

Poetry Letter

California State Poetry Society



A HARVEST OF POEMS AND POETRY BOOKS



Plums and Currants, image from a fruit plate.

Do you see how luscious the Italian plums, red and white currants are in this picture? The author of this delightful painting remains anonymous and the painting itself is from my fruit plate with gold trim that I found in a California Goodwill. Too many “modern” sets are plain, white, thick, clumsy, and plain boring. These bunches of fruit envisioned by an Anonymous (the most prolific author of works of art in human history!) for placement on delicate porcelain, and then on dining room table, come from the still-life tradition in European painting that extends back to the Renaissance. Maybe it is time for it to be reborn?

Is everything new better? Is “modern” more praiseworthy for its Bauhaus-inspired simplicity than the overly ornamental Baroque? These currants remind me of a currant bush in my childhood garden and the joy of picking the ripest, golden drops of tart juice, still more sour than sweet. My Mom made the red and white currants into jelly, preserving them without cooking, to keep the Vitamin C and nutrients alive. In the *Poetry Letter* we preserve once-published poems and share the sweet and tart taste of words. After all, being fruitful means being creative. Enjoy the fruit of poets’ labor!

Maja Trochimczyk, CSPS President

FEATURED POET – JEFF GRAHAM

The Featured Poet is Jeff Graham, who studied English and Creative Writing at San Francisco State University. He is the author of the chapbook *The Eye of Morning* (Zeugma Impress Inc.) and his publications include appearances in journals such as *Blue Unicorn*, *Indefinite Space*, *California Quarterly*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, & *Grasslimb*. Jeff is also a contributor to various haiku journals and is one of 12 poets included in *Crystal Fire. Poems of Joy and Wisdom* (Moonrise Press, 2022).

ANGELS MUNDANE

1
Slight breeze on a slight day.
The moth is on the bough.
The bough falls to the ground.
The moth falls with the bough.
Remnants of impact flutter upward.
The sky remains the sky remaining.

2
Nightfall’s fallen. First star lit in lanternglass.
The moth equatorially maps out the fiery.
Nightly happenings – happening happens.
Lantern-lined sky. First match’s last.
Flicker of wings, of glint within glass fractures.
The moth equatorially crawls the skyline.
No, it is the lantern that staggers
as on the horizon it passes past.

3

Between knowing what to do
without doing, and doing
without knowing what it does,
the moth falls not from,
but within its capacity for grace,
after singeing wing to star.

4

Night's nix, dimlit wicktrim.
The moth trudges the waxing moon
while traipsing through the wax:
bothity of both.
An unheld candle draws near the ever-
encompassing, all-
assimilating
nil,
is snuffed by a clasping of patterned wings –
is snuffed by clasping of patterns.

NOTE: Section 3 is the edited version of a piece
published in *Common Ground Review*,
Fall/Winter 2018

5

Stray wasp by night –
irregular flicker
on and off the porchlight bulb's
irregular flicker,
together with the usual moths' usual.
Morning:
motionlessness, though less
than motion.
Swift kick of the leg of the collective
deckboard remainder.
Small crawls
of a cenotaph of sunrise.

6

The moth is born by end of day.
The moth is old by end of night.
Fallings and Falls amid leaves
as (and as) leaves fall –
hesitancy not of will but of lightness –
upon and in-with an indifferent stream
that leads to a nondiscriminatory sea.
Of stars and of moons clung to by moths.
Of the suns of stars and the star of the sun.
The night is old with the moth's decline.
The sea is young by morning



SKETCHBOOK: ARTIST: REAL AND IMAGINARY 119

Journey home.
Canopy of bare branch above,
leaf over leaf over what unrevealed underfoot:
arrival without leaving.

THIRST

Kind thief, please take from my coffee cup
the rippling moon.
I have grown tired of sipping my gaze's reflection,
of eclipsing my reflection's reciprocation
with the swish of a plastic spoon.

Dearest Macrocosm, pardon my gross negligence.
I ended up swallowing night
and am drunk on the distant lights of stars,
on light,
on distances.

NOCTURNE 62

Haloed moon and I – gratefully,
none but the moon and I;
none but the moon and I to notice.

LEFT: Published: *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, 2021
ABOVE TOP: Published in *Asheville Poetry Review*, 2021
ABOVE: Published: *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, 2022

THE BANTAM HOURS 32

Between each stride lie random patches
of winter grass, too green to be green
beneath and between the sway of brown
of summer, made grey by summer's end,
grey-swayed by autumn-ending's wind.
Between each grass blade waits the void.
Between each void stands a patch of grass.

NOCTURNE 1

The shadow shared by the pine and me
becomes the whole of night.
The shadow shared by the pine and me,
who lean into each other's shoulders,
dances as we dance like trees,
lets fall its leaves as humans do.

TOP: Edited. Published in *Grasslimb* Spring 2020

ABOVE: Published in *Blue Unicorn* Fall 2021

THE BANTAM HOURS 89

In the inch between autumn and the hour –
miles of which ahead and behind,
miles of which wide.

My striding-through's mutual interlude –
mutual, thus with
(thus in, thus of)

and
subsequently

as.
And as such, the inching of my steps –
mileage made up of autumn's momentarilies.

And as such, a momentary I.

The inching by
of Autumn's catalogue of autumns.

Jeff Graham

ABOVE: Originally published as a 3-Line "Untitled" piece in
California Quarterly, Winter 2018.

WINNERS OF MONTHLY CONTESTS IN APRIL, MAY, & JUNE 2022

Alice Pero, Monthly Contests Judge, selected the following winners for the second quarter of 2022. For April, the 1st Prize was awarded to "Awaken" by Debra Darby. . For May (Personifications, Characters, Portraits) the 1st Prize went to Carol L. Hatfield "Cloud on the Ground" and the 2nd Prize to Joan Gerstein for "White on White." For June (the Supernatural), the 1st Prize winner was given to "Buffaloes Escape" by Pamela Stone Singer.



BUFFALOES ESCAPE

Wrapped in cloaks of snow, buffaloes
live in Moon's lightning-green eye.

Embedded in their bones
palimpsests reveal eternal life.

Etched with star drawings, stick figures and shapes
from outer space, their horns speak stories of worlds

where they travel calm plains.
Water songs and ceremonies, their messages.

Wander hills and valleys: cone flowers, golden rod, milkweed.
Speak the holiness of earth.

Pamela Stone Singer, 1st Prize, June 2022

CLOUD ON THE GROUND

(for my mule, Andromeda)

Never one to be
lost
in fog -
she calls
it
to her.
She shines
white as any opal -
with a quiet
fire
in the belly.
The fog holds
the four-beat
drum
of her pearl
hooves
and keeps it all
to itself.
The sky recognizes
her -
molds and
forms
soft cotton
sculptures
in her honor.
Cloud
on the ground
she is -
with one flick
of her tail
the rain
obeys
and we ride
the afternoon
on a veil
of grey...
iridescent
at the core...

*Carol L. Hatfield
First Prize, May 2022*

AWAKEN

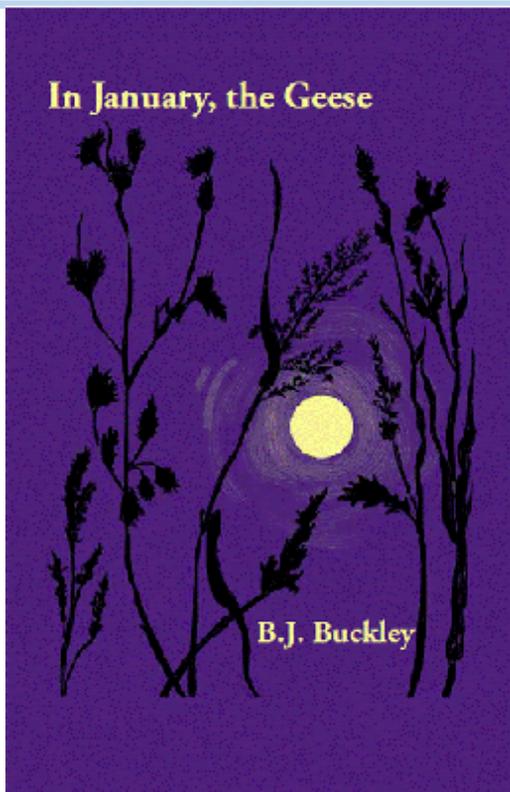
Find the strings
Ride the gleaming scales of the fish
blazing melon, gold, scarlet
nocturnal sapphire
before vanishing into the ocean at dawn.
Mooring the dreamless
dream remembering in tow
listen to the tides of morning.
The fishtail reveals its secret.
Awake to awaken
In waves of shimmering water,
The mystical call of the whale
beckons.
Awaken
Find the strings.

*Debra Darby
First Prize, April 2022*



MICHAEL ESCOUBAS REVIEWS IN JANUARY, THE GEESE BY B.J. BUCKLEY

26 poems, 48 pages, published by The Comstock Review, Inc. ISBN 978-1-7337051-3-4



It was in the summer of 1994 that my family and I were driving through Montana enroute from Illinois to Seattle. We got an early start out of Bozeman. As we approached an outcropping of boulders surrounded by a stand of pines, we beheld a partial arc of rainbow presenting just above the rocks, slicing through the spruces. This scene, a kind of spiritual awakening, planted seeds of desire to return.

B.J. Buckley's latest collection, *In January, the Geese*, centers me in the environs of Montana. (Without having to go there!) Winner of the prestigious *Comstock Poetry Review's 35th Anniversary Poetry Chapbook Contest*, this thin volume reads as big as Montana's azure-cyan sky.

While we live in the *seemingly* technologically advanced 21st century, there is little hint of this in Buckley's treatment of life in Montana. This is a poet who loves the life she lives. She doesn't depend on cell phones with all the attendant gadgetry. She is close to the land. I can think of no better trait for a poet. Absent such closeness, poets are bereft to write with insight and truth.

As I read these poems Buckley's "big-shouldered," earth-bound brogue lassoed me. Her diction is precise and burley. She has lived her poems. She opens with "Upthrust," which describes a coulee (gully or ravine) belching out what lies beneath. Note her vivid terms in this excerpt:

Frost heaves itself from the ground: everything
buried begins its slow swim to the surface.
Fields sprout stones, small hills of barbed wire
and baling twine lift overnight from plowed
furrows.

Not a word is wasted as the poet paints a word-picture better than any artist. Readers need this lead-poem for context. The coulee provides a snapshot of life and sets the collection's tone: "Deep in coulees / where the dead have long buried the dead—/ mare with her colt caught breech half born, / gutshot deer, lost lamb—the soft earth/ that swallowed them opens its mouth, / spits back their bones like pearls."

Winter

The title poem, "In January, the Geese," inaugurates Buckley's telescoping of seasons. Like the Big Sky region itself, transitions are subtle and signaled by familiar things:

in their long strings every morning
in the pastel sky twining
south and west and east,
towards the fields of stubbled barley
and dry grasses and withering
winter wheat, every evening returning
all degrees of north
to the shallowing stock ponds

As the poem continues for a total of 49 lines, the line breaks suggest the familiar shape of fowl in flight. In gorgeously descriptive language Buckley treats her readers to scenes observed from on high: *the shallowing stock ponds, the little flows in the coulees, crowds of playground children, the quiet of Montana sunsets*. I have never encountered a richer depiction of landscape, of wildlife . . . the way things are to a poet who soars within the long string of geese.

Spring

Late afternoon is the setting for “At Sun River,” where we find “two old men cleaning their catch . . . their knives quick and sure / as they slit shining bellies from anus to jaw.” Buckley places me at the scene. I inhale the cold spring air, smell the fishermen’s bodies in need of a bath and deodorant. I’m with them on muddy slopes and in the shadows of pine trees . . . I feel their contentment . . . their inner peace. I wish the same for myself.

In “Seed” Buckley explores the “fragile boat of time: death, rebirth, / each infant kernel coded by its mother / plant with the hour of life’s return.” Continuing, the poem takes on a unique religious flavor that surprised me at the end.

In Illinois, we see “Boxelder Bugs” every spring. Believe me, you’ve never seen them in the way Buckley describes these unique creatures.

Summer

Transitioning into summer, I would be remiss if I failed to call attention to Buckley’s world of birds, animals (wild and domestic), trees, flowers, and insects. I quit counting after about three dozen mentions! B.J. Buckley cares about the environment. Her poems are filled with pathos for the land and the life it breathes. That said, she is no one’s political pawn. She tells the truth as she sees it.

“Pronghorn Elegy” describes these lovely creatures who, by nature, need “the openness of space.” They often find themselves hopelessly entangled in man-made obstacles of barbed wire. Their antlers become their prisons. In response:

“ . . . some of us break locks
on head gates. Some of us cut wire in the dark.”

Autumn

“Infinite Haze, September” describes the natural phenomenon of a forest burn. Through the device of personification, Buckley has me choking in smoke rolling in “like fog, *restless* [italics mine] across the fields of shorn hay.” The haze disrupts the life of pheasants in courtship. A fox is caught by hot embers when the wind suddenly shifts. Buckley’s language is palpable in describing grasshoppers leaping frantically “from the stiff shards of iris and peony. There is so much more.

For B.J. Buckley, *In January, the Geese*, comes full circle from “Upthrust,” to the last line of the last poem, “Last Rites.” In this poem, a widower, weathered by the misfortunes of life, finds strength and value listening for the voices he once knew, life spreads out before him, *the wild geese flying home*.

Michael Escoubas

WILLIAM SCOTT GALASSO REVIEWS *BRIGHT SKIES* BY MAJA TROCHIMCZYK

85 Poems, 184 pp, Moonrise, 2022, ISBN 978-49-8, color paperback, 978-1-945938-52-8, e-book

In these uncertain times when the world wobbles on its axis between pandemics, climate change and war, taxing our ability to cope; Maja Trochimczyk (editor of the *California Quarterly*), presents us with her antidote, *Bright Skies, Selected Poems*. The book is divided in to five sections: Spring, Summer, Babie Lato (Indian Summer in Polish), Autumn and Winter. She created this generous volume (her ninth) as a gift to her children, grandchildren and for those of readers fortunate to read it. Every poem celebrates the incomparable beauty, diversity and healing power of nature--giving us reason for hope. In her first poem, *A Spring Revelation*, she declares

“I love my mountains
blue and spring green, still
under clear azure expanse.
Their velvet pleats pile up
in layers above the valley rocks,
pathways in empty riverbed.”

In the second poem, *Only in California*, “the desert is rich with the noise of our ghost river.” In *Spring Cleaning*, our avid gardener reveals:

This morning, I declawed the cactus [...]
I cleaned out the pantry, sorted out
one bookshelf and my past

carefully discarding useless fears
and fading disappointments [...]
I arranged my thoughts
into a singular clarity of purpose.[...]

Now, I only have to breathe in
hot noon light, to set old pain,
anger and resentment on fire,
expel the ashes in a shower of sparks
with diamond rays so brilliant,
they make me into a supernova
a revelation, cosmic, bright—"

That's healing. In addition, she compliments her literary art with a visual artist's eye for light, color, shape in the exquisite detail of her photography. The photographs on glossy paper present in minute detail every subject she turns her attention to. Further, her knowledge of local flora and fauna verges on the encyclopaedic, presenting us with an abundance of riches, which inform her life and work, writing poetry is like growing artichokes from a seed of invention.

Whether one perceives dewdrops on a rose, the wind swirl of a kite in cerulean skies or, an incoming wave bursting from a turquoise sea, one is moved and that's the point. She presents all five senses and dares you to fully engage—and to be moved. "Look ahead—Look up— Look / inside—we are alive" for these are *Diamond Days in Crystal Gardens*. In addition, Ms. Trochimczyk makes clear that all we treasure is in danger. She admonishes us to recognize that in man's pursuit of short-term profit, we may likely lose the Eden we cherish. Not by the will of God but by our own reckless behavior towards the mother that bore us. In the *Tale of the Hare...*, "his presence tames my heart—a gift from Gaia / for theses hard times of the plague of hatred and distress," and from *Drink of Water*, "I don't want my resident raccoon to be shot /with the black, dead-looking gun." No, what Maja clearly wants is the taste of honey from bees, the song of birds and the inspiration of their flight, the colors of fall in full regalia and the quiet of winter in its dreaming sleep. What she depicts in every poem is a desire for harmony and light, unity of purpose.

Yet, Maja's celebration of life is not confined to nature alone, but to the love of one human being for another whether that person is one's spouse, son, daughter or grandchild, or simply a dear friend—a member of her chosen family. She celebrates with equal joy the gifts of body and spirit, rejoicing in the holidays that bring

people together. One of my favorite poems is *Your Rainbow*, which I see is both a collection of images and a metaphor for gratitude. Here are a few lines addressing that rainbow,

"You are a rainbow of endless Light

You are a fountain of boundless Love

You are a red ruby of life

You are a pure amber of creation

You are a new gold of strength

You are a green emerald of affection

You are a blue sapphire of truth

You are a clear amethyst of perception"

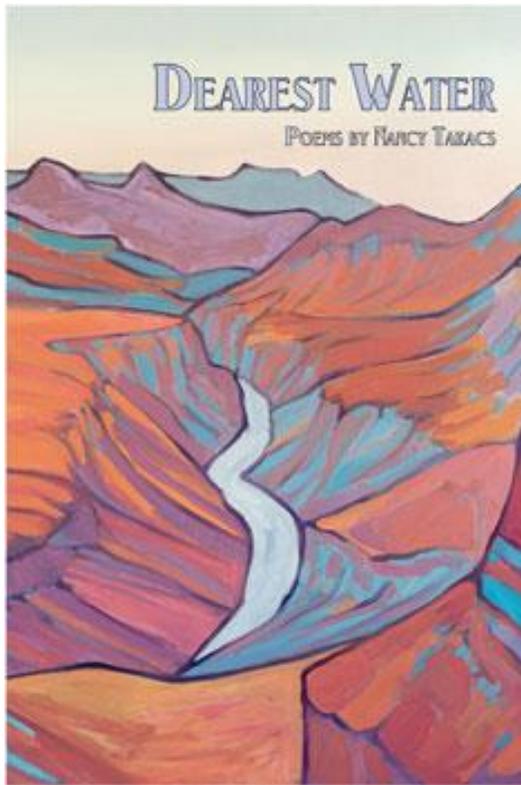
Finally, and I won't give it away, there is a coda...don't miss a page. This work is a feast for mind and spirit as close as your garden, eternal as stars. Recommended!

~ William Scott Galasso



MICHAEL ESCOUBAS REVIEWS *DEAREST WATER* BY NANCY TAKACS

44 poems, 79 pages, Mayapple Press



In one of Wallace Stevens' lesser known and underappreciated poems, "Poetry is a Destructive Force," we find these lines:

That's what misery is
Nothing to have at heart.
It is to have or nothing.

It is a thing to have,
A lion, an ox in his breast,
To feel it breathing there.

After reading Nancy Takacs' latest collection, *Dearest Water*, I'm struck by the force and wisdom in her work. Poetry is a lion, an ox in her breast. *Dearest Water* is structured in four divisions: 1) Poems for Women Only, 2) Wildness, 3) Invisible Jewels, and 4) Notes to God from County Road H.

A Word About Style. Nancy Takacs writes in free verse. Her poems are structured in couplets, tercets, quatrains, and logical paragraph breaks. A nice variety of presentation. She does not force-rhyme. When rhymes or half-rhymes occur, they are occasional enhancements applied to what she is doing.

Takacs is a student of the natural world. Flora and fauna inhabit her work. Within this broad category, I found animals, birds, bees, trees, canyons, colors, fishes, and ghosts. Her poems are replete with

emotional resonance born from an abundant storehouse of memories and experiences.

Poems for Women Only. Dare I say that the poems in this section are vitamins and minerals for men? Take for example her short poem, "Making Up":

is like the first pickle from a mason jar,
raspberry jam in the tapioca. My husband
speaks to me for the first time after our
argument that shimmered with hooves.
Now his voice is all hallowed and velour.
Now my voice is hazy and mango. We halt
our sorrows for now. We go out to the tulips
and have a cookie. I put on my magenta
sweatshirt. Her dusky sky has one tamp of bitter.
Holding a hand can be like a hornet in a balloon.
It takes two hours for our toes to get drowsy.

Wildness. This section illumines the poet's concern for animals, the environment and social justice. Love is pervasive within her environmental concerns. "Wolverine" is a case in point:

I'm kind of a loner like you, skunk-bear,
but way too soft, lounging
on my futon with a paperback
on my breast, digesting tasty
memories of Proust.

.....

Wolverine, I've leaned
into creeks for watercress,
picked the raspberries

bears have been in,
looked into the eyes
of great horned owls,
glimpsed the bear, the fox.

.....

Humans call *you* terrible,
caribou-hound, bone-crusher,
tooth-eater. Trappers wait for you,
snowmobilers spin across your space.
I hope you're still running and running,
hunting and hunting somewhere
wide and cold enough for you.

In the same poem she avers, *I should have let the wild be wild*. This after making friends with and even feeding several wild creatures. Indeed, "wild" is pervasive in Takacs' work. Her advocacy is multiplied through poetic craftsmanship. She is able to take a step back, harness her emotions weaving high art into environmental concerns.

Invisible Jewels. Upon encountering this section, I asked myself: *What is the meaning of this section title? How can a jewel (something palpable) be invisible?* As I pondered this, I noticed a tonal change within the poems themselves; a loosening of the poet's diction. The poems took on an aura of simplicity. They became like well-seasoned entrées. "What My Dog Knows," begins to pull the curtain back on how "ordinary things" become "invisible jewels":

is how the smell of shampoo
means I'm going out,
and the blow dryer
means without her.

She still asks
with her butterfly ears
wide open.

She is pine-scented
from yesterday's bath,
brushed, ready
to go if I want her,

trot to the lake and roll
in something rotten
as soon as I turn my back.

She's small but loves to bark
at all the big dogs in the park,
slip her collar
and lunge for their throats.

If I would only
take her,
And let her.



Notes to God from County Road H. The lead poem, "Drought" is akin to prayer. In 16 poems of varying length, Takacs lifts her voice to God about the way things are in life. I've done the same thing myself. This poet raises her voice much better than I, however!

She invites her readers to walk with her "where oceans of stars / once fell into orbit, / and rolled up on the shore / of the skies, . . ." This wide-ranging series serves as catharsis for Takacs. The outer visible world speaks to that which is invisible within her heart . . . hope within the reality of drought. Look for signs that drought may be multi-dimensional in the poet's mind.

I led with a reference to a poem by Wallace Stevens. These lines from the same poem, seem a fitting closure to this excellent collection:

He [poetry] is like a man
In the body of a violent beast.
Its muscles are his own . . .

The lion sleeps in the sun.
Its nose is on its paws.
It can kill a man.

~ Michael Escoubas, first published in *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 CSPA. Reading fees are \$1.50 per poem with a \$3.00 minimum for members of CSPA and/or NFSPA 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, CSPA 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, CSPA 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 CSPA Newsbriefs of the following year. In addition, the first prize winner poems are published in the CSPA 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.

CSPA 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.)



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