

CSPS  
Poetry Letter  
No. 4  
December 2023

Edited by Maja  
Trochimczyk

# Poetry Letter

California State Poetry Society



## IN THE WINTER GARDEN – FEATURING CSPS POETS SAINÉ, EHRET, & HARVEY

We started honoring “our” poets working as volunteers for California State Poetry Society with the previous issue of the *Poetry Letter*, featuring our Monthly Contest Judge, Alice Pero; Annual Contest Judge in 2022, Frank Iosue; and the newest Editor of the *California Quarterly*, Nicholas Skaldetvind. This time, we are saying farewell to three former Editors of the *California Quarterly*: Life Member, Margaret Sainé, as well as Terry Ehret and Maura Harvey; the latter two continue to assist us on the CSPS Board. Since Maura is a painter and Margaret – a photographer, some of their artwork serves as illustrations. The issue also presents one of the Honorary Mentions from the 2023 Annual Contest by Gurupreet Khalsa, too lengthy for our journal, an ekphrastic poem by Michael Escoubas, three poems by Hedy Habra, as well as three book reviews: two by Michael Escoubas – of *No Matter How It Ends* by E.J. Rode, and of *Genica* by Neth Hass – and the third one by Joan Leotta, of a new book by Hedy Habra, *Or Did You Ever See the Other Side?*

Did you? No? So, enjoy!  
Maja Trochimczyk, CSPS President



Maura Harvey, *To My Father* (31" X 38")

FEATURED POET: MAURA HARVEY

**TONY BENNETT SINGS FOR MY MOTHER**

he croons a dream crescendo  
better days swell with joy

Tony sings to the crowd  
yet I feel he sings  
just for me  
his eyes lock with mine

but you  
Mother  
you see  
the kid  
who likes art best  
tries extra hard  
stays after class  
to clean brushes for Dad

you and Dad invite Anthony  
for dinner



a museum  
the opera

Anthony Domenic Benedetto  
ripens into talent  
khaki G I songster  
he becomes Tony Bennett

tonight  
Mother  
you hear  
the voice of the kid from Astoria  
Tony tells the audience that this night is special  
his Julia is here  
in dazzling white you wave from your seat  
your smile sings an old love song  
you give him back  
his dream

Maura Harvey  
July 7, 1997 and August 28, 2023

**THE LIGHT IN GUERNICA**

Spain bombed  
numbers of dead  
ciphers burned into horseflesh  
brother against brother  
mi hermano ya no es mi hermano

Picasso paints  
in black white-hot slashes  
His stallion rages against his master  
a soldier cremated alive  
light of interrogation cross-examines  
battle nightmare crucifies the canvas

*La bombilla* burning bulb of war  
illuminates a small pueblo giant  
on the map of war  
house ablaze  
burning bodies heap into a pyramid of flesh  
families joined again in death

Pablo paints the darkening  
eyes that look but  
do not see the oil lamp's small flame  
hands that grasp but  
cannot reach the white blossom  
brothers in blood  
*carnales*  
White bull stares ahead to a world  
beyond mourning

**LUZ EN GUERNICA**

España bombardeada  
suma de los muertos  
cifras quemadas en carne de caballo  
hermano contra hermano  
mi hermano ya no es mi hermano

Picasso pinta  
en blanco y negro al rojo vivo  
Su semental pateo  
brama contra su amo  
un soldado incinerado vivo  
luz de contrainterrogación  
batalla pesadilla crucifica el lienzo

*La bombilla* luz quemante de guerra  
ilumina un pueblo chico gigante  
en el mapa de la guerra  
casa en llamas  
cuerpos ardientes en una pirámide de carne  
familias unidas de nuevo en la muerte

Pablo pinta la penumbra  
ojos que miran pero  
no ven la llama pequeña del candil  
manos que buscan pero  
no alcanzan la flor blanca  
hermanos en sangre  
*carnales*  
El toro blanco mira hacia un mundo  
más allá del duelo



*Maura Harvey, Ethiopian Guardians*

### THE DETANGLING

In the ivy I found a string of white lights,  
it was the shortest day of the year.  
Hill Deer, I did not see you,  
I barely know you.

The lights looked like leaves,  
frozen in the long frigid night.

You had snagged your antlers  
in the long braid of Christmas lights,  
but you freed yourself  
and left a trail for me.

Garden Squire, subjugated  
by festive lights,  
slave of a calendar that isn't yours,  
you ascended the hill to rest  
in your thicket.

Deer, you are a gift.

Every day and every night  
the deer climb up and down,  
their ivy route.

Messenger Deer, today  
I follow your quiet path.

~ Maura Harvey, December, 2023

**MAURA HARVEY** is a bilingual poet, author and artist who has lived in California since 1950. She holds a Ph.D. in Latin American Literature from UC Irvine. Her poetry in both Spanish and English has appeared widely. Dr. Harvey is a founder of *Taller del mar*, a monthly poetry workshop with members from Tijuana and San Diego. She feels very proud to have published a poetry anthology in Barinas, Venezuela, in 1993 and to have been able to meet Venezuelan and Cuban poets personally while travelling in those countries. She has exhibited her art in many venues in California and had a show in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2006. She joined the editorial board of the *California Quarterly* in 1999, editing many issues and serving for years also as Secretary of the CSPA and as the CSPA Annual Contest Chair. Most recently, she edited the second issue of the CQ for 2017 (Vol. 43, No. 2). In September 2023 she stepped down from the role of the CQ Editor and became a CSPA Director-at-Large.

## FEATURED POET: TERRY EHRET

### WAKING IN FIRE SEASON

Remember when you waken to be still.  
Whatever dream you have been wearing  
in the dark body of sleep  
still lies near, a deep fold  
of pleasure, a sleeve of old trouble,  
a name on a grave. Leave the dream-clothes  
under your skin that now you wash  
and lotion and paint. Dress slowly for the day  
just dawning in the smoky east. Remember  
from time to time to touch the prayer fringe  
of dream-fragments as you walk  
down the path under the falling sycamore leaves.  
Remember the sound they make  
rattling all night in the wind.

~ Terry Ehret

Published in *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, Volume 8, 2022,  
Contest Edition. Reprinted in *Interlitq, Californian Poets*  
Series VI, 2023, © Terry Ehret

### INTIMATE IMMENSITY

*The world is large, but in us  
It is deep as the sea.*  
—Ranier Maria Rilke

Say the sky.  
Say the wind galloping across the grass.  
Say the grass by the sea by the sea waves  
and their own rising and falling

eternity. Say the turning planet.  
Say the fall of the most recent evening.  
Say lie down now and say  
much sooner than you thought

the stars have all re-arranged themselves in the  
night  
while I was -- What was I doing? What?  
Say then the darkness behind the stars,  
wherever it is going. Back to the first moment

the tiny weight shifted toward  
my body or yours, and the intimate  
explosion of love. Say, in all this immensity,

who.

from *Lucky Break*, Sixteen Rivers Press, 2008,  
© Terry Ehret

### MUSTARD BATHING AT HALF MOON BAY

*After "let there be new flowering"*  
by Lucille Clifton

First blue in weeks and the flowering  
mustard sings its sweet seduction in the fields  
all along the ragged Pacific edge. Grown men  
have pulled onto the shoulder of the highway, needing  
the tender touch of yellow. They walk in slow time,  
arms outstretched, smiling as if our long war  
were over. As if all sides had won.  
Come, walk the deep paths to the sun. Be  
ready. Something inside wants to mend.

~ Terry Ehret

Published in *Reverberations II: A Visual Conversation*,  
Sebastopol Center for the Arts, 2022. reprinted in *Women*  
*Artists Datebook*, Syracuse Cultural Workers, 2022

### ON THE GREEN ROAD, COUNTY CLARE

Out the back door and over  
the cattle guard, down the walled lane,  
past the abandoned farm house

with its rambling sweetbriar,  
through a stone stile where evening  
opens to the silver rock of the Burren,  
my only company the cows in their caramel coats,  
one leggy hare, the call of a mourning dove,  
and the bells of the church away in the village.  
Oh, the relief and comfort  
of setting out alone!  
My thoughts keep turning

widdershins. I might try the Irish  
remedy of wearing my coat  
inside out till my mind

rights itself. Or walk far from anyone's  
eyes or judgment, far from troubles  
and their urgencies, or questions,

however kindly meant, that tug at my sleeve,  
leaving me thin as milk on stone.  
Solitude, they say, is an art, a gift,

a hand reaching over the old stone fence  
to pull me through, one shoulder at a time,  
like a foal or calf, into a new story.

At the crest of the hill, the wind  
tears with an ancient chill, like secrets  
in a box blown open, and the herald

of an about-to-rise moon  
fanfares the eastern clouds, casting smooth stones of light  
across the bay of Bell Harbor.

**TERRY EHRET** has published four collections of poetry, most recently *Night Sky Journey*. Literary awards include the National Poetry Series, California Book Award, Pablo Neruda Poetry Prize, eight Pushcart Prize nominations, and an NEA Translation Fellowship. She is currently working on a project to translate the collected poems of Mexican writer Ulalume González de León. Volume One received the 2021 Northern California Book Reviewer's Award for Poetry in Translation. From 2004-2006, she served as the poet laureate of Sonoma County where she lives and teaches, and in the summer, she leads travel programs for writers.

## RAIN WOMEN

*after Robinson Jeffers*

I saw them once off the coast of Monterey.  
The rain women, walking above the horizon  
in a slow procession, each carrying  
the low and heavy sky.  
Each carrying an urn of air and ash.  
I saw them again in the Canyonlands of southern Utah.  
Miles away out over the New Mexico desert,  
the sky a black hand of approaching storm,  
the air between them singed with blue light.  
Their long, gray dresses billowing,  
shifting, disappearing, reforming high above the Escalante.  
The walking rain, someone called them,  
carrying on their heads the dark and weighted sky.  
Carrying in their arms the memory of their dead,  
the ashes of what wants to be born.

~ Terry Ehret



*Blue Flower by Margaret Saine*

**MARGARET SAINÉ** was born in Germany and lives in Southern California. After a Yale Ph.D. in French and Spanish, she taught languages, literature, and culture in California and Arizona, while writing and translating poetry in five languages. Her books include *Bodyscapes*, *Words of Art*, *Lit Angels* (Moonrise Press, 2017), *Gardens of the Earth* (Moonrise Press, 2018), and six haiku chapbooks. In 1991-2021, she has been a board member of the CSPA, serving in the roles of Secretary, Annual Contest Chair, and the CSPA Poetry Letter. She was CQ Editor in 1994-2020. Saine was honored with CSPA Life Membership in 2021. Her poems have appeared in many journals here and abroad. Three books of poems and a Postwar childhood memoir were published in Germany – *Das Flüchtige bleibt* (*The Ephemeral Remains*), *Das Weite suchen* (*A Yen to Travel*), *Atem der Stille* (*The Breath of Silence*), and *Das ungeschickte Kind* (*Awkward Child*). *Searching for Bridges* is a bilingual English-Arabic book of her poems edited by poet and critic Nizar Sartawi. Several books are awaiting their publication.

FEATURED POET – MARGARET SAINÉ

NEW YEAR'S EVE

In the snowy blankness  
figures dissolve into words  
with rain as runoff

All of the stars shine  
heaven drones blue and for a while  
leaving us deathless

All of the women  
and all of the men move in  
violent antics

When death surprises  
our only swan song will be  
engraved on silence

Margaret Saine  
*From A Curtain Call of Desire*

VOYAGE

The feeling of rivers inside  
feeling them unite  
as they wrap us  
into their smooth flow  
carry us entwined  
beyond ourselves  
far along and far out  
to the seas  
to other lands  
where we long to be  
bodies  
to know and love  
embracing the world  
and being embraced

Margaret Saine  
*From A Curtain Call of Desire*

Landscapes under the Sky

Rivers

vertical hands  
branching with  
fingers entwined  
in gestures of supplication

Stillness of thought

passed through by a wind  
embedded in the scape  
of rivers and mountains  
a world of houses

of rivers and forests

Lying seemingly eternal

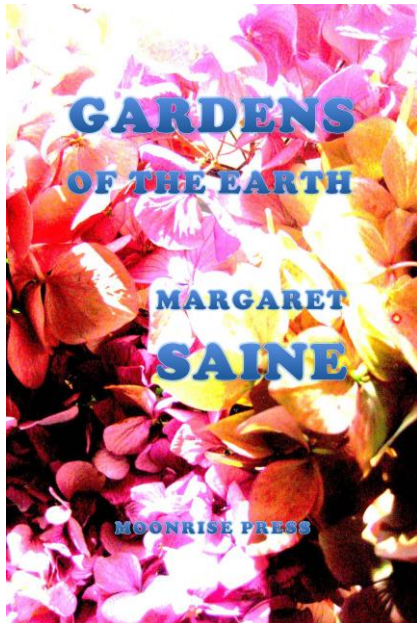
under the sky

*from a Curtain Call of Desire*



*Photo by Margaret Saine*

## ACCORDING TO NATURE



Gardens. All humans love gardens. They exemplify human well-being in nature, a nature made by plants that is evidently joyful and at ease, and eminently pleasing to the eye. My title may be ambiguous to some, those who perceive gardens as cultivated alone, and nature would then be the antithesis. But I want to stress gardens as the synthesis they are, of ambient nature and of human nature. Gardens represent a nature cultivated and beautified to human tastes, they are nature on a human scale, in a human measure.

But one learns with regret that gardens don't last forever. First they grow and are arranged, with large empty spaces still in between small growing plants and trees; then they have their heyday; but soon they may almost imperceptibly fall into neglect and alteration. They may go wild, haywire, go to seed, during one of those long trips one takes, or they may be downright abolished by others, the authority. Bulldozed, paved over.

So, true to their etymology of being "guarded", being the "ward" of someone, gardens need to be guarded in order to exist, to perform and provide their "guarding" function of human well-being and happiness.

A garden is ever-changing, I say. Someone may object that this is true only of nature herself, nature always changes, and they conclude that, because a garden is subject to human agency, it would change less. Or perhaps change more, arbitrarily, beyond rhyme or reason! This thought suggests a truth that may once have been valid, but strikes me as facetious today. First of all, as far as nature is concerned, we now know-- unlike Enlightenment writers, who believed they knew— that as a whole, nature is beholden to ecological changes, including those wrought by humans in the last five hundred years. And before someone suggests that changes of any kind are all bad, let us examine the paradox that several formerly rural species now live in cities. The countryside with its high-efficiency agribusiness has wrought disastrous changes that make badgers, owls, robins, coyotes, raccoons, opossums and hedgehogs seek refuge in formerly inhospitable urban places, but which are now relatively more tranquil, its green spaces not exploited for maximum efficiency. A garden that leaves a lot to the plants' devices, such as mine, also qualifies as such a sanctuary. What with all my travels, the plants in my garden sometimes have to fend for themselves.

What I was trying to point out is that in the garden, the mix of elements—sun, light, rain and watering, wind, hot and cold, soil amended or self-amending, insects and birds, and many more—is just as unpredictable as elsewhere and therefore transforms the garden's entire appearance, its "feel," as it were. I don't think I exaggerate when I say that the different growth of plants creates a different garden every year. Sun and shade are of special concern in the summer, when changes are more noticeable, especially at noon, for the more extreme conditions might benefit or harm plants that were, only last year, out of harm's way or growing indifferently along, whereas now they are truly "blooming" and "blossoming," providing light or shade, providing color. Or their opposite, glorious last year, they are now floundering, flopping, and dying.

My garden is my sky lab, made up of star dust. It is an adventure that does not entirely depend on me, but has its own—always surprising—dynamic. After I set it up, give it the basics, it begins to follow its own rules and laws and continues to surprise me. Each interference by me—ripping out and putting in, weeding, pruning and shaping, coaxing and tying up, lowering and stretching—is minor compared to what looks like the garden's own will, and which is none other than the interaction of all elements of this ambience according to nature. Including the plants themselves, who affect other plants and the environment, and are affected by them in return.

I like it when my garden does so much better than I had thought, or at least when it does unexpected things, in an intriguing, overall good way. But when the emperor vine or morning glory, which blooms on its white shelf when I wake up, begins winding across the stone path like a snake and crawling over other plants and strangling them, I have to interfere and strangle the strangler, so to speak, limiting her to her place.

I live, we live, on this earth. Flowers are a gift, they seek and elicit beauty in us and from us. Gardens are always "according to nature," environmental nature as well as human. There are no human beings who don't like gardens. And all gardens like and welcome humans. After all, we and the plants are each other's fondest breath.

~ Margaret Sainé

Published by Moonrise Press, <https://moonrisepress.com/saine---gardens-of-the-earth.html>

## MIDWINTER EARLY SPRING

*C'était un jour / A la gloire de l'herbe.  
It was a day / In the glory of plants.  
~ Edouard Glissant*

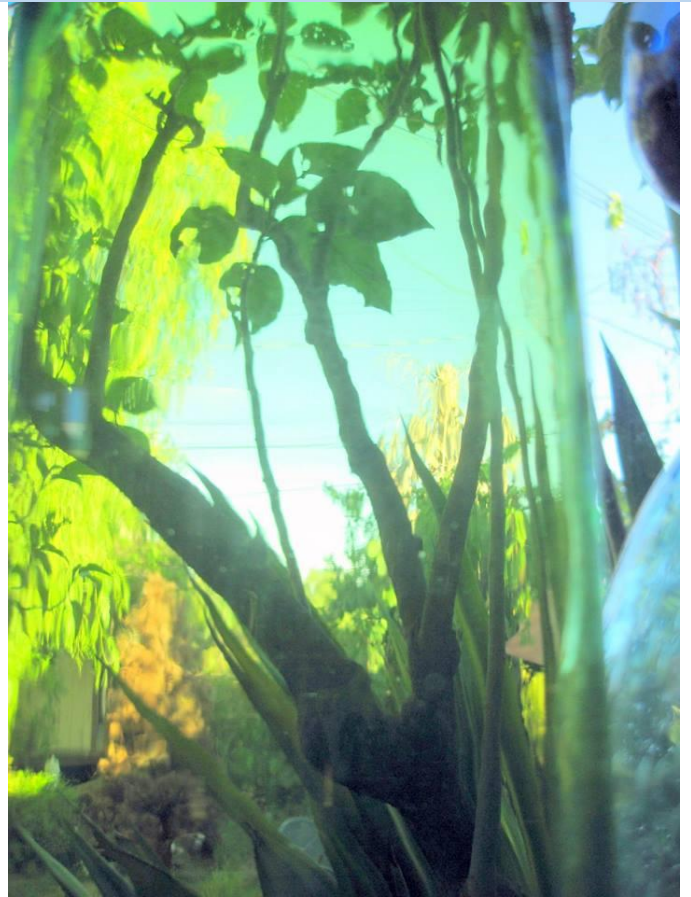
Now the garden receives  
the explosive winter sun  
green jewels break out  
on each twig and leaf:

A new green spring air  
erupts in our hearts  
what appeared already dead  
gains a new lease on life

And I'm inclined to think  
I experience a miracle  
sprung from that sudden rain  
that inundated us yesterday

A water bluer than any lake  
or river, a water blue like  
a piece of sky washed by the sun

after the tempest is over  
I gratefully view the life  
that wasn't there last night



## CLIMBING ROSE

*El silencio profundo de la vida en la tierra,  
nos lo enseña la rosa / abierta en el rosal.  
The profound silence of life on earth,  
the rose open on the rosebush teaches it to us.*

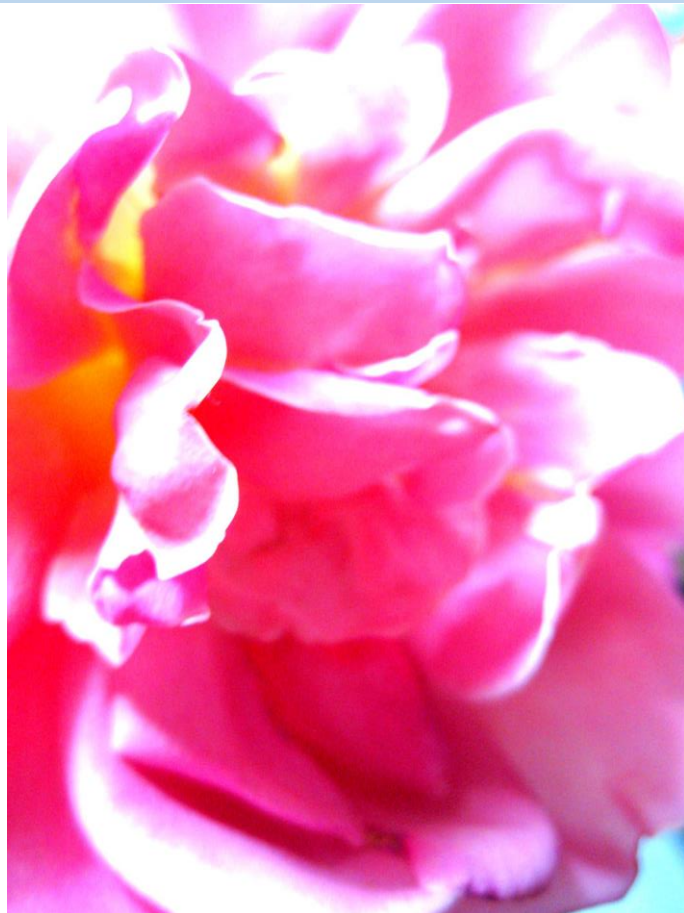
*Lorca*

Time  
a song sung to us  
a ballad of simple  
and complicated life  
phrases and lapses sustained  
on a ferry boat of feelings  
on the river of days

With pauses  
for the banal  
the eventless  
the trivial not powerful  
yet reaching at times  
for the poetic

Time  
a song to consciousness  
the climbing rose  
that twists and turns  
and in the end  
carries the roof

*Margaret Saine*





The 2023 CSPS Annual Contest, adjudicated by Anna Maria Mickiewicz of London, England, had four winners: Sharon Chmielarz (first prize), Susan Wolbarst and Claire Scott (two equivalent second prizes) and Mark G. Hammerschick (third prize). Their poems were published in the California Quarterly 49, no. 4 along with two Honorary Mentions, by Mark G. Hammerschick and rg cantalupo. Other Honorary Mentions will be published in the next CQ in the spring (Claire Scott, Christine Horner, rg cantalupo), below is the Honorary Mention by Gurupreet K. Khalsa, long for publication in the CQ, exceeding its allowable line limits. Congratulations to all the winners!

### WANDERING BRUME TO SPARKS

1. *Young Juan wander'd by the glassy brooks/ Thinking unutterable things.../ ...so pursued/ His self-communion with his own high soul.* Losing track of time in wanderings, wanting, restless, dissatisfied, seeking, reflexive thoughts about the nature of science and man/woman/all variations in between, metaphysical elements, such as are angels male or female or neither, the nature of the world, the nature of love, all pondered in wanderings in nature (Thoreau's *absolute freedom and wildness*), wanderings and wonderings of soul. Paratactic: where meaning germinates in the spaces, peripheral shadowed niggling (trapdoors that when triggered propel one down a chute into something unknown – is it a field of flowers, a cave of spiky quartz crystals upon which to impale oneself? A mirrored fun room with a rubber floor? The depths of Lake Baikal where the Rusalka lurks?). One must know the correct texture in which to commune with high souls.

2. A walkway in Amsterdam glows *Starry Night* when trod upon. No one who wonders what the night contains, where the stars go, could ever be lost because the path glides on ahead.

round and round they dance in tandem  
dance together till their hearts swell  
leap in harmony and gladness

3. *Instead of insight, maybe all a man gets is strength to wander for a while.* A box: what is outside it, what is inside it (insight and insight): in systems theory, a closed system, but once opened its molecules and content (Pandora?) interact with other systems. The box as the universe and stars and galaxies and we are all their toys in it and God is counting his marbles as they roll around, and once in a while he will open the box and take one out and roll it outside of the box, or dress a paper doll in different outfits. How do I feel about it? Safe knowing my walls but eager to wander outside of them. And how far could two photons wander when they share a single quantum state, one measured and fixed and thus the other spooky and entangled, according to Einstein? You might think then that no wandering is even possible. Gedanken experiment: breaking entanglement as you shoot off beyond the event horizon and I sit on the fence wondering.

4. *The plain was full of ghosts/ I wandered up, I wandered down.* An image at the center of a dream that is symbolic: a doll with its head missing, and now much time must be devoted to searching for it (by glassy brooks), knowing it is important for continuity to restore its head. So the quest for wholeness ensues, propelled by underlying anxiety about how we as a society have not kept our head, feeling the need to proclaim I am this or I am that (as St. Augustine wrote, we pass by ourselves without wondering), as opposed to we are this and we are that, and we need the guiding power of reason, or as the scientist said, like all sentient civilizations we are doomed to failure and extinction in a constant cycle of ego and destruction unless we return to completeness where we can present ourselves as assembled of many parts but ultimately working together (wandering through space together) to move forward because arms cannot shape and legs cannot move forward without meaning and direction from conscious awareness.

we exist to solve  
tethered by glowing threads  
to the record of all being and beings.

5. *I know not how I may seem to others, but to myself I am but a small child wandering upon the vast shores of knowledge, every now and then finding a small bright pebble to content myself with.* The child perceives no wide shores, no world beyond the present, little doubt about enduring promises of parents and love, at least if she is a lucky child; fear of meaninglessness has not intruded. In this world of the child, sixty-

four is unimaginable, today and yesterday and tomorrow the box containing all marbles and rainbows. Not yet is there a beyond.

6. Water wanders, you know, but always downhill toward the place where it joins together, unless it wants to work a while to dissolve stone and make art. A conscious wanderer finds herself looking up, to find networks arching overhead, tapping into the Akashic Records (the life-thread of consciousness) where wandering produces an electric thrill of connection to discover that all things are connected, really, don't argue with me, all things ARE connected, even as I touch your hand and molecules leap one to another and I touch the tree trunk and find that it recognizes me, and I lay my hand upon the water and it caresses, understanding my moisture and grinning in companionship. Why are raindrops not the size of swimming pools, we wonder.

7. *Love is the star to every wandering bark.* We wandered once in Mussoorie along the Mall, looking in Cambridge Books and sipping our mango shakes and browsing the Kullu shawl shop at Picture Palace. John Muir said to *wander the whole summer* and when you do, you find a mirror shard of memory, no destination but that of harmony. Idyllic, perhaps, yet idylls seem to populate the wanderer's world.

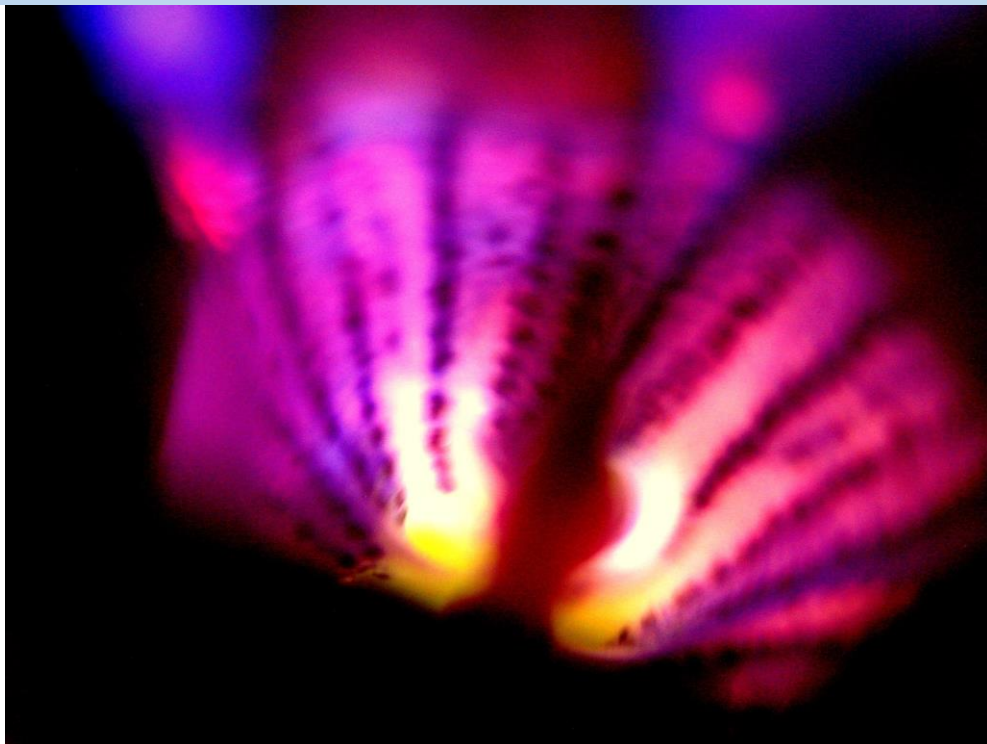
I dart up my thread to a glimmer  
of light and find your thread  
shining, where we meet in a spark.

8. And where does a demented brain wander? Through misty memories, the fog of stored moments even as faces fade in hollow vacant space, bereft of sparkling gems, rich colors of imagination dimmed, melodies left unsung.

9. In the world of the bat, an umwelt populated with shrieks emitted at 200 times per second – per second – seeking echoes of tree friends and insects that will be dinner. We think evil lurks in darkness but tiny night-flying creatures are not evil as they reflect man-made lights of the Amsterdam walkway stars. I emit a thought of you and my umwelt senses echolocation of your enfolding embrace. All there is to know in my world, in filling the night with light: blue light to light our wanderings as we push back the dark.

~ Gurupreet K. Khalsa  
*Honorary Mention, CSPS Annual Contest 2023*

(a) George Gordon, *Lord Byron, Don Juan, I, XC-XCI* (713-14, 721-22); (b) William Least *Heat-Moon*; (c) Emerson, *Dirge*; (d) Plato; (e) Shakespeare, Sonnet 116.



Purple Flower by Margaret Saine

## "FIRST SNOW" BY MICHAEL ESCOUBAS

### FIRST SNOW

It began while we slept,  
and continued as we awakened . . .  
softly falling  
as if sifted from a sugar-shaker  
by Heaven's unseen Hand.

Feathery flakes fastened themselves  
to branches shorn of leaves  
by a recent wind. The branches  
welcomed them as flake after flake  
settled in its own predestined place.

Standing amidst the changing season,  
I am reminded that few things  
in life remain the same.  
For in life, as in nature, the unseen  
Hand in charge of change, changes me.



*Ekphrastic poem by Michael Escoubas; free image from the Internet.*

## MICHAEL ESCOUBAS REVIEWS *NO MATTER HOW IT ENDS* BY E. J. RODE

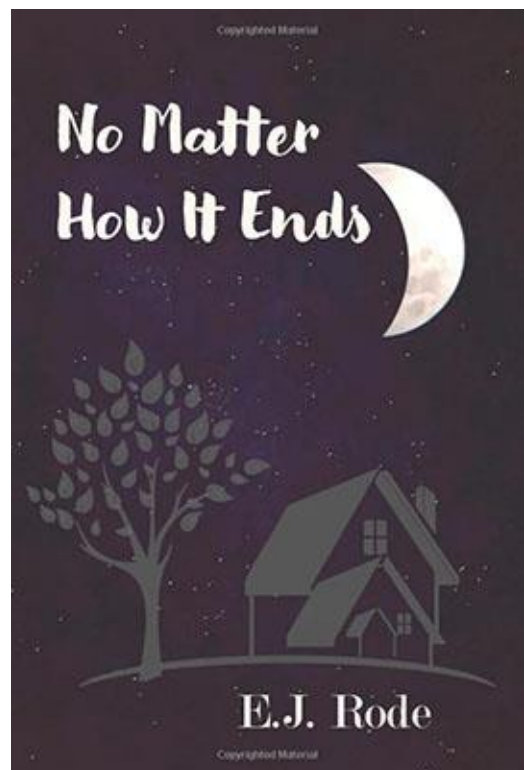
*No Matter How It Ends* by E.J. Rode | 56 Poems ~ 101 Pages | Meadowlark Press | ISBN: 978-1956578-30-0

The following quote by E.E. Cummings captures a principle I believe to be embedded in E.J. Rode's superb new collection, *No Matter How It Ends*: "To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best day and night to make you like everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting." Only the poet can affirm if the above dictum applies to her life or to what degree her poetry bears its influence. As I worked my way through the poems, I developed a strong sense that E.J. Rode has not only engaged Cummings' battle but continues to do so. My goal in this review is to support that sense and prove its truth.

*No Matter How It Ends* is organized into four headings: One (15 poems), Two (18), Three (19), and Four (14). While avoiding structural rigidity, I see section One as reflections on "Family"; section Two echoes life's "Ironies"; section Three portrays the "Pathos" of life; and finally, section Four explores life's "Simple Joys." These are general delineations. E.J. Rode cannot be run into a corner.

"The Morning After," serves as Rode's preface and sets a tone which captures all the areas referenced above. I share it in full:

Love is always a miracle  
no matter how it ends  
  
for a time we walk  
with the sun on our faces  
  
warmed deeper than our skin  
we are new  
  
shocked from complacency  
rousted from bitterness



by this unexpected grace  
this movable feast

we've forever hungered for  
how sweet at last to savor  
with no cast shadow  
of what will come

no matter how it ends  
we begin believing

always awake  
praying for a miracle

I lingered here savoring the poem's wide emotional sweep. With "The Morning After," serving as a tiller or rudder, I felt empowered to navigate Rode's river of life.

Speaking of lingering, you won't want to miss a poem named, "Linger." It is about rain coming through and leaving a "lingering / wet kiss / on the lawn." Her ending is worth "lingering" for!

Rode's style is predominantly free verse. With that said, the work shows impressive variety: couplets, tercets, long lines, short lines, poems with interesting indentations, and word spacing. Her endline decisions are impeccable. Rhymes are not forced; but appear interlineally, almost musically. There is a complete lack of self-consciousness in Rode's work. By that I mean her heart is doing the writing. Poems develop out of her considered life experiences. By the time they get to paper, she has had time to think about them, to step back and work through the circumstances which gave rise to each poem.

"Moon Dance" is a dreamy, contemplative poem in which "Poetry tumbles / from the barrel of my pen." This is about the poet's creative processes, which at times resemble my own!

"best regards" channels e.e. cummings, showing his lower-case style, ampersands and wild indentations. In fact the poem begins "my dear old ampersand." It is as if cummings is with her as she writes.

"Sunset" is an intensely personal poem; as the end nears, she will "remember / every evening walk / without regret / the same way I'll remember / my hand against your skin / never wishing / I had touched you less."

Rode uses a range of poetic devices. Irony is one of them. "Breaking" shares opinions that perhaps many harbor about the "information highway":

The evening news  
casts a shadow across

Over and over again I find  
myself lost

Nightmare the debt too large  
to be paid

Nightmare lives lost to  
the games that are played

Nightmare the spinning words  
that spew nonstop

That stink of sulfur and lava  
death and rot

I pour the wine and close  
my eyes

Even the truth has learned  
how to lie

I opened this review with "The Morning After," an overview poem that anchors the collection. *No Matter How It Ends* closes with "Advice to My Invisible Self." If "The Morning After," guides us down the river, this poem ties the boat to the pier. Here is an excerpt:

Tell your mind to hush,  
and listen to your heart.

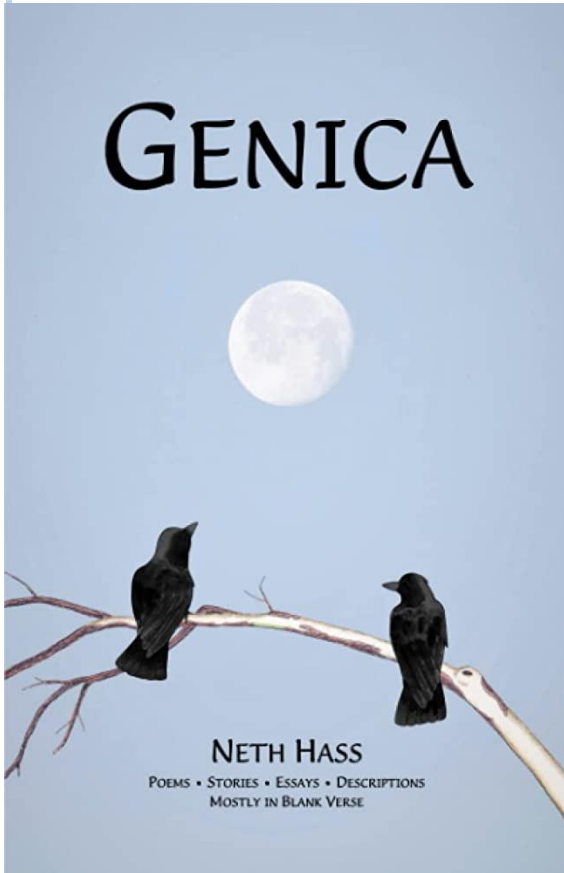
Write the poems  
you fear no one else will like.

E.J. Rode offers pearls that can be applied to life, not the least of which channels e.e. cummings' principle of being "nobody but yourself," no matter how it ends.

~ Michael Escoubas

## MICHAEL ESCOUBAS REVIEWS GENICA BY NETH HASS

*Genica* by Neth Hass | 154 pages | Nethanderal Books | ISBN:9798352215401



Celebrated Irish playwright, and social critic, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), once said, "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake."

I was reminded of Shaw's aphorism, as I worked my way through Neth Hass's *Genica*. I was struck by the depth of this writer's mind and the range of his interests. It is as if Hass and Shaw were cut from the same cloth. The lives and work of each demonstrate an uncommon [in this reviewer's mind] zest for life, attended by an eye for the anomalies of life.

The goal of this review is to drink from the well of Neth Hass's creative life and serve up an imaginative "cocktail" to you, my reader.

### Background & Style

The materials contained in *Genica* comprise a 35-year-period of life-reflections. Over time these reflections found their way onto paper, went through careful stages of editing and revision, until "parts" of the poet's world became "the" world entitled *Genica*. The Author's Note at the end of the book explains how Hass arrived at the title and opens a window into the poet's life.

Neth Hass's writing is difficult to pigeon hole. That is, the lineage in most compositions resembles free verse poetry; other pieces such as "How Not To Write a Poem," present as essays, anecdotes, or short stories. Regardless of classification Hass's writing style is engaging, witty, and wise.

I get the feeling that the writer has made his share of mistakes in life. I say this because no one could write with such insight without having "messed up" a few times. Hass says to me, "Let's take a walk, I think the two of us may have a few things in common."

"Wild Raspberries," recalls a childhood memory where:

At the edge of the field, I step into tall grass  
and negotiate a tangle of weedy brambles,  
brush and saplings bound with various vines,  
to access the luscious fruit, plump and black,  
with sweet juice as red as any blood—  
and tows and runs and ranks and racks of thorns  
reaching for my blood as I step in  
and discreetly insinuate myself among them.

This medium-length poem of 60 lines is replete with descriptions of a bird's nest containing "two small ivory eggs," an "intricate spider's net," and hidden things like ticks and chiggers, the armies of which will march up his legs, things that bite (flies and mosquitoes) and much more. This poem is a magnum opus of experiences the goal of which is to garner:

A bowl of sun-warmed berries in fresh cold milk—  
cream, if you prefer—will be tastier  
and more nutritious for having come  
and shared in the ritual of blood sacrifice.

Ah yes! How this one spoke to my life at about age 12.

Speaking of youth, many poems serve as vivid flashbacks. For example, “Cadillac Heart Attack,” is about two boys, one of which could have been me, staffing a “full-service” gas station in the days before air-conditioning. The boys, covered in grease and sweat-drenched clothes, encounter “lush femininity” . . . “overflowing her skimpy garments.” Further details about those garments and what the girl says to the boys after “she rolled the window down,” await the intrepid reader.

Poetry, it has been said, “Is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right.” Hass has thought deeply about the world. His meditative poem “Homeless” reads like a prayer. In it, the poet is on an extended winter walk. The “stirrings” of February weather “usher in the most tedious part of winter.” The poet tries to walk off his homeless mood.

Each stanza places the reader in the landscape: “The snow lies out in tatters; the air is sweet / with half-forgotten aroma of quickening earth / and lush moss caps the peaks of rock in the creek bed / like a tiny forest on a miniature mountain range.”

Throughout the poem, Hass ponders the meaning of homelessness. He and his canine companion, once abandoned with nowhere else to go, are a good fit. They pass through a neglected farm, bought and sold a hundred times, yet no one lives there. Time and abuse have laid waste to the poet’s “sliver of paradise.” The man and his companion encounter a deer herd, pensive at human presence, given the yearly autumn harvesting of their flesh. In a panic the herd disperses; a doe, in flight, becomes entangled in sharp fence wire. The poet is emotional in his concern for the wounded deer and hopes she and the herd will find each other. All of this and more become a metaphor for life, a meditation on the complexities of what it means to be human, on what it means to appreciate the time allotted to us on this earth.

I noted earlier that Neth Hass’s poetry epitomizes a zest for life. A better word might be passion. Hass, a life-long carpenter, one who measures twice, cuts once, has created a poetic edifice that will stand the test of time.

It is little wonder that *Genica*, was awarded the 2022 Book of the Year Prize by the Illinois State Poetry Society.

~ Michael Escoubas



*Or Did You Ever See The Other Side? By Hedy Habra*

## JOAN LEOTTA REVIEWS *OR DID YOU EVER SEE THE OTHER SIDE?* BY HEDY HABRA

*Or Did You Ever See the Other Side?* by Hedy Habra | Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53 | ISBN 978-1-9504136-90



Great philosophers often pose questions to stimulate creative thought and conversation. Hedy Habra, a great poet, uses this technique to title/initiate our entrance into poems that her own ekphrastic responses to art broadened to include dreams, beauty, and life in general. By using questions for each title, Habra opens up a dialogue with us, the reader/listener, as well as with the piece of art that stimulated her own elegant verbal musing. The question approach opens an interlocutory with Habra herself inviting us to think about and talk over with her, each question as if we were in a tearoom with her, sipping, talking, learning, sharing. The end notes in the book invite us to dialogue in our own way with the art that stimulated her poetry.

While each poem is wonderful in its own right, the entirety of the poems collected in this book lead us on an odyssey that reaches deeply into the heart of the subject of each question, to explore Habra's, and our own heart. These poems are a brilliant grouping of both free verse and formal poetry. They are executed with such skill that within every form each word and phrase, so carefully chosen by Habra, power the poem to make them servants to Habra's thoughts.

In the opening, title poem, *Or Did You Ever See the Other Side*, the beauty in an oak table speaks to us through a female narrator who runs her fingertips over the table's surface feeling that her touch reaches to the grain of the tree whose boards made up the table. Wavy lines and burls in the surface spur the narrator to wonder if the tree feels pain in phantom limbs and if the table can recall the carpenter's hands carving it with love. But Habra is not satisfied with this profound connection. She shifts into even deeper territory. We are brought further into the mind of the person seated at the table, with the line, "And what of the movement of her pen, her unanswered questions, the songs she sang to herself?" Subsequent equally masterful lines expose the writer's open scars and overall openness to love.

It's no wonder that Habra, who has published four other poetry books, has won multiple awards for her writing including the Silver Nautilus Book Award. Her books have been awarded Honorable Mention and Finalist in various years for the Eric Hoffer Book Award. She is fluent in several languages, including Spanish and Arabic. Her story collection, *Flying Carpets*, won the 2013 Arab American National Book Award Honorable Mention and was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award and the USA Best Book Award. She has won the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Award, the Victoria Urbano Award, and the Eve of St. Agnes Award, won Honorable Mention from *Tiferet*, and was a finalist for *Nimrod's* Pablo Neruda Award. Overall, in her career, she has been nominated twenty-one-times for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Eight of the poems in this book are among those nominated for Pushcart, two for Best of Net in Poetry, and one for Best of Net in micro fiction. Her multilingual work appears in numerous journals and anthologies.

The rest of the book unfolds in a wonderful array of sculpted words, each a work of art. Three of the poems were first published by *California Quarterly*. These are: *Or Did You Think Our Crushed Hopes Couldn't Reawaken?*, *Or What Do You Learn When You Face Only Blue*, and *Or Would It Have Made a Difference, Had I Known?* This latter poem hits hard at the expectations placed on a woman in the role of wife. It begins with a powerful punch into these expectations placed on a woman: "Little did I know that when I'd wear my wedding gown, I'd be crossing a revolving door to a path of no return." Quite a lot to think about.

The final poem in the book, *Or Did You Think I'd Never Find the Way Out begins*, "It took me a while to wake up from a life not lived," and ends with the powerful line, "a mirror outlining a woman I never knew." Just as the poet has found out new things about herself, we, reading these wonderful works are able to discover new things about ourselves and our world through Habra's work.

Each time I read the book, I am again glad to immerse myself in Habra's wisdom, beautiful language, and skilful unfolding of herself and my own being. Yes, this is definitely a work to put by one's bedside and read over and over again.

~ Joan Leotta

## POEMS BY HEDY HABRA

### OR DID YOU EVER SEE THE OTHER SIDE OF THINGS?

After *Disturbing Presence* by Remedios Varo

Seated at her table, her fingertips run over  
the knots where branches  
once grew, feel the crevices  
of the aged oak's grain, its porous surface  
about to peel open

like the pages of a book. She watches wavy  
lines swirl and burls' eyes  
sprout in threadlike tendrils ...  
Does a tree feel pain in its phantom limbs?  
Could the table remember

the carpenter's hands that carved it with love,  
the many times it was stained  
and rubbed with oils, would  
these hands erase the memory of trees  
pregnant with bird trills?

And what of the movement of her pen, her  
unanswered questions, the songs  
she sang to herself? A heavy  
breath in the nape of her neck rarefies the air.  
The chair's damask fabric,  
woven with fleur-de-lis disintegrates, scattering  
petals wet with tears. Her open scars  
exposed, she feels the pull  
of a body against hers, her hunger unveiled as  
the moment recedes.

Hedy Habra, first published by *The Bitter Oleander*  
From *Or Did You Ever See The Other Side?* (Press 53, 2023)

### OR WEREN'T WE ALWAYS TOLD TO REMOVE OUR MAKEUP AT NIGHT?

After *We Had Many Faces* by Juanita Guccione

On certain evenings when the sun turns ebony, my heart becomes an obsidian pendant hanging between my breasts, conjuring old lovers' touch, my newborn's avid lips. I can then freely perform, peeling off face after face the masks that haunted me all my life, each dangling from a strand of my graying hair, caught within a self-woven web of conflicting feelings brimming with sap and dew. I become a puppeteer pulling threads of time, braiding throbbing heartbeats with the stillness of empty silences. That's when I realize how much care was taken in recreating myself as though with stage makeup. Or else how could I have coped with the different roles allotted to me at every crossroad, each gilded with a false sense of free will?

Hedy Habra, first published by *The MockingHeart Review*  
From *Or Did You Ever See The Other Side?* (Press 53, 2023)



## OR CALL ME A HOARDER IF YOU WILL BUT TRY TO UNDERSTAND

After *Harmony* by Remedios Varo

Each and every object in my drawers has a story of its own.  
When I revisit the selves I once was, minute black silhouettes  
Align themselves over the power lines of my mind as on a score  
Until the outline of an alter ego irrupts, adding a silent note.

When I revisit the selves I once was, minute black silhouettes  
Rub over every object's skin, absorbing smells and vibrations  
Until the outline of an alter ego irrupts, adding a silent note  
And would they engage in a dialogue in the utmost darkness?

Rub over every object's skin, absorbing smells and vibrations  
Like the rosary strunged with pearls my mom loved so much  
And would they engage in a dialogue in the utmost darkness  
Map the vestibules of memory, run fingers over shining veins?

Like the rosary strunged with pearls my mom loved so much  
Boxes of left-over yarn, her crocheted creations tucked into drawers  
Map the vestibules of memory, run fingers over shining veins  
Call it a bric-a-brac fit for those of us prone to engage in bricolage.

Boxes of left-over yarn, her crocheted creations tucked into drawers  
A bleached sand dollar that might become your grandson's treasure.  
Call it a bric-a-brac fit for those of us prone to engage in bricolage.  
Nothing is what it seems, only the meaning invested in its arcane language

A bleached sand dollar that might become your grandson's treasure  
And just the sight of a handwriting triggers the deepest emotions  
Nothing is what it seems, only the meaning invested in its arcane language.  
I keep digging as I become the archeologist of my own experience

Hedy Habra, first published by *The MacQueen Quinterly*  
From *Or Did You Ever See The Other Side?* (Press 53 2023)

**HEDY HABRA** is a poet, artist, and essayist, born in Egypt and of Lebanese descent. She has authored four poetry collections, such as *Or Did You Ever See The Other Side?* and *The Taste of the Earth*, which won the 2020 Silver Nautilus Book Award, Honorable Mention for the Eric Hoffer Book Award, and Finalist for the Eric Hoffer Best Book Award. *Under Brushstrokes* is a collection of ekphrastic poems, finalist for the 2015 International Book Award and the USA Best Book Award. *Tea in Heliopolis* won the 2014 USA Best Book Award and was a finalist for the International Book Award. Her story collection, *Flying Carpets*, won the 2013 Arab American National Book Award Honorable Mention and was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Award and the USA Best Book Award. Her book of literary criticism, *Mundos alternos y artísticos en Vargas Llosa* (2012), explores the visual and inter-artistic elements of the Peruvian Nobel Laureate's fiction. Habra earned an MA and an MFA in English and an MA and Ph.D. in Spanish literature, all from Western Michigan University, where she has been teaching. A recipient of the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Award, the Victoria Urbano Award, and the Eve of St. Agnes Award, she is a twenty-one-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Her multilingual work appears in numerous journals and anthologies, including *The Bitter Oleander*, *California Quarterly*, *Cider Press Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Cutthroat*, *The Cortland Review*, *Diode*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Gargoyle*, *The MacGuffin*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *MockingHeart Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Nimrod*, *Panoplyzine*, *Poet Lore*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *SLANT*, *Solstice*, *Tiferet*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Verse Daily*, *Vox Populi*, and *World Literature Today*.

## CALIFORNIA STATE POETRY SOCIETY

Established in 1971, CSPA is the official state organization representing California to the National Federation of State Poetry Societies (NFSPS). CSPA was incorporated on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1985 as a 501(c)(3) organization, so donations above the membership level are tax deductible. Donor and patron support ensure that (1) the quality publications of the CSPA continue and (2) our promotion of poetry and art in California and around the world thrives and expands. Information regarding renewal and patron contributions is on the Membership page of our website (.org). The CSPA began publication of the *California Quarterly* in the fall of 1972. The *California Quarterly*, published four times a year, accepts only unpublished poetry and no simultaneous submissions are allowed. Foreign language poems with an English translation are welcome. Submissions may be made through Submittable.com, via email, website, or even mail (by those without access to the internet and email addresses).

### CSPA Officers

President – Maja Trochimczyk; Vice President/Communications – Richard Modiano  
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### California Quarterly (CQ) Board of Editors

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Terry Ehret, Maura Harvey and Monthly Contest Chair – Alice Pero

[www.californiastatepoetrysociety.org](http://www.californiastatepoetrysociety.org) (website) | [www.californiastatepoetrysociety.com](http://www.californiastatepoetrysociety.com) (blog)

The *Poetry Letter* ((Online ISSN 2836-9394; Print ISSN 2836-9408) is a quarterly electronic publication, issued by the California State Poetry Society. Edited by Maja Trochimczyk since 2020 and by Margaret Saine earlier. The Poetry Letter is emailed and posted on the CSPA website, CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety.org. Sections of the Poetry Letter are also posted separately on the CSPA Blog, CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety.com.

## MONTHLY CONTEST SUBMISSIONS GUIDELINES

California State Poetry Society encourages poetic creativity by organizing monthly poetry contests. The contests are open to all poets, whether or not they are members of the CSPA. Reading fees are \$1.50 per poem with a \$3.00 minimum for members and \$3.00 per poem with a \$6.00 minimum for non-members. Entries must be postmarked during the month of the contest in which they are entered. They must consist of a cover page with all contact information (name, address, telephone number and email address) as well as the month and THEME on cover page, and the titles of the poems being submitted. Starting in January 2023, we are accepting previously published poems for our Monthly Contest. Please note the publication where it first appeared on any such poem. There are two ways to submit fees, by regular mail (enclosing check) or email (using Paypal): 1) by mail to CSPA Monthly Contest – (specify month), Post Office Box 4288 Sunland, California 91041, with a check made to CSPA; and 2) by email to: CSPSMonthlyContests@gmail.com (specify month), with fees paid by Paypal to the following account – CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety@gmail.com.

The monthly contest winners are notified the month after they are awarded. All of the winners for the year are listed in the first CSPA Newsbriefs and published in the first Poetry Letter of the following year. Prize-winning poems are also posted on the blog, CaliforniaStatePoetrySociety.com. The 1st prize winner receives half of the prize pool for pools less than \$100. For pools of \$100 or more, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd place winners receive \$50, \$10 and \$5, respectively. There are no exceptions to the prize disbursement rules. Please note: Do not send SAEs. We do not return poems. If you win, we will let you know. Otherwise, there are no notifications.

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