print).

CSPA 39TH ANNUAL POETRY CONTEST — DEADLINE 30 JUNE 2026

This contest is open to all poets, whether or not they are members of the CSPA. The Contest is managed by CSPA President, Maja Trochimczyk, and adjudicated by an experienced, published poet who is approved for this role by the CSPA Board. A different poet is selected to judge the CSPA Poetry Contest each year. The Judge in 2026 is Mary Langer Thompson Ed.D. Poems must be postmarked or uploaded to our website or from March 1st through June 30th. Reading fees for all entries, domestic or international, are \$3.00 per poem for members of CSPA and \$6.00 per poem for non-members. There is an 80-line (two page) limit for each poem and seven poems per poet.

AWARDS: There are three main prizes that include publication in the *California Quarterly*, a small cash prize and a certificate and six to ten Honorary Mentions. Poets winning 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes receive \$100, \$50 and \$25, respectively. Six to ten Honorable Mentions may also be awarded. Winning entries will be announced on our website, blog, and in the CSPA Newsbriefs in September 2025 and published in the fourth issue of the CQ in December 2025. The Honorable Mention poems and other submissions are forwarded to the CQ and the *Poetry Letter* editors for possible inclusion in the subsequent issues. Contest results are posted on our website. **250th BIRTHDAY PRIZE:** This year, the CSPA Board decided to add a special 250th Birthday Prize for the best poem celebrating the 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States in 1776. The prize consists of a certificate, publication and \$76 in cash.

SUBMISSION: Please submit unpublished poems, written in English, with 80-line (two-page) limit per poem, with reading fees, using one of two options. If submitting by mail, send a cover letter with all poet information and a list of submitted poems, one copy of each poem with no poet identification, plus an email or SASE for contest results (only for those poets who do not have an email address) to: [Maja Trochimczyk, CSPA President & Contest Chair P.O. Box 4288, Sunland, California 91041-4288. CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety@gmail.com](mailto:MajaTrochimczyk@CSPA.org)

You may also upload your poems and pay reading fees at our website: www.californiastatepoetrysociety.org, by first registering your account with a password, and then login-in to upload poems and pay the fees. If you find it too difficult to register on the website, you may submit your reading fees via PayPal with a note stating "Annual Contest Reading Fees" with your name and contact information, including State Poetry Society you are a member of, to PayPal account while also emailing the poems to CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety@gmail.com, Please make sure your poems were not published in any format (print or online) prior to submission.

CONTEST JUDGE - MARY LANGER THOMPSON



An award-winning poet and writer who currently lives in the high desert of California where she opened a public school as principal, Mary Langer Thompson was born in Illinois and traveled to California on Route 66. She credits her bi-weekly critique group with helping her to transition into writing fiction and children's stories. She has been a secondary English teacher, adjunct professor, and elementary school principal. Thompson is active in the California Writer's Club, High Desert Branch, and was California's Senior Poet Laureate in 2012-13. She won the Jack London Award in 2019 and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2020. She has given poetry and writing workshops in schools, colleges, and prisons. Most recently she was the featured poet, along with Pat Connors, on Saturday Afternoon Poetry. She edited *From Silence to Speech: Women of the Bible Speak Out* in 2015, published *Poems in Water* in 2014 and wrote two children's books, *How the Blue-Tongued Skink got His Blue Tongue*; and *The Gull Who Thought He Was Dull*, both illustrated by Samantha Kickingbird. She also published several chapbooks.

BEYOND BIRDS AND ANSWERS

A Dialogue by Alice Pero and Vera Campion

Can I catch a firefly?
Put the wind in a bottle?
You ask me to explain
and there is only mist
Going to a place where there
are more than answers
death, a myth

Alice Pero
Vera Campion



"Dialoguing in poetry is an ancient form. The Japanese wrote linked poems. The poet in this book has been dialoguing with other poets for over 30 years, and even earlier as a dancer. Ekphrastic poetry is also as old as the written word. We see this in the beauty of the Chinese scrolls. A poet writing with an artist becomes a conversation and an ever-expanding story. Writing can be like dancing to a painting. Painting can be like singing to a poem. Colors bring words and words invoke shapes and stories. We invite the reader to find a beautiful place to read this book, a place where you can sit and simply dream."

"Beyond Birds and Answers," book of poetry by Alice Pero and Vera Campion, Elyssar Press (2021)



39th Annual Poetry Contest

California State Poetry Society

DEADLINE - 30 June 2026

**Three Prizes and 6 to 10
Honorary Mentions**

**FEES - \$6 per poem,
\$3 for CSPA members**

**Submissions - 7 poems
max., unpublished and
anonymous, with a title list**

By mail to CSPA PO Box 4288

Sunland CA 91040

CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety@gmail.com

<https://www.californiastatepoetrysociety.com/2026/04/39th-annual-poetry-contest-deadline.html>

SPECIAL PRIZE

**for the 250th
Birthday
of the U.S.**

JUDGE

**Mary Langer
THOMPSON**



MONTHLY CONTEST SUBMISSIONS GUIDELINES

California State Poetry Society encourages poetic creativity by organizing monthly poetry contests. The contests are open to all poets, whether or not they are members of the CSPA. Reading fees are \$1.50 per poem with a \$3.00 minimum for members and \$3.00 per poem with a \$6.00 minimum for non-members. Entries must be postmarked during the month of the contest in which they are entered. They must consist of a cover page with all contact information (name, address, telephone number and email address) as well as the month and THEME on cover page, and the titles of the poems being submitted.

Starting in January 2023, we are accepting previously published poems for our Monthly Contest. Please note the publication where it first appeared on any such poem. There are three ways to submit.

- (1) by regular mail (enclosing check) or email (using PayPal CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety@gmail.com):
CSPA Monthly Contest – (Specify Contest Month). Post Office Box 4288, Sunland, CA 91041
- (2) online on our website CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety.org (you must register and create a profile with a password first, then the option to submit poems and fees will open), or
- (3) by email, using PayPal to pay (CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety@gmail.com) and email to send your poems (CSPAMonthlyContests@gmail.com) (specify the month).

The monthly contest winners are notified the month after they are awarded. All of the winners for the year are listed in the first CSPA Newsbriefs and published in the first Poetry Letter of the following year. Prize-winning poems are also posted on the blog, CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety.com. The 1st prize winner receives half of the prize pool for pools less than \$100. Please note: **Do not send SAEs**. We do not return poems. If you win, we will let you know. Otherwise, there are no notifications.

CSPA Monthly Contest Themes (Revised): ① January: Nature, Landscape; ② February: Love; ③ March: Open, Free Subject; ④ April: Mythology, Dreams, Other Universes; ⑤ May: Personification, Characters, Portraits; ⑥ June: The Supernatural; ⑦ July: Childhood, Memoirs; ⑧ August: Places, Poems of Location; ⑨ September: Colors, Music, Dance; ⑩ October: Humor, Satire; ⑪ November: Family, Friendship, Relationships; ⑫ December: Back Down to Earth (Time, Seasons).