



WHAT WE KEPT: A GEOGRAPHY

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Foreword

d. ellis phelps and I sat at an outdoor table, chatting after a good meal, she lit by the soft November sun, and I sipping the dregs of my iced water. “What do you think of pockets?” she asked. We’d recently finished up an issue of *fws* and were discussing our next project. I was slightly caught off guard, but in the next few minutes we eagerly catalogued the possibilities of a pockets themed issue—pants, handbags, pouches, caves, envelopes, and what these *contained*. And not just pockets in the tangible sense but also pockets of time and memory. What we intuited that afternoon, though we were not yet able to articulate, is that pockets tap into two deep truths—what is held and what is missing.

It is no wonder, then, that the major challenge in editing this collection was the sheer volume of poems dealing with grief and loss. These pieces are poignant and beautiful, but how to keep the anthology from turning into one long lament? As I shuffled and reshuffled poems on my coffee table, I gained a sense of clarity; like any landscape, grief has its contours. There were poems of close loss and loss at a remove, of deteriorated body and mind, of inequity, violence, and war. When I arranged poems with this understanding, different geographies emerged: the intimate and the communal, the familial and the political, the regional and the world-sweeping.

And of course, these pieces are offset by delightful and delightfully strange poems in the anthology—the “fistful of frontal lobe” thrown to a fussy dog in Karetnick’s “Subconscious, Last Night,” the pomegranate in Coronel’s “If You Look into an Apple,” that suspends mother-daughter love “in dark horseradish hood,” and “First” by Burnett, in which lovers’ rituals are “forgotten beaches/brought at last to light.”

This anthology represents the work of thirty poets from six different countries: U.S., Canada, Cameroon, Syria, Ghana, and Australia. The threads that stitch these international voices together—across language, customs, and borders—are these: the depths of love and a desire for human dignity. That is the invitation of this collection. To experience love, the raw and exquisite, and to carry mutual respect “close to the skin.”¹ In a pocket, if you will.

Rachel Aguirre, Poetry Editor
September 6, 2026

¹ “Stitched Graves” by Donna Nichols

In memory of and with deep respect and admiration for Kendra Preston Leonard (June 11 1974-August 19, 2026), librettist, lyricist, poet, playwright, educator & frequent, beloved contributor to *fws*.

*To uncover new strata of myself.
To drill down to unknown levels.
To uncover beds, and veins,
and pockets down in the untried depths.*

~Muriel Strobe, *My Little Book of Life*, 1912

A Handful of Holes

Pockets of Static

Between one station and the next
on the long drive out of the city,
there is a pocket of static
where no one's voice can reach you —
not the preacher, not the traffic report,
not the woman singing about a love
she has already decided to leave.
For eleven seconds, maybe twelve,
the radio holds nothing but the shape
of all the things it isn't saying,
and you find you are gripping the wheel
the way you gripped a phone once,
waiting for someone to speak first
so you wouldn't have to be the one
who breaks a silence you were not sure
you wanted broken.

There are pockets like this in a life, too —
between the funeral and the return to work,
between the diagnosis and the waiting room chair,
between the sentence you meant to finish
and the one that arrived instead.
No signal reaches you there. No one
can be blamed for the quiet. It is simply
the shape the world takes
when it briefly stops broadcasting itself,
and you are left to notice
that you were listening, all along,
for something other than the news.

The Extra Pocket

Before the boy left for the city, his mother took the shirt he'd wear and turned it inside out across the kitchen table, and with a needle worn smooth by thirty years of small departures, she sewed a second pocket beneath the first — invisible from the outside, deep enough for three folded bills and a square of paper bearing a name, a number, in the small certain hand of a woman who had learned that certainty is something you stitch into cloth, not something simply given.

She did not tell him where to look. She trusted that hunger, or fear, or the particular loneliness of a first night among strangers, would send his hand searching the seams of his own shirt the way a man searches a house he has just inherited — uncertain what he'll find, and certain, somehow, that his mother would have thought of it first.

He found the pocket on the second night, in the dark, and did not need to see it to know her stitches — small, even, unhurried, the same stitches that once closed a school uniform's hem, a torn sleeve, a wound of fabric only she had noticed.

He did not spend the money that week, or the next. He kept it there, in the pocket she had made and he had not asked for, the way a person keeps a spare key to a house not yet needed — trusting only that the day might come, and that when it did, the door would still be there, and so would the hand that had, without a word, made sure of it.

A Remnant of Memoir

In those days I began to fidget
with loose threads inside
the pocket. Its stitches no longer
tightly knotted around tiny traumas.
The light hidden. A tear in the fabric
exposed my fairy tale,
a fantasy. No pinking sheers
could prevent fraying,
grimness. No ghost
of a fairy godmother.
A frog remained a frog.
The one in the pocket, I was
certain the dark
was safer. When I saw
that sliver of light,
all came unstitched.

Hurry

Patched, stitched, secured, strong
Trust in the strength of the thread
Please don't drop my keys

Unpocketed

My pockets hold a fob, a glass cloth, a folded receipt,
a stone smoothed by nothing but time and touch —
things small enough to carry,
easy enough to forget.

But grace doesn't fold.
Faith doesn't jingle like loose change.
The peace that passes understanding
has never once fit in the body that envelops me

I cannot pocket the ones I love,
though I've tried — God knows I've tried,
patting down every seam,
looking for what I lost.

I cannot pocket memories,
though I carry them with me,
somewhere more intangible than fabric could hold,
somewhere with no zipper, no flap, no snap.

The things I value most
were never meant to be pocketed.
They were meant to be carried
the way breath is carried —
unseen, unzipped, alive.

Not in my pocket.
Just here.

Handfuls

I pick blueberries the same way I hold my grandmother's
hand as we walk across the asphalt parking lot to Benihana's,
Pressing gently, testing the strength of peeling blue skin.

There are many ways to love a person and only some will break them down, like my grandfather,
who knows me in sneezes,
knows me in the contours of my shoulders,

pictures my six-year-old self licking a lemon popsicle on the hot stone bench
outside Brookside gardens, a day before he went in for the surgery
that left him blind, feeling our hair for height when we visit.
At mealtimes, his plate is a clock.

My father spoons fried rice at three o'clock
and red vegetable curry at eleven o'clock,
and as I sit across the table and watch him, I wonder if he is okay, my father,
who cried for the first time that day
when he left the hospital,

me upstairs, throwing
a rubber ball into a hoop fitted onto the frame
of my bunk bed, that was how he found me, and that was where I learned

that tugging on the hem of a crying man's navy T-shirt,
asking "What's happening?" only makes him cry harder.

A frail hand, blueberries spilling, a melting lemon popsicle.
An unraveling navy T-shirt.
I cup my hands and despair that they cannot hold more.

apron song

*"...the fact that we carry it within us
...history is literally present in all we do."*

—James Baldwin

an apron can support the weight of history,
particularly when it harbors a pocket, but

her walking begged the question: what was she doing
before she strode the cobblestones of our alley?

I never witnessed her meditative, musical drift
into a shadowy past my mother

in her own apron at the kitchen sink
told the tale of my brother's best friend's great

grandmother from the family across those cobbles – a river
of sorts – how she slowly fished her hand inside her apron pocket

to extract a tiny harmonica to play,
seemingly mindlessly, as if remembering the

post-Civil-War South from where she came had she been
peeling potatoes when she sensed the need

to move and blow ghosts into that harp of pieced together
wood and metal, with a mere ten square pockets of air

waiting to be sound had she been shucking
corn and noticed the rows of yellow eyes staring

back at her to remind her of those gone – only a
toddler when her family's bodies belonged to someone

else my mother spoke as if she still saw, through her kitchen
window, that frail Black, aproned woman ambling and leaning in

to the instrument in her small hands to raise it to the pocket
of her mouth to conjure those now diminished back into her walking

till she sways – her shoulders dropping – alighting her load
somewhere to float in her mouth organ’s drawl my mother

carried this image within her for decades
not yet knowing its meaning, she slowly withdrew it

from the pocket of her memory to place carefully in mine
“Mrs. Crawley,” I’ll now call to her from time to time

as if beginning my own stroll down that alley, “tell me
about this song I never heard but still curls in my ear;

where did your mind travel when in your apron, as your feet
trod those grey concave stones?” when she was gone, her son the chauffeur,

who inherited their house from his boss, walked his mother’s
route with his cane and cap – tall, lean, and with a dignity

only history can award – his one hand slung inside
his sports coat pocket, but he never withdrew it

to toot on a handful of holes still, a rhythm in his gait said
something to me as I watched him – a lesson of sorts:

one about waiting and pacing, and a sad rage not forgotten –
one about hunger for another apron song – please, just one more

The Shadow of Everything We Loved

The coat hangs by the door,
a hollow husk of corduroy and lint,
bearing the weight of lives lived in the dark.

We use them as vaults-
fingertips brushing against the phantom shape
of a river-smoothed stone,
a bus token from a city that no longer exists,
the crinkle of a grocery list
where the ink has surrendered to the friction of skin.
These are the archives of the inconsequential:
the dust of a summer afternoon,
the jagged corner of a ticket stub
that keeps the ghost of a symphony pinned to the fabric.

But there is a cruelty in the depth of a stitch.
When the hand reaches in, expecting the solid anchor
of a key or a penny,
it finds only the fraying edge of the lining
where the weave has begun to starve.

Injury is the first thief.
It pulls the thread loose,
a sudden snag that drags the contents
out into the indifferent light.
Trauma turns the pocket inside out,
leaving a gaping, empty mouth,
a visual stutter in the silhouette of the body,
the geography of what we kept
spilled and scattered on the floor of the mind.

Then comes the slow, white erosion.
The pockets of the brain are stitched shut by the silence.
The items are not lost; they are un-remembered.
The names of colours, the texture of a daughter's cheek,
The specific weight of a Tuesday in 1974—
All of it tucked into a seam that no longer has a needle.

The fabric remains,
a heavy wool draped over a chair,
but the interior is a smooth, blank landscape.

No secrets left to hold.
No history to brush against the palm.
Just the deep, terrifying stillness of an empty pocket,
where the shadow of everything we loved
has finally ceased to occupy space.

The Hollow We Occupy

There is a topography to the garment,
a geography of lint and soft-edged history
tucked against the thigh.

To reach into a pocket
is to excavate the silt of a Tuesday,
the jagged corner of a transit pass,
the phantom weight of a stone kept for its coolness,
a talisman against the velocity of noon.

We are small creatures,
obsessed with the hollows we occupy-
the scooped-out basins of dry creek beds,
the womb-space of a hillside,
the way the earth bends inward to offer a lap
for the tired and the terrified.

I think of the kangaroo,
her belly a cathedral of warm velvet,
a perimeter of muscle sealing the chaos away.
Inside that dark, rhythmic sanctuary
the joey maps the world by the thump of a heartbeat,
a pendulum of biology
swinging in the quiet dark.

We carry our own versions of that security:
a thumb hooked into a denim crease,
fingertips tracing the seams of a secret,
the comfort of knowing that space exists-
not as a void,
but as a receptacle for the things
we are not yet ready to lose to the wind.

Even when empty,
the pocket retains the shape of what was held-
a silhouette of absence,
a soft, inverted cup
waiting for the next fragment of life
to make its home in the shadows.

The Price of Flight

She's only eight, this child crouched beneath the oak table in the kitchen, busy licking a slick chicken leg and staring at a washed-out picture where a thousand white cranes soar toward an apricot sun. She knows they contain bones, these birds. Knows these bones constellate skeletons. Knows that somewhere, in this house, a skeleton hides, because, last night, at the top of the stairs, as she weighed a rose-colored stone in one hand against a red bird's feather in the other, she overheard her grandmother saying so.

*The stillborn undid her. A husband.
Three children. Didn't matter. She left.
He wept. Filled his pockets with coal.
Jumped off the bridge in mid-December.
Such a shame, the skeleton we hide.*

The child had wondered which would land first, the stone or the feather. Poking her head through the spindles of the staircase, she dropped both. The pink stone plinked against the top of the parakeet's tin cage. Bounced. Thumped the frayed blue carpet below. But the red feather caught a draft and drifted from side to side in a languid, see-saw motion. Only after it snagged the thorns on Grandmother's devil's tongue cactus did the girl realize her head was trapped between the stair's spindles.

After the firemen freed her head, after her mother scrubbed the olive oil from her tangled hair, the girl lay in bed, staring at a picture of an angel guiding two small children across a bridge above a serpentine river. The angel's wings could lift them all, she thought. She sat up. Reached for her shoulder blades. Prayed for long, white pinion feathers to bud from each blade and unfurl – wider and wider, like a rose inviting bees, like ripples from a thrown stone – and beat with such ferocity, she might soar high enough to pocket some stars.

Tonight, she'll dream of a man walking beside the river, his face shaded by a cloth cap, his overcoat weighted with coal. He'll reach the bridge with the concrete spindles, peer over the side, and pause, as though counting the stars reflected on the river's dark tongue. He'll mount the railing

and perch there, like an enormous raven, until the weight
of waiting urges him to stand. To lean. To just let go.
For a moment, he soars. The child jolts awake, gasping
like a grounded minnow. And wonders: did he float
like a red bird's feather, or sink like a small pink stone?

Stitched Graves

I keep pockets for the people I've lost—
small stitched graves
where I hide the pieces they left behind.

There's a pocket stitched with your name.
I didn't mean to sew it there;
it happened the way grief does—
thread pulled through fabric
by a hand that doesn't remember
starting the motion.

One pocket holds your last goodbye,
creased from being opened too often.
Another carries the silence
you never explained.

They weigh more than they should.
Grief always does
when it's carried
this close to the skin.

A Nest of Psalms

Bitter to Taste

Before the living blood was made,
I was planted without seed.
A pear found beneath the comb of a rooster,
I am not just a fruit
I am a pocket that holds green liquids
meant to dissolve oils needed by the living blood.
The oils will never be dissolved without a spit of green liquids
from beneath the comb of a rooster,
flowing directly to make me bitter to taste.
Though I am always engulfed with bitterness,
My beauty is seen through the living blood.
I am a hanging fruit that can never be eaten
though I am forever ripe.

If You Look into an Apple

you'll see a star
but if you look into a pomegranate
you'll find the universe—
chambers studded with ruby lights
not hard seeds but bursting sweetness

On the second night of Rosh Hashanah
I partake in its juices its genius
little love explosions embedded
in the syrup-seeded gift I crave

Honeyed incantations reside
in a nest of sleeping psalms
ignited when chanted
infused with new moon energy

Pink blush stains lips & teeth
reminding me of spice in the sacred
the hope of daughters—
their stubborn uncommon love
suspended in dark horseradish hood

In this shelter of paradise
tradition counts 613 seeds
for Torah's 613 commandments
the fruit is exalted decorating the pillars
of King Solomon's temple
embodied in gold on the hem
of a high priest's robe

In this shelter of paradise,
tradition counts 613 seeds
for Torah's 613 commandments

In the *Shehecheyanu* blessing
I name it worthy less common fruit
savor the tart delight once used as dye
for scarves & dresses

Its ruby seeds split me open
I hold a brick-red sphere

of belonging
knee-deep in its peace

The Sower

From his pockets,
seeds of light,

he sows them
with a toss, and hums

the tune that all stars sing,
the melody all things recognize,

he waits and watches,
from his pockets, throws more seeds

time does not exist for him, only endless shimmer
and glow—

luminescence, incandescence
fallow universes begin to blossom and grow.

Transmigration

Before the sun arranged itself, its hydrogen, its photosphere,
you and I watched as ungendered stardust, awaiting Cassiopeia
and the constellations we knew would be strung

Before the ozone settled within the stratosphere
and the sky coalesced into blue,
we existed as atmospheric electrons

Before decibels & stories, we were the chatter of running water
When the river chiseled its path, we faced each other,
the escarpments on opposite sides of the canyon

When the tectonic plates were moving with greater force than today,
we were lava and igneous rock, porphyritic,
the two of us adjacent mineral crystals

Before rational mammals defined the boundaries of science,
we were the two elongated teeth on a saber-toothed tiger
then twin tusks on a sleek mastodon

Before the California condor emerged in the Pleistocene,
When the great blue heron first spread its wings,
we ran as *Leptomeryx* before we were deer

Before the words *God & religion*, you were a brown lacewing
ensnared in the web of an orb-weaver spider,
and I was that section of web

Before alchemy or capitalism, you were a burr
caught in the wool of a ram whose fleece was spun into yarn,
and I was that yarn woven into a blanket

Before we were human, you were the skin of a snake
snagged in the polyethylene rings from a six-pack,
and I was that thin plastic sheath

Now we stretch out our bodies, polymerized and compounded
For a short time, we were indigenous to the earth,
extracted, fecund, from its deep azure blue

Bedtime

Come twilight's sleepy liturgy,
I slip inside the forest-green
envelope sealed 'neath
cool, triangular folds,
sent away to
Dreamland.

My body soothed in a
bamboo womb, or
embalmed in a
feathered bier,
incubates in the
wrinkled cocoon.

Return to Sender
stamps the morning's
gold breath upon my lids,
dawn's rebirth
resurrects from the
cozy cotton death.

The sluggish legs that languish
in the downy grove of
dormant thoughts and drifting dreams
linger till Sunlight's vigil
drags me from the comforting
pocket of repose.

Subconscious, Last Night

The dog could not be consoled.
Could not settle on the mattress or
under the quilt. Instead, she wanted
the spread tossed over her body like a leaf

of lettuce covering a burger, pockets
for ears and tail to escape. She wanted
the fan higher or completely off.
She wanted this bone or that, squeakies

and stuffies from downstairs,
bringing them to me one at a time
until I finally fell asleep, dreaming
how I reached into the sack of my head,

pulled out a fistful of frontal lobe, patted it
into shape and threw, ball of brain
she ran to sniff at but failed to bring back,
abandoning it in the scraggy grass.

First

Planting pea seeds and
lettuce, carrot, bean,
I plant first my faith
in a fertile darkness.

Lifting the soup spoon
I taste first my hunger,
feel how it feeds
many purposes.

Pouring the blood-red wine
I meet only the thirst
of my own heart
for communion.

Lying in bed with you
I begin by placing
my loneliness in the hands
of your desire.

But it's here on the page
I'm foremost a lover, hoeing
the rich earth of a body
that so warmly jackets my soul,

its deep pockets dipped into,
a drift of rock and shell
from forgotten beaches
brought at last to light.

A Day at the Beach with She'ifa*

High up on the bluff
in the Sitka spruce,
she took my hand
and led me down the trail.
I followed, sleepy.
She showed me
in the duff little pieces
of mushroom, bird feather, bone.
On the beach,
in the sand,
she pointed
with her toe,
touched the molted shell of a crab.
I looked for agates
but did not find any.
The ocean swelled,
yellow foam blew toward dune.
A star fused on sand,
gulls cried over stinking carcasses.

The fog danced
with the wind
and sometimes the sun
splattered in drops
on the wet sand.
I picked up a smooth rock,
flat, and big as my hand,
with white marks on black,
a message
I thought to read,
and I wanted to put it
into my pocket
but she said
it was too big
and would not fit.

That night,
sand spilled
from her socks
as she fell to sleep still
in my arms.

* in Hebrew, the feminine of breathe, breath, breathing

Embrace

You held me close,
swaddled against winter's cold,
not that I would remember,
the evidence in black and white.
Again, a year later, perhaps,
but warmer as I wore a spring cap,
held in a grandparent's arms.
Each time, like a visit home.

We visited those mighty falls
often in my youth, wrapped
in Niagara's mist and roar
on a boat that rocked
in the wake of that cascade,
or on a platform at its base,
in slickers that kept the river
in as much as out.

Over the years, I've felt
most at home in this
little corner of the world,
always returning
for the comfort it brings.
Whether the river flows
beside me or around me,
it always flows through me.

Upstream, beside its serene,
smooth surface. Gazing
in winter at the falls
through ice-crystal eyelashes.
Downstream, the rapids churning
within my veins. The river always
takes me back to the embrace
I felt those many years ago.

Sloshes in the Lining

What the Children Left in Mom's Pockets

Many moments as
a mother I will
nonchalantly slide
my fingers in my
pockets, consequently
mystified
by what surprising
objects found their way
therein to hide:

a roundy thing so
hard and cold, its
smoothness pure delight
could only be the
marble Simon lost
the other night
when he dropped it
on the tile where
it then rolled out of sight.

What kind of odd-
shaped ball is this
so rubbery and hard?
Oh ick,
Marina's gum, which
I told her to discard,
insisting on her
manners at the
table to regard.

Now why on earth
do I detect this
mushed and sticky mass?
Oh, I remember now—
it's when my
youngest lass
dropped her berries
unexpectedly
upon the mud-caked grass.

I haven't got the slightest
what this plastic form
could be—
oh right, it's Dory's
princess toy she
chose so thoughtfully
as a present for
my birthday and then
wrapped and gave to me.

There's one last thing
that crunches—I won't
guess, because I know—
since one more child
is all that's left,
it's only apropos
that my Xenia slipped a
spider there unto
my bitter woe.

Along the Water

For Mom

Morning at the lake begins
with our slow walk
picking up beach glass
tiny colors in the sand—
green, blue, clear.

We don't need to say much.
We are paying attention
to something outside of
ourselves.

I used to bounce along
next to you, my child eyes
pulled always to the horizon.

Now our pockets are
filled with the past,
with what time does—
soften shorelines,
shape routines
with round edges.

Behind us, our footsteps
travel through the years.

one day, a daughter

is sure to stumble her way
into my story

lean against the kitchen counter
with pockets full of limerence
freckled nose, all flushed and warm

i'll know in an instant
exactly what type
of charming she's found

lodged deep in the dimples
of his cheeks — the folds of his
denim jacket, significant now

as she bashfully shares the details
of melancholy lavenders and moods rings
passed between youthful fingers

i'll want to share
my well-worn wisdom
and warnings, memorized over time

instead, i hope i keep my words
close to my chest
lips pressed kindly together

lend a listening ear to
the newfound synthetic symphonies
he's shown her & i'm sure they'll make me think

of my own melodies, sung in years past
standing next to the boy
whose middle name spelled "trouble"

the stars in her eyes will remind me:
the stage lights hit just right
against grinning cheek bones

how, for a moment, we were simple.

on the surface. sort of innocent.
first time ever feeling wanted.

& my heart will break
again, along those buried
fault line fractures

i hope
he's doing well
& remembers everything

then i'll smile, easy, at my daughter
tell her the music is beautiful
kiss that familiar freckled nose

pleased to find it
so very flushed
and warm.

o, innocent container

receptacle of odd sizes
angles shapes mingled
folded scrunched strange
bedfellows in your limited
space jammed full
or almost empty
as am I
on so many days
chamber
holding the might-be-
needed the undiscarded
stitched zippered
buttoned you
an oubliette of items
forgotten for years
or seasons until my hand
slips into you
cached in a London Fog coat
until a touch triggers
the balm of laughter
collecting pectin
barnacles sand dollars
the bane of the last coffee
last goodbye
until this bone-chilling wind
in November
you hold my hand
reveal a small rectangular
ticket memory-keeper
passage on the Paris Metro
a city unreachable now
my significant other lost
to another
dimension
my hand fingering love
ticket edges softened
surface rubbed as silky
as this pocket

What My Husband Left Me

When I finally decided to gather his clothes, prepare them for donation, I found the remains of his days in his pockets. Folded church programs, creased receipts,

wrinkled dollar bills. A doctor's business card. A frayed handkerchief. Coins. Honey-flavored cough drops. Dusty, foiled chocolate kisses.

I found several of his prescription pills. Loose. Lint-covered. Pills I handed to him each morning. Pills he assured me he'd taken each day. White pills, pink ones,

beige capsules, his handfuls of daily lies piled up in the inner seams of random pockets. How had I missed all these untruths, the signs in his morning smile?

I found more and more pills, not just in his clothing but in other pocketed areas of his life—beneath the cushion of the easy chair in his man-cave,

beneath his socks in his top dresser drawer—the anti-seizure pills, the high blood pressure pills, the pain pills, his rebellion everywhere. Maybe

he'd assumed I'd never find out his secret. That he'd been cured and would live to clean this up. Death disclosed a legion of losses, dazzled me with my own assumptions.

Yahrzeit Season, This Time in Cape Elizabeth

An American sentence acrostic

We marvel at the bunched hydrangeas,
are stunned by the unfixed size of them,
forced into a late bloom by a spring that kept us

indoors with freak storms and cold spells,
by the absences that hit us like cloud-to-ground

lightning. There's no better way of
animating panels of grief than an electric strike,
a phenomenon that can take several forms, never stays

static, and almost always presages the kind of
groundswell any logical person would rather dodge.

I try to give failure a new name

After "Leaf Litter" by Jarod K. Anderson

In a canyon of blue stone smoothed by river and storms,
I find three tiny, dry dandelion stalks jutting from
a bowl of sand, a tiny pocket of rock
at the foot of the mountain.

I imagined the seeds
floating in a seam of wind.

Some must have landed in dirt, near water.
Others, in a place too barren to take root.

Today I am trying to forgive myself
the thousand failures of each day—
things I said I would do but didn't.
Ideas watered and tended,
then left to rot.

What if none of this is failure?

Above me, buckeyes hold withered leaves.

Only a few spindles
of the dandelion's bright head
live to make more of themselves.

Dark and fertile,
the heap of scraps collapses
into soil to feed
next year's seeds.

The soft sand once
was a durable stone,
had no idea
how much was left
in her own becoming.

An Inverted Cup

Pockets for Women: An Impassioned Ode

Their significance is underrated
And thus, it should be propagated
To all those willing to embrace
The lack of its own commonplace.
At what point was it made clear
That some of ours should disappear?
Isn't there enough gender division
Without this separating decision?
Pockets are a must for women's clothes
The cons can never outweigh the pros!

Pants, skirts, and even dresses
Without pockets only depresses.
My devotion can't be understated,
Their value shouldn't be discarded.
Why must we resort to other options
With pockets always in men's fashions?
If anything it should be evident
Why this feature is so relevant
Wallets, phones, and other things
Oh, the carrying joys pockets bring!

You may not share my same passion
But please don't discount the frustration
That many of us women often face
When there is not adequate pocket space.
Having to carry around extra baggage
Does not lead us to an advantage.
Clothing companies, this is a call to action...
No one should have to ask permission;
It's time to reclaim our control...
More pockets for women is my goal!

Whatever Language You Speak, Escaping

Be quick about it now!
We must go soon and no delay,
the barque can't wait.
Take your fabric, whatever you have,
make a *poque*, make a *pokete*,
come on, girl!
A pouch, a pouch, like the old proverbs tell:
if a man give you a pig, girl,
look in the poke it's coming in,
a living pig in a clean pocket;
here we take the pokes
and leave just the pigs.

Cut it out, your pocket, your *pocca*.
Pin it, pin it precisely, pin a patch pocket,
pins perpendicular, inside your dress,
inside your bodice, inside your waist,
in your hems, pin it precisely,
hide the pocket, the *poque*,
it must carry all we need
and quietly too,
topstitch, topstitch, take out the pins.

There, see, we swell at our sides
not with babes nor bairn but the swelling
of our bulls, our smooth round purses,
like soft fat on our hips, our good little moons,
that light our way to where we must go,
full of gold and silver, ingots and pigs
of wealth.

Cover, cape, cloak, wide about your shawl,
put only a single coin in the pocket
that others see; come on, dammit, girl!
We cannot wait; our pockets full,
leave pins behind,
we go, leave this household
and its miseries, mistresses, and masters
that did put babes in our most secret purses,
starved out our stomach pouches,
forbade us the warmth

of a blanket wrapped to a *poque*
behind, itself to be found
much out of pocket with the morning
while we and our *pohhas*, our *poccas*,
our well-deserved full pockets
sail away.

Tiny Pocket, Giant Heartbeat

New Orleans is a pocket the universe forgot it stitched
a soft, secret pouch brimming with midnight magic
and the kind of laughter that bubbles up
even when the night is running on fumes.
At 4 a.m., the French Quarter glows like a charm
rubbed warm by wandering hands,
spilling jazz into the cobblestones
and happiness into the humid air.
Bourbon Street sloshes in the lining,
half whiskey, half wonder,
clinking like a tipsy talisman
that refuses to sleep.
Music curls around balconies,
dancers sway like spells in motion,
and the whole city giggles
a bright, breathless sound
that feels like someone shaking the pocket
just to hear what magic rattles inside.
Deep in the corner,
where the pocket meets the pulse,
the vampires lounge with lazy smiles,
their fangs catching the streetlight
like mischievous little secrets.
Tonight they don't bite
they're too busy humming along,
letting the joy soak their bones.
And me?
I feel like a queen down in the pocket of New Orleans
crowned in neon, draped in jazz,
my laughter stitched into the night
as the magic rises up to meet me.
The Quarter keeps overflowing
with joy, music, and that soft, wild happiness
that only happens when the night
is almost done
but refuses to end.
Because New Orleans is small
a pocket-sized kingdom stitched tight between the river and the sky,
just big enough to hold its music, its mischief,
its moonlit vampires and its barefoot joy.
A tiny place with a giant heartbeat,

where the whole world feels close enough
to tuck behind your ear and carry home like a charm.

Cavates of Bandelier

Cavates (cave-eights) are natural hollows formed in the soft volcanic ash rock of the cliff face. Many were enlarged and used as dwellings by Ancestral Puebloan inhabitants between 1150 & 1550.

In Frijoles Canyon there are pockets
where the breath of fire and ash
opened hollows dim and quiet
in walls of tuff. Once,
corn was ground here,
babies hushed, fires lit
against darkness as stories
settled day into night.

Having given up most
of their treasures,
the rooms say little
but they listen for footsteps
at the darkened doorways
for voices telling new stories
to hold in rooms that are still
but not empty.

Building on Tequesta Land

An American sentence acrostic

The backyard is so rich with evidence, we could
wind up an archaeological site. Digging

brings us pottery shards, bits of bone, elemental
sulfur. Our backhoes invade the way

seaweed does, getting into everything. It's
inevitable that we pocket these artefacts, stow our own

corrosion; we'd rather have an extension
of the house, a laundry room where mounds of

earth used to stand, burial sites still pixelating secrets.

El Muerto

they don't believe me when i tell them i died
en el desierto alone in some riachuelo seco
so i bring a handful of desert dirt stuffed
in my leather coat pockets to prove i died
i offer some dried cactus roots i dug
to chew and spit to ease my hunger
an old wooden cruz con los nombres
de jose y maria written on it
some hawk feathers for protection
a handful of semillas achicharradas
a femur bone de muerto
because en el desierto los muertos abundan
a coyote's jaw with all its teeth
still attached to its mandible bone
a necklace made of rattlesnake rattles
the wind reminds me i carry los cascabeles
around my neck para mis muertos,
they hide inside my leather pockets
thirsty and tired, una chicharra con su sonido metálico
it does not let me sleep en el riachuelo
a pack rat's tiny, salty vertebra to suck and nibble
at night because en el desierto los muertos must eat
and a tiny black bird's corazon
still spitting blood after flying alone through empty fields
i pull from my inner breast pocket a blood-stained paper
i've written garabatos to let my parents know
i died en el desierto;

A Borrego Leather Jacket

i hide my dead father deep inside of my leather coat's breast pocket, close to my corazón, i brought him al desierto en una foto vieja; he was a teenager when someone took the photo standing next to an agave tree; he didn't smile, only stared at the camera, and never blinked; he wore the same brown leather jacket mother had saved from a bag of darned, frayed clothes some rich ladies brought for us indios as gifts; the brown leather jacket was made out of soft borrego skin with basketweave buttons and giant outer patch pockets; as a child, i hid dead grasshoppers, butterflies, and alacranes i found in the fields inside of the pockets, so mother kept the jacket away hidden from us children inside of her ropero; she would only let father wear it when he went to la misa de gallo; mother gave me the leather jacket when i left huhi to venture into el desierto, *you may be cold at night; i won't be there to hug you*, she told me as she handed me father's photo, *búscalo en el desierto, se fue hace mucho tiempo, we're still waiting for him, return and tell me if he's still alive*; inside of the giant patch pockets, i keep the living and the dead: sapos negros, ants, semillas, obsidian stones, rattlesnakes fangs, tumbleweeds, arrowheads, spells, puñales, the sun, estrellas, wind, fear, stories, cuentos, father;

Rim of the World

Forgotten Houston

The feral chickens behind my house grub for grubs in the abandoned graveyard, or sometimes idle with sex workers outside the Valero. And when the rooster crows, it's really a rooster, Blues town notwithstanding.

Here, at the tip-top of Independence Heights, the boot of Acres Homes, west of North Freeway, east of Garden Oaks—I once saw a woman take a piss on the sidewalk, dress hiked, haunches bare, and I envied her. I mean, who hasn't been desperate to pee at an inopportune time? Plus, these walks are too clean now. Who stands proud in a tear-down, butt-up against those fancy condos sprouting all over like mushrooms in manure?

But the trailer park still snubs its nose at the new-landed gentry, and the horses lose their minds on Christmas Day and New Years Eve and the 4th of July, when drunk uncles fire arms at starless skies. Or maybe it's a shoot-out, you never know. Dogs bark either way; you can't sleep no matter whether someone bleeds out or just staggers into the gutter. Those dogs run the streets, and I mean *run*, as in the Big Dog, the Straw Boss, you'd better run. Carry a big stick when you walk our block, talk to folks about getting out to vote.

You don't know nothing about these streets, don't know what side your belt is buckled on. Us chickens will be here long after you're gone. We got plenty of poverty to sharpen our beaks, grub for the pecking to chow on down. That homeless guy outside the new Whole Foods hammers at your window, demands change, and you give him all you've got: the easy reach into your bulging pockets, those deep, deep, pockets of change.

Steampunk Manor/Church of the Small Claims

A pocket packing list for Room 400 at 901 N. 9th St. Milwaukee, WI 53233:

1. Hard copies (bring three)
2. Shoes that don't go clickity-clack down the hallways (you'll forget this one, you always do)
3. A wedding photographer to capture someone's big day, unaware that also sitting in the pews of the Church of the Small Claims are those awaiting to see if they're getting forced out of their homes this month (this is normal this is very normal)
4. A calendar reminder to book that therapy appointment you'll need after reading the paint on the side of a van parked downstairs "Kidney needed for my son - type O - desperate - please call..." (the slanted handwriting haunts you in your dreams still, eats you alive)
5. Resilience (but you can leave your dignity at home to die)
6. The rent money (a day late and a dollar short)

The Rule Against Perpetuities

See that cream city brick
Used to be ours

A lot can happen in a few months
Can see a person get shot on your front yard
Can look someone you love dead in the eye
Watch them break in front of you

Each month we paid rent
On the honeyimhomes
The leavingloveyou
The bloodshed grass
None ours to keep
But foolish we tried

Listen it's getting late
I need to tell you that we gazed at the stars
On that front lawn
Need to say out loud that we sashayed
Drunk with laughter
Will you save me this script?
You fell asleep on the yoga mat
While I played pretend therapist
Tell me that the Bible included this part
The snores
The bright light from the tv
The boredom
Cream city love in the time of Corona brick
Can I rent it for a little while more?
Monthly rent divided by the minute is roughly .023 cents
I dig through my pockets frantic
Can't find a penny nowadays
And who will even remember it
My hands come up empty
Please promise me it all made it into the dead sea scrolls: the softness, the beauty, the terror

I've heard the saying strong as steel
But even the street signs outside our old place
Bend to the Lake Michigan wind
And still foolish we try

The Inventory of Lost Things

My pockets are hollowed-out cathedrals,
cradling the light debris of a shattered century.

In the left, I carry the coarse grit of a borderland,
the pulverized granite of a farmhouse
that forgot its own name under the weight of artillery strike.
There is a rusted key here, cold as a spent casing,
fitting no door left standing in this hemisphere,
only the air where a hallway used to breathe.

In the right, the static of a nuclear noon-
a button detached from a coat that disintegrated in a flash,
a polished stone held by a child whose shadow
is now merely a charcoal stain on a concrete quay.
These fragments do not weigh anything;
they are the gravity of the undone,
the dense, vibrating ache of an empire
that mistook its borders for the rim of the world.

And deep in the lining, behind the frayed seams,
I feel the ghost of a letter, unread and illegible,
ink bleeding into the fabric like a slow, dark hemorrhage
of everything a soldier intended to say
before the soil swallowed his stride.

I reach for peace, but my fingers find only
the snag of barbed wire pulled from a frost-bitten fence,
a jagged souvenir of a temporary truce.
It is elusive, this stillness,
a phantom limb twitching in the aftermath,
tucked away in the dark, restricted space
where we keep the things we are too ashamed to bury
and too haunted to throw away.

Bunker Thoughts

In Ukraine

Death sits not far off.

It lives with us
like a ghost

singing a lost song.

This could be our last meal.
Or no meal.

Bodies collect as flowers
having been plucked.

Air doesn't know where
to go, where to look.

Even the trees are burnt.

No wonder we pray
like birds.

No wonder we're ready
to lie down.

Morning must fight
for itself.

grief

crusted with rubble
bloodstained & dirty

the pockets of
war-torn blue jeans

walk along
empty streets

wandering
what used to be

their neighborhood,
schoolyard

searching for
familiar faces

wondering
what they did

to deserve
this

& longing for
lighter days

when
loose change

wasn't crusted with rubble,
bloodstained & dirty

& pockets weren't
filled with grief.

Somewhere Deeper

When I was a child,

my mother searched my pockets
before washing my clothes.

She found stones,
buttons,
a bird's feather,
once,
half a moon
drawn on folded paper.

She never found
the war.

It was hidden
somewhere deeper,

in a pocket
the body had sewn
without asking permission.

Years passed.

Every goodbye
slipped inside it.

Every house
that forgot my name.

Every hand
that learned
how to wave
instead of stay.

The pocket grew.

Quietly.

Like roots
beneath a sidewalk.

Doctors listened
to my heart.

Poets listened
to my language.

Lovers listened
to my breathing.

No one
heard
the weight
I was carrying.

One winter,

I emptied everything.

The photographs.
The keys.
The unfinished letters.
The faces
that still knocked
from inside sleep.

When I reached
the bottom,

there was another pocket.

Smaller.
Darker.
Patient.

Waiting
for everything
I had not yet lost.

Perhaps
this is what makes us human—

not memory,
not hope,
not even love,

but the endless craft
of sewing
new pockets
inside ourselves

for the things
the world
cannot bear
to hold.

Contributor Biographies

Sheri Flowers Anderson (p. 41) is a practicing poet whose work has appeared in *Unbroken Journal*, *Abandoned Mine*, *Pensive Journal*, and others. Anderson is the author of a poetry collection entitled *House and Home* (Broadway Lotus Press). When not reading or writing, Anderson is watching movies or too much You-tube or enjoying jigsaw puzzles and table tennis. The poet lives in San Antonio, Texas. More info at <https://linktr.ee/sheriflowersanderson>

Sofía Ascorbe (p.57-58) grew up in many places and cultures due to her Latine-military upbringing, including Miami, Florida, where she chased the best croquetas de jamon in between visits to her dad's homeland of Puerto Rico and her mother's homeland of Panama. She has a legal background in advocating for housing justice on behalf of her community, and she is an avid dancer, trekker, and storyteller. Her writing has been published in *fsm. Arts Journal* and *Unwashed*.

Lynne Burnett's (p. 31) poems have appeared in many magazines and anthologies in the U.S. and Canada. A Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee, she's won the Lauren K. Alleyne Difficult Fruit PP, the Jack Grapes PP, and Kelsay Books' Women's Poetry Contest and is the author of the chapbook *Irresistible*. Recent journal publications include *fws: peace*, *Blue Heron Review*, *ThimbleLit*, *Mad Persona*, and *Passager*. She lives on Vancouver Island and spends summers boating, ever inspired by the mountains and sea. Her personal weakness: books that can be held and kept.

Julie Butler (p. 17-19, 59) started writing poetry at university and has been published in literary magazines and anthologies in Australia, the U.S., and India. Her poems are regularly broadcast on ABC Radio and commercial radio. In 1996, she won an Australia wide competition that published her book of poems, *Come Share My Silence*. Butler has continued to win, place second, and be short/longlisted in competitions. She won second place in The Writers Digest Chapbook Competition in January this year and was published in *The Scarborough Poetry Summit Review* in June and in *The Poems of Australia* in July. Butler was also longlisted for The Yeovil Literary Prize and the Grieve Project Competition.

Sarah Colby (p. 50) was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico and raised along the Rocky Mountains. She believes the intersection of people and landscape reflects complex issues both broad and intimate. She seeks to write in ways that connect people to their own stories and places, building awareness of how we each experience the world. Sarah has an MA in Art History from Brigham Young University and an MFA in Creative Writing from UNR Tahoe. She lives with her husband, a retired Army Chaplain, in San Antonio, Texas, where she mentors veteran's writing groups and teaches writing in community-based programs.

Brigid Cooley-Beck (p. 38 & 61) wrote her first poem when she was seven years old and hasn't stopped since. Her debut collection of poems, *family recipes*, was published by Kelsay Books in 2023. While her work has been published internationally, she takes special pride in having grown up a "San Antonio poet." Brigid currently lives in Saratoga Springs, NY, with her husband, Zach, and their cat, Scout.

Rebekah Conard (p. 12) is a writer of flash fiction, short stories, and occasionally, poetry. She writes whatever strikes her fancy and posts it on Vocal for the world to see. When concentration allows, she also enjoys crochet, cross stitch, and playing video games. Rebekah believes that art, and stories, live in absolutely everything. Her cat, Lily, would agree, if Lily knew what any of those words meant.

Susan Michele Coronel (p. 25) is the author of *In the Needle, A Woman* (Finishing Line Press, 2025), winner of the 2024 Donna Wolf Palacio Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in journals including *Cider Press Review*, *Mom Egg Review*, *Mudfish*, *Nixes Mate*, and *SWWIM*. She received three Pushcart Prize nominations and won the 2023 Mass Poetry First Poem Award. A former New York City public school teacher, she has an M.S.Ed. in applied linguistics from Queens College (City University of New York). She lives in Ridgewood, Queens, where she studies Yiddish and writes about identity, memory, and belonging.

Terry Dawon (p. 15), a retired Presbyterian minister, former adjunct faculty at San Francisco Seminary, and guest columnist for the *Austin Statesman*, resides in Madison, Connecticut. He's winner of the 2024 Hot Poet and the 2022 Wingless Dreamer Prizes for Poetry. His essays, fiction, and poetry have appeared in many print and online anthologies over the past half-century—most recently in *Formidable Women Sanctuary*, *Praisesong for the People*, *Equinox*, and *Notes of Light and Dark*. He's author of two full-length poetry collections: *the after* (Poets' Choice, 2022) and *Pursuing the Ruin* (forthcoming, Lamar University Literary Press, Fall 2026).

Kelly Ann Ellis (p. 56) holds an MA in English Literature from the University of Houston. She is the cofounder of hotpoet, a literary nonprofit, and managing editor of *Equinox*, its arts journal. Her poetry, which was twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, most recently winning an honorable mention and appearing in WIVLA's 2026 anthology *The Fire Within: Poems, Stories, and Essays of Women's Resilience*. Her collection, *The Hungry Ghost Diner*, was published by Lamar University Literary Press (LULP) in 2023. Her newest collection, *What I Burned*, will be forthcoming also from LULP in 2027.

Dimitri Brice Molaha Fokam (p. 9-10), writing under the pen name **L'Écrivain Fokam**, is a Cameroonian poet and writer based in Douala. His work draws on Cameroonian and broader francophone African heritage to explore memory, identity, and belonging, spanning poetry, short fiction, and devotional writing. He has submitted work to literary competitions across Africa, Europe, and North America, and shares his writing with a growing community on Facebook under the name L'Écrivain Fokam.

Ken Gierke (p. 34), a transplant from Western New York, has lived in Missouri since 2012. His love for nature, fostered by the Niagara River, continues in Missouri and is often featured in his poetry. His writing has appeared as micro-chapbooks from *Origami Poems Project*, as well as in numerous anthologies. His writing also has been featured online by *Amethyst Review*, *Silver Birch Press*, *formidable Woman sanctuary*, and *the Ekphrastic Review*. His poetry collections, *Glass Awash* (2022), *Heron Spirit* (2024), *Random Riffs* (2025), and *The Long Haul* (2026), are published by Spartan Press. His website: <https://rivrvlogr.com/>

Benjamin Green (p. 32) is the author of twelve books including *His Only Merit* (Finishing Line Press) and the upcoming *Old Man Looking through a Window at Night* (Main Street Rag). At the age of sixty-nine, he hopes his new work articulates a mature vision of the world and does so with some integrity. He resides in Jemez Springs, New Mexico.

Jennifer Handy (p. 28) is the author of *A Child Cries in Levittown* (Finishing Line Press) and *This Is Not a Polar Bear: A Study in Postmodern Extinction* (Fernwood Press, forthcoming 2027). She is the recipient of a Pearl Hogrefe Fellowship in Creative Writing at Iowa State University's MFA Program in Creative Writing and Environment and has received support from the Bread Loaf Environmental Writers Conference. She recently spent six years camping mostly in the Sonoran Desert.

Maria Illich (p. 20) is a writer and educator living in Houston, Texas. She has won accolades from the Press Women of Texas, the National Federation of Press Women, and The Texas Institute of Letters. Her poems and stories have appeared in various journals, including *Dappled Things Magazine* and *Ekstasis*. She promotes writing, especially among the young. Her literacy hero is Le Var Burton, whom she had the honor of meeting.

Shelley Jaffe (p. 13), at age eight, read her first book of poetry and decided she would someday marry a poet. Decades later, she did—Larry Jaffe, a celebrated poet, and her husband of eighteen years. Before that, she devoted her earlier years to raising her daughters from her first marriage, setting her own writing aside to support her family and, later, Larry's career. Her poetry appeared in an anthology over thirty years ago; after Larry's passing earlier this year, she returned to writing and was recently published in the *Florida Bards Anthology*.

Jen Karetnick (p. 30, 42, & 51) is the author of 13 collections of poetry, including *Domiciliary* (Sheila-Na-Gig Editions, October 2026); *Organ Language* (Lit Fox Books, September 2026); and *Inheritance with a High Error Rate* (January 2024), winner of the 2022 Cider Press Review Book Award. The co-founder and managing editor of *SWWIM Every Day*, she has work in *Crab Orchard Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *North American Review*, *Plume*, [Poets.org](https://poets.org), *South Dakota Review*, and elsewhere. Jen lives in a historic house in a designated bird sanctuary in Miami, where she collects peacock feathers every summer. See jkaretnick.com.

Shaza Kamel Khalil (p. 62) is a Syrian writer whose work includes poetry, fiction, and literary essays. She received the Qumra Grant in Beirut (2023) for her debut novel, *Tall Al-Khuzama*

(Lavender Hill), and the Gallery of Literature Award in Morocco for her first poetry collection, *A Narrow Space for Love*. She has also won the Al-Wasat Newspaper Short Story Award (Bahrain, 2017) and the Aqua Creative Writing Award (Egypt, 2021). Her literary essays have been published in *Al-Hiwar Al-Mutamaddin*, *Sharjah Cultural Magazine*, *Al Faisal*, and *Oxygen*. She lives in Tartus, Syria

Kendra Preston Leonard (p.46) (June 11 1974-August 19, 2026) was a librettist, lyricist, poet, and playwright. She was the author of two chapbooks, *Making Mythology* (Louisiana Literature Press, 2020) and *Grab* (Red Ogre Review, 2023), and the novella in verse *Protectress* (Unsolicited Press, 2022). Her poetry has appeared in *About Place*, *Ofi Press Magazine*, *Sage Cigarettes*, and *The Waggle*, among others. As a librettist and lyricist, she has collaborated with composers including Jessica Rudman, Lisa Neher, and Angela Slater; their works have been performed by Opera Elect, Rhymes with Opera, New Opera West, Ensemble for These Times, Choral Arts Initiative, and others. Find more of her work here: kendraprestonleonard.com.

Editor's note: Kendra Preston Leonard passed away suddenly during the compilation of this anthology. She was a beloved & frequent contributor to *fws* anthologies. *what we kept: a geography* is dedicated to her memory.

Ariel Lepore (p. 29 & 36) grew up in the PNW and graduated there with a degree in English. Though her primary purpose now is the raising of her five children, she spends her free time pursuing creative endeavors, including writing, paper quilling, movie-making with her family, and piano.

Emilie Lygren (p. 37 & 43) is a poet and outdoor educator who teaches writing in a variety of contexts: classrooms, research stations, graduate programs, parks, libraries, and beyond. She is also the author of two books of poetry and the co-author of dozens of resources on science education and social emotional learning, Emilie lives in on Coast Miwok land in San Rafael, California.

Gerardo Pacheco Matus (p. 52-53) is a Mayan poet and writer whose work has earned the Joseph Henry Jackson Award and the Latin American Poetry Chapbook Award. He has received fellowships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, CantoMundo, and Macondo. His work has appeared in *Tin House*, *New England Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *West Branch Wired*, *Apogee Journal*, and other literary journals. His poetry collections, *Border Canto Poemas* and *Child of the Grasses*, have been finalists for the Alta California Gunpowder Press, A. Poulin, Jr., Andrés Montoya, and Changes Book prizes.

Donna Nichols (p. 22) is a poet and memoirist based in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. She is the author of *Roots and Branches: Poems Across Time* and *Life Without K*. Her work also appears in *Best Poets of 2025* and *Figments of Fire*. Donna's writing explores grief, memory, and the intimate psychological spaces people carry. In addition to her creative work, she serves in

senior-services outreach, designing compassionate programs for older adults. Her poetry blends emotional resonance with lived experience, focusing on the quiet fractures that shape identity.

Dennis Kwame Nkrumah (p. 24) is a writer based in Accra, Ghana. When he is not writing poetry, he enjoys watching Akan dramas and classic theatrical performances.

Elizabeth Petit (p. 45) is an aspiring poet and short story writer. Most of Petit's published work appears on Vocal Media, and a few of the writer's stories/poems have received runner-up or honorable mention status. Life experiences and career as a middle school teacher heavily influence the writer's content and writing style. Petit enjoys surprising readers with unexpected endings or twists whenever possible.

Tara Prakash (p. 14) is the 2025 National Youth Poet Laureate Runner-Up and the Youth Poet Laureate of the United States South. She is the author of *Memory Map* (Finishing Line Press). A Pushcart Prize nominee, Tara is a three-time National YoungArts winner and two-time Scholastic Art & Writing National Gold and Silver Medalist (as well as an American Voices Medalist). Her work has been recognized by *The New York Times*, Princeton University, the National Council of Teachers of English, and *Narrative Magazine*. Tara is an incoming freshman at Princeton University. She just completed the Camino de Santiago!

David Radavich (p. 60) has published a variety of poetry, drama, and essays, including two epics, *America Bound: An Epic for Our Time* (2007) and *America Abroad: An Epic of Discovery* (2019, as well as *Middle-East Mezze* (2011) and *The Countries We Live In* (2014). His plays have been performed across the U.S. and in Europe. His latest books are *Unter der Sonne / Under the Sun: German Poems* (Deutscher Lyrik, 2021) and *Here's Plenty* (Cervena Barva, 2024).

Merril D. Smith (p. 27) is a Pushcart and Best of the Net nominated poet from New Jersey. Her poetry has been widely published by *Black Bough Press*, *The Broken Spine*, *Tiny Wren Lit*, *Feral*, and *Anti-Heroin Chic*, among others. Her first full-length poetry collection, *River Ghosts* (Nightingale & Sparrow Press) was Black Bough Poetry's December 2022 Book of the Month. Her second collection is *Held Inside the Folds of Time* (Jane's Studio Press, 2025). It includes photos taken on almost daily walks along the Delaware River.

Sandi Stromberg (p. 11 & 40) is the author of *Frogs Don't Sing Red* and *Moonlight, Shaken*. Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *formidable woman sanctuary*, *Gyroscope Review*, *MockingHeart Review*, *Synkroniciti*, *Equinox*, *San Pedro River Review*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, and *The Senior Class*. An editor at *The Ekphrastic Review*, she also edited three anthologies—*Untameable City*, *Echoes of the Cordillera*, and *Ekphrastic Poetry and Prose Archway Gallery's 50th anniversary*. A multiple Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, she was a juried poet in the Houston Poetry Fest eleven times. Dutch translations of her poems appeared in *Brabant Cultureel*.

Aurora Storm (p. 48) has recently published on Amazon KDP and was a winner at SAMA Ekphrastic Poetry Contest. Storm is a purple enthusiast who writes poetry and is finding the

beauty in imperfections of the shadows and the light. The poet is currently enrolled as a Master's degree candidate in Forensic Psychology and just wants to make the world a better place.