

Poetry Letter

California State Poetry Society



Merry Christmas! Happy Holy Days! Have a Wonderful New Year 2022!

It is a wonderful custom to wish everyone all the best for the coming year at least once a year. I also do it for Happy Birthdays. What's the point of a one-day happiness? It is the whole year that must be blessed with joy, creativity, gratitude, generosity, health and all the good things one can dream of. With the wishes, I'm sharing with the *Poetry Letters'* readers wonderful poems by Judy Barrat, Pamela Stone Singer, Dave Malone, Bruce Gallie, & Jeanie Greensfelder. Previously published, these poetic gems surely deserve to be read again. In one case, we are fixing our own error, with apologies to the poet: "I'm Sorry, Mr. Webster" was published in the *California Quarterly* 47:3 without its last line. Here it is in its entirety. Daniel E. Blackston whose work was included in the *California Quarterly* 47:2 analyzed a poem by Marilyn Robertson, "Low Tide," published in the same issue. Poetry is a conversation and this is an excellent example of poets talking to each other. The *Poetry Letter* also includes book reviews. Laura Schulkind reviewed *Make For Higher Ground* by Diane Lee Moomey. *Common Ground* by Kathy Lohrum Cotton was reviewed by Michael Escoubas. Karla Linn Merrifield wrote about *Images: A Collection of Ekphrastic Poems* by Michael Escoubas. *Beyond Birds and Answers* by poet Alice Pero and artist Vera Champion was reviewed by Neil Leadbeater and Toti O'Brien. Three reviews have been reprinted from *Quill & Parchment* to widely share news about these notable books. Finally, the illustrations for *Poetry Letter* are by two artists, Vera Champion from New York, who agreed to share images from the *Beyond Birds* dialogue book, and Toti O'Brien, a wonderful artist, poet, & musician. ~Maja Trochimczyk, Editor

Rules for Happy Holy Days

Don't play Christmas carols at the airport. Amidst the roar of jet engines, they will spread a blanket of loneliness over the weary, huddled masses, trying not to cry out for home.



Don't put Christmas light on a poplar. With branches swathed in white galaxies, under yellow leaves, the tree will become foreign, like the skeleton of an electric fish, deep in the ocean.



Clean the windows from the ashes of last year's fires. Glue the wings of a torn paper angel. Brighten your home with the fresh scent of pine needles and rosemary.

Take a break from chopping almonds to brush the cheek of your beloved with the back of your hand, just once, gently. Smile and say: "You look so nice, dear, you look so nice."



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POEMS BY JUDY BARRAT

Judy Barrat has been a writer of poetry and fiction most of her life as a hobby and began presenting her work publicly in Los Angeles several years ago at open readings, as well as at music venues, sometimes with a vocalist weaving a song around one of her poems. She has been a featured poet at several Los Angeles poetry venues and has performed three very well reviewed one-woman shows of her poetry and stories, with musical accompaniment, at The Gardenia Club in Hollywood. Her work has been published in several anthologies, magazines and on-line journals. Her poem "I'm sorry, Mr. Webster..." was accidentally printed in *CQ* 47:3 without the lastline, so it is reprinted here in its entirety.

I'M SORRY, MR. WEBSTER . . .

but I must take issue with your authority as to two words you deem synonymous which, in my view, are not as inter-changeable as your famous book professes:

The words I refer to, if your please, are “naked” and “nude. At the risk of appearing argumentative sir, no one visits art houses to view famous Nakeds.

It is the “Nudes” -- those entrancing figures of women and men, unclothed, baring their bodies that we seek.

So you see “Nude” is art -- in the proper setting and in an improper setting which I will leave to your imagination “nude” may still be art though it may simply be embarrassing or even criminal.

“Naked” on the other hand I think is more synonymous with “exposed” for “naked” is so much more than baring the body. Naked is devoid of the mythic mask one might wear to hide the truth of oneself from the world -- the pain, fear, shame or insecurity.

Oh, Mr. Webster, I have never seen some of my friends unclothed and may never, but I have seen them naked, stripped of the armor and shield which enable them through each day. I have seen in their eyes unshed tears which bespeak hearts that ache with the pain of caring too much or, perhaps, not enough.

However, sir, I concede that in personal relationships, nude is so much more delightful when both parties are naked.

~ Judy Barrat

Published in the *California Quarterly* 47 No. 3, Autumn 2021



From *Ulysses' Journey* by Toti O'Brien. Totihan.net

THE ROAD

I left behind the street of childhood
to navigate the highway of life,
exchanged dirt of backyard and joy of
sandbox for dust of the open road.

In a haze of youthful exuberance, I
searched for adventure described in books.

I climbed mountains, crossed deserts,
sailed seas to cities and streets in lands
far and near; encountered life, both sweet
and simple, and also shockingly brutal and
barbaric and stood impotent, in my naivete
to do more than extend a hand. But some-
times, only sometimes, that was enough.

I found joy and generosity in places of dire
need and deprivation, sadness and
selfishness in the midst of opulence and plenty.

No longer do I walk carefree, inhaling
nature's bounty, but run, frantic, in an

THE BEACH

The waves rise and fall
in undulating swirls.
I sit in the sand on this
familiar expanse of beach.
This sand knows all my secrets,
my past, my now.

I remember how, as children
we played, you and I;
laughing, crying,
growing, changing.
Only this beach
does not change.

I see your blue eyes,
dimpled grin, wild dark hair,
muscles of your bronzed
body rippling in the sun,
as, unaware of your magnificence
you run into the sea.

The waves roar
reminding me
they have taken you;
I shout to them:
"I'm here - Take me too"
as I walk to the water's edge
and into the sea.

The sun is bright;
icy wetness bites
my ankles, legs, hips.
I dive deep into a wave.
In the turbulent darkness
I feel you near.

Your voice
permeates the abyss:
It implores me
"Reach for the sun, for life".
Tossed by the current,
I reach out in panic
and break the surface
gasping in the sun.

~ Judy Barrat

THE ROAD, cont.

endless quest for-- HOME, as I mourn
the death of innocence and damn the
dawn of disillusion.

On this narrow track of time every now
becomes then in the blur of contemplation
of tomorrow. And while each impediment
on this path may proclaim: **this Road
Leads Nowhere**, I find the fortune
I believed this trip would provide when
I or anyone extends a hand because
sometimes, that's enough.

I AM

Once I was a cloud
afloat in the space
between there and here;
I faded into nothingness.

Once I was the earth,
a blue spec in the universe
orbiting an uncaring sun;
it lost its grip and let go.

And once I was snail on the
ocean shore, enticed into a
wave to ride the tides into
a thousand tomorrows.

Today I am drawn from forest's
edge into its depths by whisper
of breeze through boughs,
a language of rippling grace.

The clean green scent of the air,
solitude of sunlight through
treetops, splendiferous silence,
speak karmically to my heart.

I am free simply to be;
we breathe life to one another,
the trees and me, and for these
moments, as never before

I am,
I am,
I AM.

~ Judy Barrat

ME ME ME – A Poem By Pamela Stone Singer

ME ME ME

*Tell the King; the fair wrought house has fallen.
No shelter has Apollo, nor sacred laurel leaves;
The fountains are now silent; the voice is stilled.
It is finished.*

*Oracle of Delphi, 393 A.D.**

rain outside the high school
where I teach students to write poetry
at 3:00 p.m. they pour out of the building as though it were ablaze texting
friends a few feet away, light years away, in a foreign country

some text over a hundred times a day
sleep with phones beside them as if the phones
were going to plant kisses on their lips

overhead, flocks of geese fly through downpours
a few students take pictures of the rainbow appearing
no one else notices
and there are 300 kids on smartphones, twitter, facebook, taking selfies
who rush from the building as though it were ablaze

i don't understand this communication that negates
the soft enunciation of vowels, the closed sound
of consonants, the origins of I in our alphabet:

*Phoenicians used a backwards z called yod, meaning hand.
Greeks used angular versions of I, changed its name to iota.
Medieval times i became a line with a curl.
Today I stands boldly on a page.*

eye, window of clarity in bony sockets of skulls
omniscient, like the Pythia of Delphi
Selli at Dodona who spoke through rustling leaves

imagine life with words only on screens
not feeling pages of books
not reading ancient texts for clarity

when life comes alive with words
I becomes we, me becomes us
myself becomes the earth

~ Pamela Stone Singer



From *Ulysses' Journey* by Toti O'Brien. Totihan.net

* NOTE: In 389 A.D., under the reign of Theodosius I, Christian attacks against pagan temples continued. The Emperor ordered all pagan temples closed. Within 20 years the Western Roman Empire fell. For the first time in 800 years no oracular statements were given.

Four Poems by Dave Malone

Dave Malone is a poet and filmmaker from the Missouri Ozarks. These poems are from his seventh volume, *Tornado Drill*, forthcoming from Aldrich Press in March and available for preorder. Dave can be found online in the usual haunts, particularly Instagram @davemalone.

WALK IN THE WOODS

At once whatever happened starts receding.
—Philip Larkin

Last night I walked the woods
lit by the final moon of the month.

Days don't count here
beneath the centuries-old pines

where my grandmother took her solace
on hard farm days, passing up

the washboard or jam-making
for the eternal whooshing

of the forest as much serenity
as yearning.

~ originally published in *Spindrift*

LEAF BLOWER

During my morning meditation, the neighbor
begins her leaf-blowing. She's precise

the way she slides from side to side,
the way she forms right angles

as if acing high school math.
Her noise travels into the hollow

louder than semi-trucks howling
from the bypass. She blows

into blowing into blowing
until a vortex of leaves

half-eaten by mower and storm
form in the narrows.

Here is a full sound. Here is
the aum I must have been waiting for.

~ originally published in *Midwest Review*



RECALLING LIGHT

It is the light I think
I recall. Was it church

or vacation Bible school,
the desks like pews,

when the sun's morning rays
ached to rest on shoulders

while the teacher dimmed
at the front, barely perceptible

like God. I remember now
the gospel the instructor ignored—

how the cypress floor danced
with golden dust in its hair.

~ Dave Malone, originally published in *Right Hand Pointing*

HERON

I startled the great blue heron
when my kayak scratched stones
in the river's low summer water.
With little effort, like the way
one takes off shoes, the grand bird
flapped long arms, held steady,
until she found the shore opposite me
and slipped into the sycamores
below the bluff. She stayed there
a long time, longer than my life.

~ Dave Malone
originally published
in *Right Hand Pointing*



From *Ulysses' Journey* by Toti O'Brien, 2002
Totihan.net

CALIFORNIA CLOUDSCAPES

The sky solid blue, your gallery
disappoints. I await the next show.

Give me a full circle exhibit,
a different artist in each direction,

a cumulus haven where sun-lit gods
and harp-playing angels lounge.

Surprise me with a Mount Shasta mirage,
a Disney display of dragons and dinosaurs,

or the drama of an El Greco storm, one that
reduces me, puts me in my place.

Let me study the brush strokes and guess
artists from baroque to surreal.

Show me an orange, yellow, blood-red sunset,
invoking nature's Edward Munch scream.

Bring on Georgia O'Keefe puffballs,
Van Gogh swirls over grassland,

even a Rothko mist, but please no grey washes,
those ho-hum shows that go on and on.

~ Jeanie Greensfelder
published in *Birdland Journal* 2019

Jeanie Greensfelder's poems have been published at *American Life in Poetry*, *Writer's Almanac*, and *Poetry Foundation's Poem of the Day*; in anthologies: *Paris, Etc.*, *Pushing the Envelope: Epistolary Poems*; and in journals: *Miramar*, *Thema*, *Askew*, *Persimmon Tree*, and others. She served as the San Luis Obispo County poet laureate, 2017,18. Jeanie's books are: *Biting the Apple*, *Marriage and Other Leaps of Faith* and *I Got What I Came For*. Website: jeaniegreensfelder.com

Three Poems by Bruce Gallie

PINE

Evergreen last seems long ago
been Christmas scent and scene -
Lucky, old sweetheart, old friend
passed
the grains aligned well before the end
I knew what would be...
You softened the roar

PINE, cont.

salvaged the moods,
when lost in the woods
your timbre was with
mine —
pine, Lucky
pine.

~ Bruce Gallie

BABY PICTURE

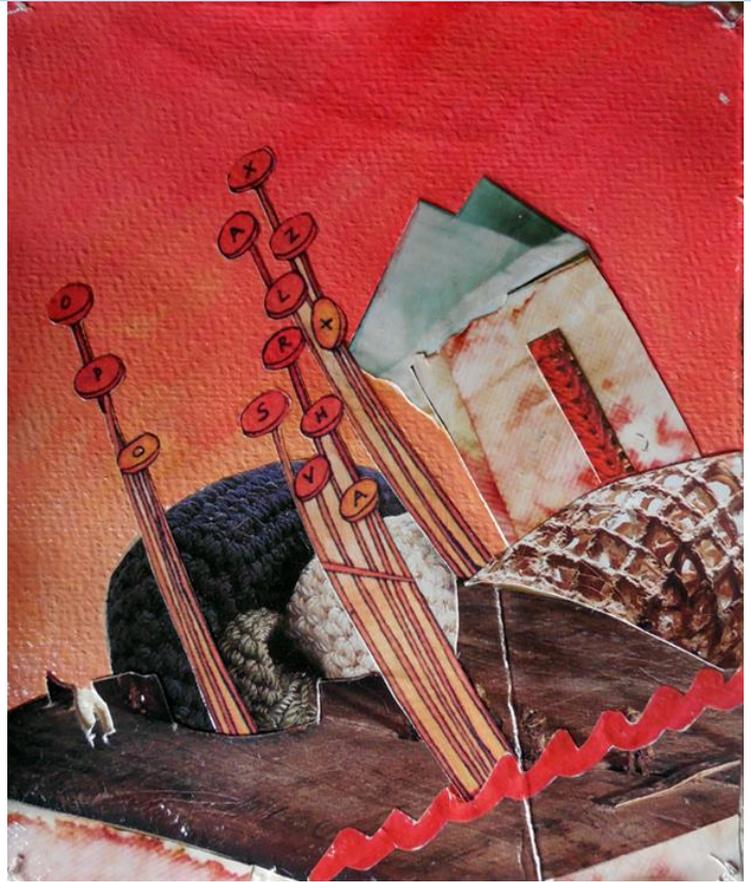
Ol' Sol will rule the roost
in his own steady way
he beams through the evening window
turns the wall gold from gray

the shadow line climbing
to a sepia toned portrait —
an old baby picture
hanging less than straight

the dresser in the corner
lost a knob, a trophy sits on top —
batter at the plate. There's a vase
with a paper daisy, a Baby Ben stopped

on a bed, a dusty quilt
and old magazines strewn
some Elvis 45's with worn jackets
there's the title: "Blue Moon"

as evening falls, the shadow
crosses that chromatic display
the child's flushed cheeks fade
to the background, hair to gray.



From *Ulysses' Journey* by Toti O'Brien, 2002. Totihan.net



From *Ulysses' Journey* by Toti O'Brien, 2002.
Totihan.net

LAST ROSE OF SUMMER

~ thanks to Sir Thomas Moore

"Tis the last rose of summer" Mom would sing to me
"all her lovely companions are left faded and gone"
when I was but five felt kindred to this song
as the years bore me up in a see saw sea.

With weakness and strength, full of folly and free
spent time in kinship if not more alone.
"Tis the last rose of summer" sing to me
"all her lovely companions are left faded and gone."

With the years wisdom waxed slowly
sure as time erodes the bone.
We fall alone but stand as one -
this is the law that lets us be.
"Tis the last rose of summer "-
sing, last rose, sing to me.

~ Bruce Gallie

Bruce G. started writing poetry right after high school and has continued to do so with several long and short hiatus. He has been in the army, a cook, and an electrician throughout his career. He retired in 2010. He published many poems in the *California Quarterly* since its genesis.

High Seas and Low Tides, Essay by Daniel E. Blackston

**CALIFORNIA
QUARTERLY**
CALIFORNIA STATE POETRY SOCIETY



Summer 2021
Volume 47, Number 2

Marilyn Robertson's poem, "Low Tide," from *California Quarterly* Summer 2021, is a real gem that just might slip past your eye because it's only ten lines long, tucked in the upper left corner on page thirty-six of this excellent issue of a consistently finely edited and printed journal.

What's eye-catching about this poem is the way Robertson gets the most out of every word and every poetic choice. It'd be a really long blog if I pointed everything right in this little poem, so I'll just touch on the highlights and you can tell me what you find that I left out.

The first line of the poem is: "I like the moreness of time at low tide." Clearly, the word "moresness" is the flash in the line, but equally as smooth, if not as obvious, is the way Robertson connects her experience to time, rather than to the sea itself. She sees the retreating water as a gap in time where she can "stretch" and "sigh" and maybe build (or not build) a sand castle. She writes:

Time for a stretch, a sigh
Time for nothing perfect.

The repeating of the first word "time" in consecutive lines is an obvious time-like device, like seconds ticking away. The next stanza describes sand, a blue bucket, and a pile orange peels in simple diction that emphasizes that it is the gap in time, not necessarily the particular specifics of place, that define the experience.

The poem concludes:

The nearness of far away.
The sparkle of here and now.

Here, the last word "now" forms a delayed, slant-rhyme with the "low" in "low tide" from the opening line. This links the idea of low tide and the freedom from time together in a declarative image: "The sparkle of here and now." The rhyme surprises and cements the sentiment simultaneously.

Robertson has described a true transcendental moment. Standing beside the sea, the poet literally moves beyond time to a moment of pure creation and possibility.

Further points of interest: the stanza form helps promote a sense of harmony and regularity like the coming and going of the tides, or the passing of time. Two tercets alternate with two couplets to complete a ten line poem that should have won someone's brilliancy prize. Really, I'm leaving out many of the most striking elements. Go read the poem and see what you find.

California Quarterly Summer 2021 is a great read with a sixty pages of poems. There's even one by me, "Jar of Flowers," that I'd like your opinion on. Some have called it too sentimental.

Speaking of which, watch this space for an announcement about my "Four Sea Poems" due to be published over at Kelp Journal. They should be out any day! Hit talk above or below to let me know your thoughts.

~ Daniel E. Blackston
Reprinted from *Stone Secrets Blog*, December, 2021

Laura Schulkind's Review of *Make For Higher Ground* by Diane Lee Moomey

Make For Higher Ground by Diane Lee Moomey.
Barefoot Muse Press, 2021.
ISBN 9798509619205; 63 pp. \$10.95
<http://www.barefootmuse.com/>

Diane Lee Moomey is one of those masterful form poets who uses structure to challenge boundaries. Her new collection, *Make for Higher Ground* (Barefoot Muse Press, 2021), does just that. Throughout, it is evident she has drawn on *I Ching* #57, *Penetrating Influence*, which she speaks of in the introduction and riffs on in the opening poem, as the collection both offers us a path to higher ground, and persistently urges us to take it.

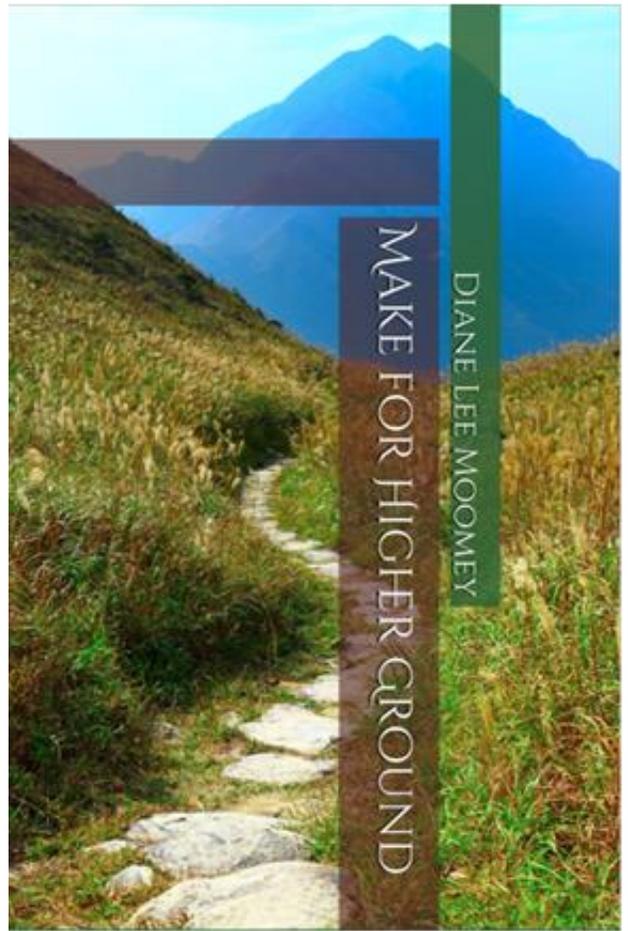
Her path begins with "*Small Wild Things*", a group of poems that leads us into the "tall red grasses" that lie just beyond the road. She finds sleek snakes in "the long stems my father's mower doesn't/reach" (*Wearing Snakes*); and imagines wild cats in the forest abutting the golf green (*Time Share at the Country Club*). In juxtaposing human activity and wildness, she urges that we not forget our connection to the wild—even as we mow and drive and golf and stay indoors with the radio blaring. As she concludes in *Chaparral*, just knowing ". . . the wild/ is out there. Sometimes/that's all you need."

From there, she takes us to our beginnings in a section titled "*Tap Roots*"— suggesting we can't get much of anywhere without understanding our origins. "I'd open trunks and boxes, pry;/so certain that I'd found the place/where all the family secrets lie." (*The Other Attic*). The intimate details of these poems (the "wicker chair with yellow chintz/ that curved to her fit"—*Her Screen Porch*) also convey a loving eye—reminding us that we can cherish where we came from without getting trapped there. In her exquisite poem, *Carousel*, she considers her own mother's choices, and in so doing perhaps explains her own: "You could get off. You may have wanted something/else: the purple unicorn . . ."

Now grounded, the book offers us *Fractals*, a series of poems on how to navigate a dangerous world. Here we find perfectly placed at the middle of the book, *Water Above Water Below*, (a riff on *I Ching* #29—*Danger*), which gives us these final lines: "The lamps are going out, dear/one by precious one and it's for us/to choose to live in darkness or, blind/and trembling, make for higher ground/and set ourselves alight."

Then, in the last two sections she shows the way out of the darkness. In *Coming Up For Air*, the poems remind us to find delight in the world we have—embrace dear friends ("I'll squeeze Purell into my right/palm and gently stroke your left cheek"); arrange pandemic picnics; rescue "former treasures left behind" from the dollar bins.

In *Lights Above the Poles* she adds, and ends with, love. A gorgeous collection full of sky and light, these poems tell stories that remember, long for, miss and sustain love. Importantly, there is nothing saccharin here. Indeed, the last poem ends ominously, "Making coffee, breaking camp—/we do this well together,/but whitecaps, winds and lowered skies; promise heavy weather." And that's the point. Higher ground is not a panacea; it isn't even a place. It is a way of being in the world that Moomey gently urges in this compelling collection.



~ Laura Schulkind

Kathy Lohrum Cotton's *Common Ground* reviewed by Michael Escoubas

Common Ground by Kathy Lohrum Cotton
Deep Well Poetry, 75 Poems, 103 Pages, \$12.00
ISBN: 97986111359884

As I write this review (late April) President Biden has just completed his first address to a joint session of Congress. Senator Tim Scott has given the Republican rejoinder. Listening to both men recalled poet Kathy Lohrum Cotton's latest collection, *Common Ground*. Whether you believe in Providence, Fate, Coincidence, or just plain Randomness, you must admit these ducks fell nicely into a neat row.

Enter Kathy Cotton, stage left. With quiet assurance and ripened poetic skills, Cotton offers a collection of poems which bear directly on what many are seeking. Remarkably, these poems were written "prior" to the advent of Covid-19. Which is to say that her theme is timeless and does not need a worldwide pandemic to justify its existence.

An epigraph by no less a luminary than Walt Whitman, sets the tone: "Every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." It is the gift of language that humans alone possess and share. Appropriately, the poem "Finding Common Ground," opens the door to Cotton's quest:

Before the extravagant feast,
the flowing wine of words,

let me break bread
at the table of

a neighbor starving
on broth-thin bromides,

elders who chew
old shibboleth scraps,

the child choking down
force-fed fear.

I got the feeling early-on that this poem represents the poet's life. Helping a person in need is more important than just setting words down on a page. Only then:

let my pen touch
the waiting page,

common GROUND



let the ink's dark nectar
spill out

every ripened syllable
of words worth sharing.

Stylistically, Cotton does something I've never seen before. At the end of many of her poems, she adds key words in a delicate light-face font; subtly highlighting a theme she wants readers to consider.

The volume is organized in three sections: "Quiet Words," "Shared Words," and "Last Words." In an age of loud talk, street and gun violence, and folks insisting that it's *My way or the highway*, Cotton's wisdom is like a warm cup of Chamomile tea slowly sipped.

In my youth I recall how the evenings took on a unique fragrance after a soft rain, Cotton took me back in her poem "The Scent of Rain," where her old Lithuanian neighbor:

who stands in rain-spattered pajamas,
breathing, just slow-breathing
in the middle of his wire-fenced yard—

...

This cloudburst soaking
his drought-brown garden brought
him from his bed, quick like a child,
wordless with wonder at the scent of rain.

While Cotton writes primarily in *verse libre*, her skill in formal verse is evident in the villanelle, “Words of Peace”:

There is sweet symmetry in words of peace,
as both the mind and heart communicate—
a balance of withholding and release
through conversation shared: the centerpiece
of knowing when to speak and when to wait.
There is sweet symmetry in words of peace,
not toppled into dogma or caprice.
It chooses not to flatter or berate,
but balances withholding and release
to find a common ground where conflicts cease
to rage alone, a place where pain abates.
There is sweet symmetry in words of peace:
both hope and understanding can increase
when empathy is speaking’s gentle mate.
It balances withholding and release:
a spoken and unspoken masterpiece—
consideration, rather than debate.
There is sweet symmetry in words of peace,
a balance of withholding and release.

Titles in Part I, entice me to reconsider my life perspectives, titles such as: “Quiet Friend,” “Gift of Your Silence-Keeping,” “Inner Balance,” and “Slow Thaw,” hang like medals on a service-member’s coat; commendations won on the battlefield of life.

Moving into Part II, “Shared Words,” I found myself focused on “The Sweetness of Doing Nothing.” This poem explores the tension between “busyness” as a virtue and *Dolce far niente*. (Translated in the title). This shared word is one your reviewer needs to hear.



Vera Campion’s image from a dialogue with Alice Pero.

Perhaps I should emulate the poem’s protagonist and, “stretch full length on a Montana stone.” In this section shared words become “strands of simple kindness, a treasure to pass down.”

I recall special evenings tiptoeing into my children’s rooms to read stories and say their prayers. The ease of those moments, the quietude of being with them, things we shared before clicking off the lights, returned to me as I entered Part III, “Last Words.”

I lingered long with “Sweet Cluster” where:

I fell asleep to the lullaby
of a family’s last words
of the day, to soft sounds
of Mother and Father kissing.

Impressive tenderness and restraint. Many of these poems could be read as testimonies to loved ones who have passed on. While platitudes often accompany loss and death, the poet’s treatment is fresh and original. She remembers her brother, the “only shaved face in a little house crammed with petticoats.” Ed was, “the last of all who knew me from my beginning.”

In “The Last of Life,” death is compared to:

Winter’s longing to shed
the weight of every last leaf,
to stand proudly stripped,
wind-whipped to the marrow,
baring misshapen limb and scar.



Vera Campion's image from *Beyond Birds and Answers*

The "welcome home"
rivers sing to scattered streams
and oceans whisper
to heavy rainclouds.

The ripple
of a zephyr's soft breath
across ripened fields.

*So, this
is how it feels
to love the last of life.*

Indeed, Kathy Lohrum Cotton's *Common Ground*, closes with a blessing I wish for everyone who buys this superb volume:

Leave something
of sweetness and substance
in the mouth of the world.

--Anna Belle Kaufman, "Cold Solace"

~ Michael Escoubas
Reprinted from *Quill and Parchment*

Toti O'Brien's Review of *Beyond Birds and Answers* by Alice Pero & Vera Campion

Beyond Birds & Answers: a Dialogue by Alice Pero and Vera Campion,
Elyssar Press, 2021; 78 pages, ISBN: 978-1733452991

Beyond Birds and Answers is a symphony of questions in three movements, varied in color and rhythm, yet unified by thematic elements echoing throughout. Musical in its essence, masterly harmonized, as tightly interlaced as a great jazz impro, this small gem of a book is the joint effort of a poet and an artist so flexible, they evade the confines of their disciplines and create a unique esthetic experience. Words sing, colors and shapes leap and dance, poems spill from the page and create a fluid narrative, single artworks melt into a moving kaleidoscope. Artist Vera Campion's imagery is deceptively simple. At a closer look, her scenes are brimming with mystery. The improbable shape, the daring combination of colors, the hidden, puzzling detail, the curious overlapping. Alice Pero, the poet, doesn't miss a bit of such complexity. She explores and fully enjoys the labyrinth, unafraid to ask both pertinent and, more importantly, "impertinent" questions—the clear-eyed ones born by a keen, fierce imagination. The art promptly responds.

Guides are there through the journey, different for part one, two and three: birds, flowers, and stars. They are brave, and elusive. As the title imply, they don't provide answers, only point at new possibilities. Children will feel at ease into the vibrant universe woven by Pero and Campion, but theirs isn't a children book. For the visual part, we can think of Chagall, Matisse, Klee. The poetry has a surrealist flavor. Verse and figures unfold like a game of Exquisite Corpse, delightful in its sheer unpredictability, yet magically endowed with coherence and meaning.

~ Toti O'Brien

Neil Leadbeater's Review of *Beyond Birds and Answers* by Alice Pero & Vera Campion

Beyond Birds & Answers: a Dialogue
by Alice Pero and Vera Campion
Elyssar Press, 2021; 78 pp, ISBN: 978-1733452991

The first thing to notice about this book is that it is a collaboration between two people. It is subtitled 'a dialogue' and that is precisely what it is. The book is dedicated to the memory of Bob Hart (1931-2014), a New York poet whose work on dialoguing has been an inspiration to Pero and Campion down the years.

Alice Pero has been creating dialogue poems with more than 20 poets over the years. She started dialoguing with other poets as a dancer in the 1980s and these continuing exchanges have resulted in thousands of pages of poetry. Her work with New York City artist Vera Campion is her first conversation with works of art. Pero is a teacher of poetry and a member of the California Poets in Schools, where she has developed a unique style of teaching children poetry based on rhythm and other art forms. She is also a classically trained flutist and formed the Windsong Players Ensemble in 2015 which performs regularly in the Los Angeles area.



Of Czech parentage, Vera Campion moved to New York in 1970. She studied watercolour with Theo and later studied at the Arts Student League with leading New York artist Knox Martin. In the early nineties, she studied Intaglio printing with Veejay Kumar at the Manhattan Graphic Center, New York City.

Campion views her art as 'Reality in Metaphor' and is particularly interested in collage as an art form. She likes to see a picture grow organically from cut-up shapes so that the final image comes as a surprise. Her work has been shown in Prague, the USA and Canada. The intense use of colour in her work has prompted comparisons with Henri Matisse, a comparison that she is very happy with. The artwork in this collaboration is full of movement and colour. Her collages of people, animals, birds, flowers and stars evoke a sense of childlike wonder about the amazing world in which we live. Taken as a whole they convey a rich visual vocabulary that is matched with equal force by Pero's poetic vision.

The book is divided into three distinct chapters. Each chapter contains 10 poems. The layout of the book differs from the conventional format insofar as there is no contents page, none of the poems have titles and the works of art, which have titles assigned to them outside of the book, are not titled either. The poems and paintings are placed opposite each other so that the reader does not have to turn the page. In the first chapter, the reader is invited to look at the artwork first and then to read the poem. All the poems in this chapter are justified to the left. In the second and third chapters the reader is invited to read the poem first and then to look at the artwork. All the poems in this chapter are justified to the right. This prompts the question: which came first, the poem or the artwork? Intriguingly, we are never told.

The three chapters are quite distinct. In the first chapter the reader is introduced to the simple image of birds, especially the crow. The second chapter focusses on some of the darker aspects of life including the concept of evil. The last chapter moves towards a spiritual perspective. Here, the image of the star is very much in evidence. Despite the differences, there are common threads that weave their way through the book, giving it a sense of unity and purpose. Magic, movement and colour combined with a childlike innocence and sense of awe, keep the poems anchored while at the same time allowing the reader to use his or her own imagination as well. It is as if

Pero is holding her poems as one would hold a kite giving the reader enough free reign to watch the kite fly freely in the wind.

In a review like this, offering the reader an extract is tantamount to offering only one half of the story because the poem should really be seen in conjunction with the artwork. I should therefore explain that this poem is one that is positioned alongside an artwork showing five pink and red flowering tulips standing at different heights against a dark sloping background and clear blue sky.

So tall and straight
meeting the sunlight
in colors we take in
like whiskey, straight
no chaser

There is no escape
You announce your beauty
with no apology, no safe distancing
We must breathe your air
without complaint
We are not afraid
of beauty



Originally a dancer and a musician before she became a writer, Pero's poems have a musicality and a rhythm all of their own. This may be one of the reasons why the punctuation is sparse. Only commas and question marks are used. There are no full stops. For Pero, rhythm and the positioning of the line break provide all that is necessary to convey meaning. Some poems begin with a question or a series of questions while others end with a question. All the questions are rhetorical. We do not expect them to be answered.

Like Campion's artwork, Pero's poems are full of birds, flowers and colours. Crows are mentioned five times, the word 'flower' is mentioned 18 times and the word 'colour' and /or the mention of a specific colour appears frequently throughout all three chapters of the book. Campion's predominant colour is blue and that is the colour that is mentioned the most by Pero.

The idea of collage that is portrayed in Campion's artwork is captured in Pero's poems in a number of different ways: 'daisies' are 'divided in so many parts,' somebody falls 'into a dozen pieces,' 'flower heads fall / as though beheaded,' 'stars' fly from someone's eyes and doves explode, 'leaping into the sky'. Pero's phrase 'an explosion of doves' is particularly arresting since doves are traditionally viewed as symbols of peace. Like collage, Pero holds these fragments together with her carefully chosen words.

The following stanza is taken from the final chapter. The first two lines reminded me of Holman Hunt's allegorical painting, 'The Light of the World'. In direct contrast to that painting, the final two lines startle us with their image. They evoke a real sense of frustration that some people just cannot 'see' that there is so much beauty in the world and more to life than meets the eye.

I will knock at his door
of disbelief
and throw a brick
into his consciousness

This collaboration is a testament to the power of the imagination. It shows us how art and poetry have the capacity to inspire us. One of the many beautiful things about this book is that it will appeal to all ages. Fully recommended.

!~ Neil Leadbeater, published in *Quill & Parchment* and is reprinted with kind permission.

Karla Linn Merrifield's Review of *Images* by Michael Escoubas

Images: A Collection of Ekphrastic Poems by Michael Escoubas, 29 Poems ~ 29 Paintings & Photographs ~ 58 Pages, \$15. Cyberwit.net ISBN 978-81-8253-761-3. <https://www.cyberwit.net/publications/1755>

Readers of *Quill & Parchment* know about ekphrastic poetry which has long been publishing a section dedicated to ekphrasis. The journal is not alone in its spotlighting of the art of poetry written in response to a work of art (which is what ekphrasis is—that simple). The online quarterly *Visual Verse: An Anthology of Art and Words* has been solely devoted to ekphrastic poetry for eight years. For each edition, the editors select an image and invite poets to respond to it in much the same way as does *Quill & Parchment*.

You might even call ekphrastic poetry a rage! In September, my local poets organization, *Just Poets of Greater Rochester*, offered at its monthly meeting, an ekphrastic workshop conducted by poet Kitty Jospé, whom I've longed deemed *the* guru of ekphrasis. Her many years as a docent at the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery has inspired Kitty to write dozens of stellar ekphrastic poems. It was Kitty who first introduced me to the genre.

With all that may be said about history, background, and resources of the genre, one can do no better than dive into Michael Escoubas' *Images: A Collection of Ekphrastic Poetry*. This work is destined to become a handbook for both beginners and experienced poets who embrace this poetic approach.

Michael is an accomplished poet of ekphrasis, right up there with Kitty. His new collection (which follows his 2018 ekphrastic journey with Monet, *Monet in Poetry and Paint*, and his 2019 collection, *Steve Henderson in Poetry and Paint*) in that wildly popular genre is a stunner.

Here are twenty-nine poems paired with beautifully reproduced full-color paintings, photographs, a quilt, and even a swatch of embroidery that lead us from image into words woven with flashes of wisdom. In "Sea and Shadow," based on a watercolor by Blanca Alvarez, Michael observes, "We live in the/ continuous mystery of now." In "Village by the Sea," he reminds us to listen to ocean music: "...absorbed in each other/ the caressing of the sea/ is like a song..." And, although the poem is based on an amazingly evocative photograph by Victor Riehl, you will see no lovers in the image. That, too, is part of Michael's ekphrastic genius—he brings something greater to the original work of art! All the while wisely inviting us to experience anew the soothing voice of Earth's great waters.

The book also offers us welcomed moments of tenderness. Tears nearly sprang into my eyes reading "Ingrid loves white orchids," after a photograph by Sharmagne Leland-St. John (editor of *Quill & Parchment*). In the poem a shy teenage boy marks an important passage in his budding love life. About to head off on an important date with a girl, "... he takes a moment to tie/ the orchid around her wrist ..." Remember those days? Your first prom? That slender boy who brought you flowers? Or your own boyhood and that significant evening that began with a rose or carnation? Almost impossible not to scan your memories in search of a similar scene, such is the evocative power of Michael's lines.

What a joy it is to turn the page and be treated to a brief lesson in art history, too! Take the poem "Vibrations of Color," which reflects on Paul Cezanne's 1897 painting "Pines and Rocks." We learn about Cezanne's realism, and how he "never fit in / with the Impressionists" as well as how he "became the bridge / between Monet and Picasso...."

You needn't be a denizen of the world's art museums nor even a reader of poetry to appreciate this collection. There's something for everyone in Michael's handsome book. It's accessible, immediate, absorbing—and delightfully quiet. Art, and the poetry of art, enables healing. Thanks to Michael, a seer and teacher, we may emerge from his pages having come to "love the austerity of ice-blue trees," as he writes in "The Empty View." With poet Michael Escoubas in our lives, we need never fear an empty view on life, love, art, and poetry.

~ Karla Linn Merrifield. Reprinted from *Quill & Parchment*

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 CSPS. Reading fees are \$1.50 per poem with a \$3.00 minimum for members of CSPS and/or NFSPS societies 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 first page with all contact information (name, address, telephone number and email address) and the titles of the poems being submitted. At this time there are three ways to submit:

1. by email. Poets may submit their work by email to: SPSMonthlyContests@gmail.com (Specify Month) and simultaneously pay their contest fees by PayPal to: CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety@gmail.com.
2. by regular mail, enclosing printed copies of poems and your check, CSPS Monthly Contest – (Specify Month) Post Office Box 4288, Sunland, California 91041
3. online on our website CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety.org, or

All Monthly Contests are judged by Alice Pero, CSPS Monthly Contest Judge. The 1st place winner receives half of the prize pool for pools less than \$100. For pools of \$100 or more, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd place winners receive \$50, \$10 and \$5, respectively. If there are insufficient fees submitted, the minimum prize is \$10. There are no exceptions to the prize disbursement rules. The monthly contest winners are announced as they are awarded and the winners are notified by mail. All of the winners for the year are listed in the first CSPS Newsbriefs of the following year. In addition, the first prize winner poems are published in the CSPS Poetry Letter (PDF, email, posted on website) and posted on our blog. Please note: Do not send SAE's. We do not return poems. If you win, we will let you know. Otherwise there are no notifications.



CSPS Monthly Contest Themes (Revised)

- ① January: Nature, Seasons, 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: Best of Your Best (Winning or published poems only. Indicate name of contest or publication and the issue/dates of publication/award.)

Vera Campion's image from *Beyond Birds and Answers*.

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