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# CentralLit

MAGAZINE

Volume 2

SUPPORTING THE LITERARY ARTS OF  
CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

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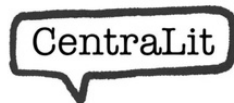
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# Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

As we reflect on this past year, we can't help but feel a tremendous sense of pride and absolute gratitude for what the magazine has become and we've been able to accomplish. Despite our busy schedules, this year, we've had the privilege of continuing our open mics at the Centralia Regional Library after a long pause due to COVID, participating in the 2022 Centralia Balloon Fest, the 2023 Marion County Cultural Fair, and the 2023 Centralia Library Author Fair where Brittani was able to promote the magazine while also showcasing her latest publication, *My Body, Like Tentacles*.

We also attended and spoke at Centralia's 2023 Juneteenth Celebration which was an unforgettable experience, being able to stand together in solidarity with the community in celebration of our shared history and the richness of our community's diversity.

Thank you for being a part of this journey. We truly believe that literature has the power to unite, inspire, and transform. We hope this magazine is a testament to that.

With love,

*Brittani* *Ashley*  
*Lana*

# Interview with Nancy Stanford

*CentraLit* recently had the chance to talk to Nancy Stanford, author of the *Letters to Sarah* series. Nancy is one of the original contributing members of *CentraLit*, attending our very first open mic event at the Centralia Regional Library. We are so excited to share this interview discussing Nancy's connection to Southern Illinois and what's next for *Letters to Sarah*

*This interview has been edited and organized for space and clarity.*

**CentraLit [CL]:** It's really amazing how [in *Letters to Sarah Book 1*] you are able to sort of get into the headspace of this young woman and all of the things that she's gone through.

**Nancy Stanford [NS]:** Well, I'll tell you something. I think I hit on it because I've gone through a lot of that. So, I think when we write, we tend to draw on what we know anyway. Considering what inspired it – the way it was written, the letters, you know, being epistolary and the things that she was going through – considering what inspired me to do that. All the emotion, everything that came out of me went into her. If you try to fake it, the reader knows.

**CL:** The world is shaping the way Sarah sees the world and how she understands her place in it. How did you decide to include that aspect?

**NS:** It all started because my mother passed away when I was ten, that was 1964. So, all through these years since there's been times when I would say my mother wouldn't have known anything about this, or my mother would never have experienced this. I still, to this day, have out loud conversations with her, explaining to her things like what a microwave is. Why do I have a salt lamp sitting over there? What is that supposed to do? So, what does that mean? You know, and what are these little things with the blue light? Well, they're security cameras, you know, and everybody has them.



Our cars, the stores we have, how we shop, what we buy – just the majority of things about our lives. She didn't live to see that. She didn't know we landed on the moon. She wouldn't know what a space shuttle was if she was standing in it. I think the minute I knew was when my step grandfather had passed away just several years back now. In his things they found a packet of letters that my mother had written to him during the last year of her life and somehow or another, they got to me. So, there I had this packet of letters that's written in her hand, in her words. I was sitting on this floor, and I had them all spread out and I was reading them again and again and it hit me that I was getting to know her through her words and her views on things and what was going on in the world. When that struck me, I thought, you know, that is the only way to write this, because we're dealing with someone who is dealing with life without her sister, she's dealing with her losses, she's dealing with the world, she's dealing with so much, but by herself in the beginning, and I thought the only way we're going to understand what she's going through and how she's going through it is through her own words. Just like I was getting to know my mother.

So, I had several manuscripts started. Most of them I called something like "Conversations with my Mother" because, as I said before, I was always having these conversations out loud explaining to her what the world was like. When I finally figured out how I wanted to tell it and my characters got them in my head. That changed the name, changed the perspective, and that's how we ended up with letters to Sarah.

**CL:** History plays a large role in the books, right?

**NS:** The history of it is, well, twofold. First of all, I'm a history freak, but second of all, getting to know the person is one thing, but getting to know the world around them is something else, not to mention it helps us understand why she's thinking what she's thinking and why she's doing what she's doing. Well, you know. Germany is taking over, you know, and Hitler's going nuts and, well, that's what we're getting into. So yeah, I'm doing research for Book 4 and that's the 1940s. So yes, everything is getting very, very real. The 30s was very interesting. I was thinking earlier how I'm going to have to reread book three, so I don't screw it up. I'm getting more and more characters, so I'm having to remember what everybody's doing. It's like watching my own family grow and grow, you know?

**CL:** You do so much to make them historically accurate. That's something that's hard to find. So, what's the research process like?

**NS:** Lots of Googling, lots of library visits because you know they have encyclopedia which are actually, you know, good things. I grew up with a set of encyclopedias in the house, and I read them like they were the most best-selling fiction in the world because I loved learning it all. And so, I Google a lot, and I have a couple of websites that I go to, and they're written down in the office. So, everything's on the wall in the office and there is either on a Post-It note or on a dry erase board. I'll find things, and I write them all down.

Everything with me the first time around is all pen to paper, so I have a notebook that has, 'OK in May of 1939...' Then I go down through these pages, these websites that I found and the books that I find and well, this happened on the 3rd. So, I write it down the 3rd and then I write out what happened – Sometimes just a quick idea so that I can go back later if I choose to and look it up more deeply. I will sit at the library and books spread out in front of me about certain subjects. When I was going through World War I in the first book, I would go there and I would sit and I would read pieces out of these different books concerning World War I, so I get the perspective of it, the atmosphere of it, you know, get to understand how people were thinking about it at the time because I'm having to write this as someone who's living at that time. That's what gave me a little trouble at the beginning. But then, when I set myself into Mary's head, it was like, OK, yeah, this makes sense. But the thing is, I've known people when I was a kid, I knew people that were born in the late 1800s. I knew my great grandmother and she was born in 1896. And so, I've known people through my life that have lived at these various times. I think about those people and how their mindset was and when we'd have a discussion about anything or how they thought about it, how they spoke, the whole thing. So that's helped a lot.

**CL:** Lauren's daughter really loves the Letters to Sarah series. It's not often you find historical fiction to be appealing to children. Have you found that younger people seem to enjoy it? Would you say that it's a family friendly series?

**NS:** So, my grandson, when he was fifteen, picked up the first when he's sitting on my couch and he opens it and he goes, "What's this?" And I said, "Well, that's the first book I wrote. So, he picks it up, turns the page and he reads the first letter and the next thing I know, he's halfway through, and he looks up at me and he says "G-ma, this isn't just for girls." I had



never thought of that. I just thought, well, it's family friendly, you know, it's age friendly, There's no age limit on it. Just recently I had a book reading at one of the shops downtown [in Salem, IL], and these two young girls came in and they said, "It's *history*?" You know, they got that look. And I said yes, it's historical fiction. I said the characters are all fiction, but all the history is right, as right as I can possibly get it. I said, don't think I don't remember how dry and boring history class was. It was always so and so did this on this date, this happened on this date this and you write all that down, you make all those notes, you pass the test and then you forget. And I said that's one of my biggest things with these books is to make it where the history is interesting. It's not like shoved in your face and there's gonna be a test on this later. They were interested in it, and I think one of them actually bought a book later so, it's kind of cool.

**CL:** You research history, how do go about researching for your characters? How long does this whole process take?

**NS:** Well before I published the first one, I think the research was more than 20 years. And I had enough. research done for the first three books. And it took way before Anna [Nancy's daughter] was born. So she's now going to be 27, so you can imagine how long this has been in the works. So now of course I have to start the research thing all over [for Book 4]... Lana [Shaw] keeps telling me you're going to write another one because Mary still has stuff to say. That may be, but Mary's not the one writing it. Although she is actually. It's kind of a paradox, isn't it? How we bring these characters to life and they almost direct themselves. Well, I'll tell you something. When I write something, the characters do write it because I will start out with a general sort of idea and it never goes the way I think it's going to go ever. The characters, it's like they're talking in my head and they say no, I wouldn't do that, you got to do it this way. So, I have to switch it and what's cool to me I think one of the best things that Literature is...is to see things from so many different perspectives, and it's quite astounding, I think,

to me, just how important the world at large is in developing somebody's character. And I think that, you know, whether you write historical fiction or not, you know, at least if you're writing realism, but even if you're not writing realism this happens, and you know, sci-fi and you know any other type of genre, whenever you're trying to embody a character, you're always trying to embody in a way that you know you're showing who this person is through the experiences they had in their life. But you know, politics and history and everything going on completely affects how somebody is, even if it's science fiction or fantasy. You want to write characters that the readers can relate to, and I don't care if it's *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*. They have the same general... What do I want to say? The same general things that that push them in their lives. You know, you have certain kinds of people and people who fall into similar backgrounds. And it doesn't matter what genre you like. It doesn't matter what genre we're talking about. People are who they are so. It's pretty cool.

**CL:** Very cool.

**NS:** I had a double major in English and psychology. And the psychology was the most fascinating thing for me when I'm writing because I understood to a point why people did the things they did, and that really helped in developing characters, I have a hard time writing a very, very long story. And I'm surprised I've made it through three books already because I call myself the Super Queen of short shorts, you know? But I love doing character sketches, absolutely love it. I've got two drawers full of scraps of paper napkins, notebooks, backs of empty notebooks, paper bags. You know that something will come to me I'll write. I took a trip to New England few years ago, and I had a layover it at the station in Chicago, and I'm sitting there with my notebook, and I'm watching all these people. I am writing bits and pieces about these people, how they came across to me as I sit there and observe them, and a couple of them were in book 3!

**CL:** When we were in undergrad, one of our English professors used something similar as an assignment. He said one of the best ways to learn how to write dialogue or to understand character in general is to just kind of people watch. He created an extra credit assignment to just go out and listen to peoples' conversations.

**NS:** Hey, I never had any problem whatsoever doing that. I would write down what I heard, and then I'd run with it. You know, I've always done that. I can remember writing a paragraph about my great grandmother, and I don't know what happened to it, but in my head because it was so important to me. You know when I was a kid, my dad used to take us on a Sunday drive, and we would go to Saint Louis to the airport and just sit there and watch people watch the planes, watch the people. It was heaven. You know, I always had these ideas about, OK, who's getting on that plane? Why are they getting on that plane? Where are they going? Why are they going there? And what happens once they get there? You know, all kinds of questions. That's the kind of of thinking I think that's gotten me to where I am now. You know you if you're not asking questions, you're not learning. You're not advancing, I guess. You're never too old to learn. You're never too old to ask questions, and there's not a single stupid question in the world.

**CL:** So, what made you decide to write letters to Sarah from the perspective of Mary specifically and her situation? Why, Mary?

**NS:** Well, like I said before, I had Mary in my head and to begin with it started out as two different stories. One of them was conversations with my mother, but the other one had to do with the history, and they merged at some point. I started writing it the way I did because of those letters that I received. I mean that was just like somebody banging you over the head and saying, "excuse me, this is what you do and this is how you do it." We don't argue with that. You know, you go with it and it was right. So Mary, the character of Mary and just her specific

situation, this young girl who's lost her sister, how she's gone through this. That's fiction. The fact that she lost a close family member, of course, was based on the fact that I lost my mother, but I didn't want it to be from that perspective. You know, you love your mother and you don't want to lose her. You're different generations, and you don't see things the same. But a sister? They were only two years apart and this is 1910, and in 1910 your social life consisted mainly of your family. There was not all this running around and, you know, traveling and whatever. So, they were closer than close, and I thought that, from that perspective, be more likely to express the emotions, the feelings, the problems, the terrors, the happiness. I thought that would tend to make it more personal to the reader. So yeah, nothing quite like the sisterly bond.

**CL:** Do you feel like having lived in Southern Illinois has impacted your writing and the things you choose to write about?

**NS:** I think it's had everything to do with it. I, like I said, you observe people and especially if you observe people from other places. I have lived on all three coasts, I have been to about two-thirds of the States, so I've managed to meet and observe people from all walks of life. And I was born and raised here in Salem [Illinois]... I traveled all over and then I ended up back here, and I think that this area, the atmosphere, the people, have made my writing, to me, feel more real, I guess more down to Earth to a point. Yeah, I think that growing up around here where people are mostly nice and helpful to each other, people down here seem to look out for each other more than I've noticed in a lot of other places. They're open to out of towners. Just in general, I just feel like this area is a down to Earth friendly place and I think that made me feel more comfortable writing at all. Of course, I'm blessed, I have a lot of friends who are very supportive and encouraging, and that makes a big, big difference. The area where you grow up, the area where you are, has a lot to do

with what comes out of you. And I don't care whether it's writing, or painting, or what it is. We react and react differently, judging on our environment. And you know, this is such a great area for the arts in general, really, and very supportive of the arts, too, and I think it's really nice. I've talked to people from other areas, and they think, "Southern Illinois? What do you farm corn?" I said, "Well, and soybeans and wheat, but I also write stuff." Yeah, we're an eclectic group.

**CL:** What's the best writing advice that you've ever been given or the best advice that you could give to our readers?

**NS:** It's an ancient quote, from Epictetus: "Do you want to write?" Really is that simple, you know, and it doesn't even have to be good. It doesn't matter as long as you pour it out of yourself. I feel I look at myself like if you put a picture outside to collect the rainwater every day. Every raindrop that goes into that pitcher is an experience. It is an emotion. It is a person in your life. It is something that's happened to you, around you, because of you. And once that picture's full, it's got to go somewhere. So, write it down. Listen, I have a journal - I never miss a day. I'm traveling, it goes with me. The last thing I do before I go to bed is I get in bed, I sit down, I write the date the time and I'll write, "dear mom" and whatever I feel like writing, I'll write, and that's for nobody's view but mine. My son thinks that once I'm gone from the mortal world, he's going to read all of my journals... As soon as one's filled up, I shred it. But you know, the important thing is to write it. And I was just before [this interview], I was in the office, and I was trying to get myself pumped up for writing, right? So, I when I do that I do stream of thought. I don't worry about grammar, punctuation, anything, I just start writing. And I go from "my interview is in 30 minutes" and I end it with something like dealing with anxiety about not going into crowds and not doing this and it was strange, and it doesn't matter, you know, it helps me to get it out of my system. Just like that Epictetus quote--you want to write, right? You know, and don't beat yourself

up for not being Stephen King or JK Rowling or John Grisham - nobody is. There are very, very few writers who reach that level. The important thing is to reach your level. You only succeed if you try. The measure of success is something else. I feel like I'm a success if somebody tells me how much they enjoyed something I wrote. And believe me, I'm not rich, you know, I'm not selling a thousand books a day. No. And never will. Most likely. But that's OK by me. That's OK.

**CL:** Book Four of *Letters to Sarah* is in the works, what can you tell us about that and the future of the series?

**NS:** We're going into 1940 and considering the cliffhanger at the end of [Book 3]-we got to go into that-I have this thing about cliffhangers, I don't know why. I just think it's fun, so they'll all have a cliffhanger! But we're going into 1940, and we all know what happens in 1941. It's going to have a lot to do with that. Her children are older, there are grandchildren involved now, the family keeps growing. I suspect there's going to be some turmoil family wise. Mary's dealing with... I don't know if I want to mention exactly what she's dealing with. Because I like for when you read them there's subtle hints at what she's handling. I'll say it - she suffers from depression and back then, of course, it was melancholy. She was just having an off day, you know, whatever it was. But I think as we go along and the world changes and learns more about such things that will come into play a little more, so we'll see how it does in the fourth.

**CL:** How long do you think the series may end up being or do you know how you want it to end?

**NS:** Well, I'll tell you this: Before I ever started Book one, I wrote the very last letter in the series, so I know exactly how it's going to end. As far as how many? I originally expected ten, because I had in my head that Mary was going to live to be 100, but I'm not so sure. The more I get into it, the more I write the more I can't see it going that long. So, I'm thinking for sure five.

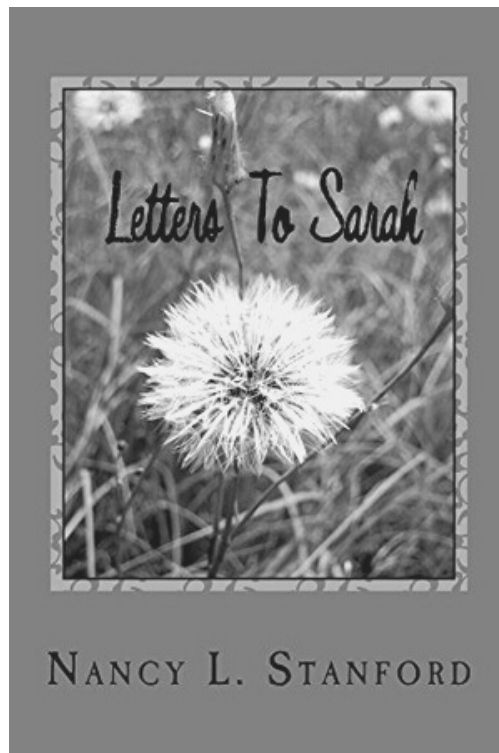


After that, we'll have to see. It depends on what the characters do in the meantime, and I don't know what that's going to be. It's like the last letter in each of the books, I was surprised, too. A lot of writers have to outline everything beforehand; I couldn't follow an outline if my life depended on it.

### **About Nancy Stanford**

Born and raised in Southern Illinois, Nancy Stanford enjoys the outdoors. She finds fishing and hiking inspire her writing. Nancy especially enjoys developing characters based on every day folks. As a grandmother, she especially enjoys creating stories for the little ones.

Ms Stanford published the first book of her series, Letters to Sarah, in 2017.



*CentraLit would like to thank Nancy for taking the time to speak to us. Letters to Sarah books 1-3 are available for purchase on Amazon, and we anxiously await the release of book 4!*



# Essays



# Living as a Foreigner in South Korea

written by Alexis Deomes

Back in July of 2021, I was going through one of the most trying points I'd experienced in my then 24 years of living and decided I needed a trip to clear the air that had been suffocating me for years. I had decided to take my first trip abroad to Seoul, South Korea. I had never been on a plane longer than 6 hours, let alone out of the United States. As I am sitting here now twenty-five years old, and almost a whole year later, I can say I have no regrets. By October of that same year, I had a new boyfriend, a place to stay, and all of my ducks in a row. As of now, I have spent two months shy of a year in South Korea. And so far, I believe I have a pretty good grasp of what it means, personally, to live as a foreigner in Korea.

First, I need you to know I have struggled as a foreigner, but I want to take a moment to say I recognize the privilege I have had living this experience the way I have in Korea. Sometimes this shit is hard. I know very little Korean and being in this extremely homogeneous country with little to no Korean skills can be a problem. Even though Koreans are taught English in school from a very young age, it can be hard to get someone to truly grasp what you're saying.

It's relatively easy to get by with some 'Konglish' (a mix of English and Korean), but honestly, don't be like me. Learn sooner! I have been fortunate enough to have my fiancé around to help navigate, order, and shop with me. He is a native Korean but speaks English at a native level. Truly, sometimes I feel like a child, unable to speak and convey to the people around me. The language barrier, in my opinion, is the hardest part. I want to be able to go out and shop for things or befriend Korean women, but at this point in my journey, it is difficult. And it's not just going out and shopping or ordering food anymore. This past May I had the opportunity to meet my fiancé's family for Parents' Day. Parents' Day in Korea is comparable to Mother's Day and Father's Day in America but for both parents and grandparents. I got to meet his father, sister, uncles, and grandmother. And I could only speak to his sister, who also speaks English. Not being able to tell his grandmother how great her cooking was sucked, to say the least. All I could do was bow and say thank you. 할머니 감사합니다! (That means thank you, grandma!)

So dear reader, this is my vow to get better at reading, writing, and speaking Korean! Not that you can keep me in check, but a superficial promise is always fun, right?

Now we can move on to everyone's favorite and probably my most asked question. How is the food? My answer is always: amazing! There are very few times where I haven't enjoyed a dish here. The biggest change is the lack of salt. Koreans do not salt their food the way we do in America. Salt isn't a seasoning, people! Personally, I have felt the effects of my body yearning for salt. My veins used to scream for high blood pressure! And the only way I have found to relieve this is McDonald's. Even the McDonald's here is different - better, but different. There are so many things on the menu that we don't have in America. However, I have always loved Asian food.



So, thankfully, I don't always go running to McDonald's. Whether it was Chinese food, Filipino, Japanese, etc., I was eating it. I had already tried a few simple Korean dishes before I made my move here, so I had no trouble trying things or adjusting. Except for mushrooms!

Mushrooms are in everything here and I despise them. Alas, I have adapted as best as I can, and I just make my fiancé eat them all!

To add to the short list of things I had to adjust to here, diet-wise, let's talk about spiciness. I thought I had a good grasp of spicy food before. Not. I love spicy food, don't get me wrong, but many things are spicy here. Just trying to eat normal chicken wings? Spicy. Random dumplings you ordered one night because you were craving them? Good job, now you feel like you have a lava baby in your stomach. Not everything here is spicy, but it is something you have to think about beforehand. Especially when it comes to some traditional dishes. If we're talking personal favorites though, I'll have to go with 잡채. Translated to Japchae in English, Japchae is stir-fried glass noodles and vegetables. Also often used in dumplings which is my absolute favorite. Korean food is slightly more favorable to me compared to American food; however, I don't have to miss out on too much because Seoul still has things like McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King, and Subway. I am only sad about the lack of Wendy's, but I digress. I miss things like Cracker Barrel the most. Being from Southern Illinois, I just can't seem to find a good biscuit! A "biscuit" here is not the same thing.

On the brighter side of it though, my body feels so much healthier and cleaner since coming here. A lot of the ethnic food here is generally very healthy for you and personally has cleaned out my gut. Kimchi especially has a lot of benefits on my stomach! As someone sensitive to everything, the food here is heaven!

Now that I've got some of the lighthearted stuff out of the way, I'll go ahead and drop some heavy stuff on you. Fact: Unless you are a Native Korean, and even sometimes that's a stretch, you will never fit into Korean society. There will always be an aspect of you that doesn't fit in. And you will know it. Even if I was a fluent Korean speaker, I will always stick out like a sore thumb. The current population of foreigners in Korea is slightly above 3%. That is 1.7 million compared to the total population of South Korea which is about 50 million. (Thanks to [en.yna.co.kr](http://en.yna.co.kr) for the stats.) This is extremely noticeable largely by the number of people who stare at me while I am out and about, especially while I am on public transportation like the subway and bus. People will also take pictures, believe it or not - which, by the way, is highly illegal here without consent. On the bright side, you can almost always tell when they do because in Korea phones are set to always have the shutter sound on. This is a feature that cannot be turned off unless you have a phone that was bought outside the country. I've even had friends whose phones auto-turned on that shutter feature.

If you are a person who loves drinking, dancing, and socializing, however, Korea is your place! On the flip side, some clubs can and will deny you entry because you are a foreigner. And the worst part? It's not illegal. There are no anti-discrimination laws in South Korea. I have only experienced this once at a restaurant in Seoul on my first trip here. It is rare, but it happens. And people of color are even more vulnerable. I am in no way demonizing Korea; they have their problems like the rest of the world and have some work to do on a lot of levels. But I also don't want to be the person who walks around and acts like this country is heaven on earth like some people do because that is simply not the case. Everywhere has its pros and cons.

Truthfully, I love South Korea and I am beyond grateful to be able to live my life here with the man I love. There are so many places I have yet to explore and even more people I have yet to meet. And I am so excited for the rest of my journey. I understand it's not feasible for everyone to come here and do what I am doing. Or even come here for school, work, and tourism. In this day and age, money is hard, and traveling is harder. But more than anything in the world, I want people to know it's okay to leave your small town. Please do it, even just once.

Coming to South Korea was the most drastic life change I have ever made. The biggest decision was to leave what I knew behind and come to a place where everything is different. When learning a new culture, language, and mannerisms, everything can become a challenge. However, I have found this challenge to be the most rewarding one yet. Coming to a new culture has opened my eyes to many things and has let me meet people I never would have met otherwise. I love these people and this country, as much as I have some qualms, I do love them.

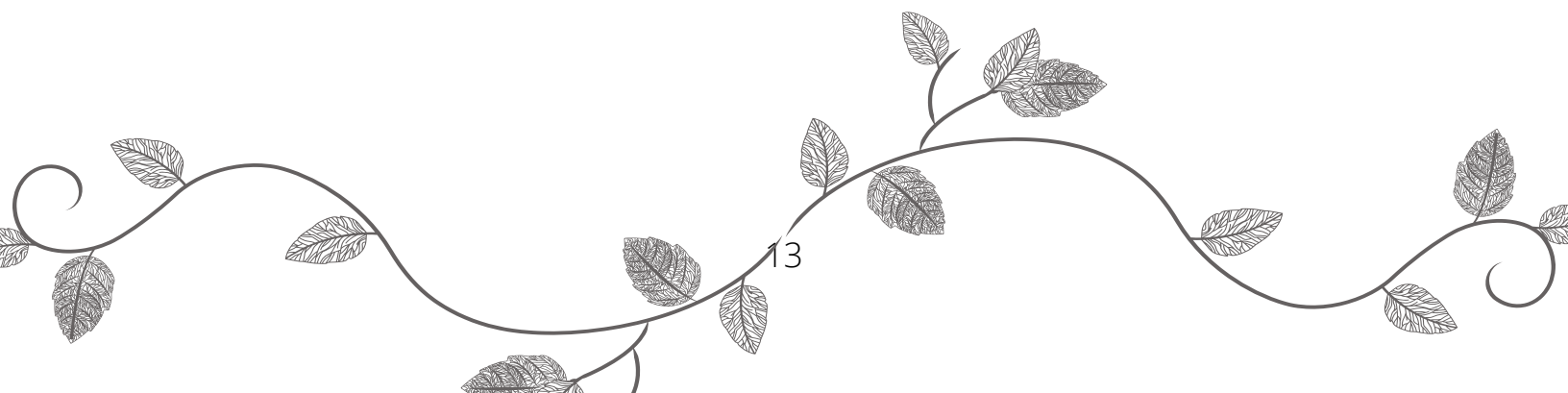
My experience is limited to my view, so I encourage you all to read more about others' experiences as well. Korea may be a small country but there are so many people here. Seriously, South Korea can almost fit inside the state of Illinois. Illinois has a population of about 12 million and South Korea is sitting at 51 million. There are so many parts of this world waiting for you. If someone like me, some random woman from the Midwest, can make it here, so can you. Before making this significant change, I was in a toxic relationship, wasn't happy with my home life, had lost my job, and began spiraling into a deep depression all in 6 months. All it took me was one decision. One decision to change the direction of my life forever. If someone hasn't said it to you before then I will now, I believe in you. You can do whatever you want in life. I am an example. Please don't take the limited time we have for granted. Choose yourself, choose joy.

I will leave you with this quote by Ash Alves:

"Decide. You have the power to make a better decision today. You no longer need to hold yourself hostage to previous actions that weren't in alignment with who you want to become. You can decide to prioritize your joy and peace right now."

### **About the Author**

Alexis Deomes is a writer, storyteller, and traveler from Centralia, Illinois. She is currently residing in Seoul, South Korea with her fiancé, where she works on her latest stories and her blog. You can find her on Instagram @AlexisDeomes or view her blog <http://deomeswriting.wordpress.com>.





A black and white photograph featuring a dense arrangement of ivy leaves. The leaves, which have a characteristic three-lobed shape and prominent vein structure, are positioned along the left and right edges of the frame. They appear to be growing on a light-colored, textured surface, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric. The central portion of the image is a vertical strip of this same textured surface, left clear of the foliage. The word "Fiction" is printed in a large, dark, serif font across the upper part of this central strip.

# Fiction





# A Carol for Billy Coogan

written by Mike Warden

There were no warnings for Billy Coogan the night that Jack Shelby's ghost came back. No door knocker was transfigured into his dead friend's face. There was no impression of a hearse gliding silently up the stairs before him, no dragging of chains across the casks in the cellar, no sudden flashes of light as the clock struck midnight. There were only these similarities in the stories: both began on Christmas Eve and both were about ghosts.

It was Christmas Eve but for Billy it had been a workday like any other. At the end of his shift he had simply clocked out, gotten into his car and

headed for Evelyn's Diner as he usually did after work. He was always wired after the 3 to 11 shift. But Evelyn's coffee was good, and her jokes were funny, and that always helped him to unwind before he went home and tried to go to sleep. Anyway, it was better than hitting the bars. He'd done that too often. And so had Jack, and look where he'd ended up.

He parked his car along Broadway and walked toward the diner. It was a bitterly cold night. The north wind met him on the street, shaking the shop windows as it passed, rattling the doors and stirring the wreaths and garlands that had

been hung from the windows and lampposts. The shops had closed early that day and all along the street the windows were darkened except for the one at the diner at the end of the block. Evelyn never closed for anything.

He paused at the door and thought again of Jack. He hadn't thought of him for a long time which was strange because Jack had been his best friend. It was even stranger to open the door and see Jack sitting in the booth by the window, the one they had usually shared after the Green Onion had made the last call and the two of them had made their way down the street.

But there he was, Jack, alive again. He was not only alive but young. He looked the way he had looked when the two of them had been maybe twenty-nine, the way that he had looked before the years and his lifestyle had begun to take their toll. To say that Billy was surprised would have been an understatement, to say the least. But he wasn't afraid. And that was why he decided that it must all be a dream.

He looked around and then began to notice other odd things. There wasn't a soul in the place. Usually, the diner was hopping on a Friday night. Even Evelyn was nowhere to be seen, and he didn't see the short order cook through the serving window. Except for Jack and himself, the whole place seemed to be empty. But the walls were hung with holly and mistletoe, and there was a small Christmas tree by the cash register, and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" was playing on the jukebox. And his usual order was waiting for him, two eggs over easy, a side order of bacon, wheat toast and a cup of black coffee and, right across from the platter, sat Jack.

Billy had come here for years, first with Jack and then alone. It was a place that, except for the holiday decorations, never seemed to change. He looked around him again. He listened to the wind walking in the rafters above him. He took

out his wallet and found his paycheck and the receipt for gasoline he had been given when he had filled up his car that morning.

"This is real, isn't it?" he said. "This isn't a dream."

"It ain't no dream," said Jack.

Billy took a seat with a calmness that surprised him when he thought about it later. Jack looked up and nodded which had been one of his familiar gestures when he had been alive.

"I'll tell you what," said Jack, dabbing some egg from his chin with a napkin, "Nobody can touch Evelyn's breakfasts, not in this life and not in what comes after life."

"No, I guess not."

"Come on, Billy! Ain't you gonna ask me what it's like on the other side? Ain't you gonna to ask me what does come after life?"

"Okay, what does?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to talk about that."

"So how'd you get here? Can you talk about that?"

"I'm not sure. I got a message from the boss that I was coming. The next thing that I knew I was on a bus from Newark."

"A bus?"

"Yeah. It wasn't express either. It was one of those that has a layover at every one horse town on the way. I think that must be what hell is. Just think if you had to do that forever! I was dog tired but I couldn't get a wink of sleep, not on that drafty bus and not on them hard plastic chairs at the bus stations."

"I'm surprised, Jack. I'm surprised that you can

still eat eggs and drink coffee and ride on a bus after you die. I'm surprised that you can still do all those things and all without money."

"Yeah. It's like I got a Mastercard only I never have to pay nobody back."

They were quiet for a few moments and then Jack said, "You ever see Ellen?"

"No. And I never hear from her either unless I'm late with the alimony check."

The wind shook the windows and made a mournful music in the trees outside and the lights in the diner flickered.

"So I'm so bad that they had to send you back on a bus? I mean, this visit, this is about, what...my redemption?"

"Not really. That's out of my hands. This is more in the line of a social call. Well, maybe it's a little more than that."

"What then? What did I do that's so bad?"

"Well, part of it's your temper. That's why you lost a couple of jobs, ain't it? That's why the guys wouldn't bowl with you no more, remember? Somebody would say or do some little thing and you'd go off on them."

"All right. I've got a hot temper. But sometimes I was in the right. Besides, everybody loses their temper once in a while. Even Jesus got mad at the moneychangers in the temple."

"But he didn't stay mad. You do. You hold onto to it. You let things eat at you. And you never let the other person forget about what you think they done wrong. That's why your wife left you, ain't it? That's why your kids don't come around."

"Even if I tried to change, Ellen's never coming back."

"Maybe not. But wouldn't you like to see your kids?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I would. Okay, I need to work on that. Maybe I need – what do you call it – counseling? Maybe I'll look into it sometime. Is that it?"

"That's just part of it. This is about the things you say but it's more about the things you don't say."

"Huh?"

"It's hard to explain," Jack said. "Wait a minute. I almost forgot."

"Forgot what?"

Let's see," he said, putting his hand in one of his pants pockets and then the other. "Damn! I bet it fell out of my pocket while I was using the john in Elmira. No wait, here it is."

He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket.

"One of the other guys helped me with this. Herschel's his name. I think he was an English teacher or somethin' when he was alive. Herschel's a good guy."

He unfolded the paper and began to read, following the lines with a forefinger.

"Dear Billy, I'm Jack's friend Herschel. Maybe he told you about me. He asked me to write a letter and to help him explain why he's come to visit you. First of all, he's was your friend and he still is. He just wants to help you. He wants to help you, not blame you. So this isn't just about what kind of person you were...or are. It isn't just about what you do. It's about what you keep yourself from doing or saying too, things that, deep down, you know you should. I don't know about your reward or fate or about anyone else's. I just know how quickly the years slip through our hands and how important it is to use time wisely, how

important it is to make our lives count for something.

Sincerely, Herschel'

"Ain't that nice, the way he wrote that, I mean? How I wish that I had done that, made my life count for somethin', I mean."

"You did all right."

If Billy had expected Jack to wail and rattle chains as Jacob Marley had done after Scrooge had said made a similar remark, he would have been disappointed. All Jack did was what he had always done when Billy had said or done something that he thought was stupid which was to look at him glumly with his big hound dog eyes and slowly shake his head.

"Yeah, it's a nice letter," said Billy. "But I still don't know why he wrote it. What's he mean, this Herschel, about using my time wisely? And, yes, I'm glad to see you but I still don't know why you're here."

"He's talkin' about saying the nice things, the good things, the things that let other people know that you care about them. For instance, while you two was together, how often did you tell Ellen that you loved her?"

"She should have known it. I mean, we had four kids."

"That's not the kind of love I'm talkin' about."

"Okay, what about your old man?"

"What about him?"

"I remember how you used to tell me what a great guy he was."

"He was."

Did you ever tell him that? Did you ever tell him like you used to tell me?"

"Well, no."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I guess because those things are hard to say."

"I know. I don't know why that is, but it's true. The bad stuff's easier to say than the good stuff. But a guy ought to try even if he messes up. A guy ought to say those things once in a while to somebody he cares about. After they're gone, it's too late. There's not gonna be another chance, and you'll remember the things you're not sure they knew. The rest of your days you'll remember that you never told them how special they are."

"I remember laying in that hospital bed on the last day. I remember how lonely I was. I remember how scared I was, scared of the dark, scared of dying, scared of what came next, of fire or of nothingness. I tell you, what I would have given for somebody to have been there, to have held my hand, somebody to have told me that they loved me. And if they had, whatever might have happened next, I would have known that I hadn't lived for nothing."

"I'm so sorry, Jack. I'm sorry I wasn't there."

The windows shook again and the lights flickered. And then they flickered again.

"The lights, the wind," said Billy. "Is that some kind of message? Does that mean it's time for you to go?"

"I got some time. As long as I'm on that 2 a.m. bus, I'm okay."

"Where to next?"



"Back to Newark and then home, I guess. How about walkin' with me to the bus station and we can shoot the bull on the way?"

Jack reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a ticket. He looked at it and smiled.

"Hey, what do you know! I must have done good tonight! The ticket's changed to express!"

"Jack, I'm sorry that I wasn't there that last night. If I had been, I would have said...I would have told you... I mean, I would have tried to tell you that I..."

"I know, Buddy. I know," said Jack. "Me too."

### About the author

Mike Warden is a lifelong resident of the Centralia area. In addition to writing, he enjoys photography, travel and visiting with his international friends. He also enjoys history and has served as a docent at the Lincoln Home National Historic Site and Frank Lloyd Wright's Dana Thomas House in Springfield, Illinois.



# “The House Where You Lived”

written by Brittani Miller

The old house was much like you remember it – wide open doorways and tall ceilings, the wallpaper still faded and peeling in places. Your fingers brush against the doorframe as you move through the house, feet practically floating over the floorboards you remember creaking.

You whistle, and the sound echoes through empty rooms until it melts into the sounds of the wind gusting through the open windows on the second floor.

The touch of the doorframe’s wood against your fingers mimics the feeling of skin – *a hand gently brushing over your fingers, tracing every line of your palm, the static of electric energy moving through your nerves into your bones and up to the base of your skull.*

The rooms are lacking furniture; what is there is covered in sheets and layers of dust. Somebody called this home once – you called this home once, not so long ago, was it? The sun shines through the musty glass so you see dust particles dance through the air.

You think you could dance among them, spin through the cloud of dust and let the sun burn into your skin – *through the kitchen, up the stairs, fall down in laughter on the marital bed.*

You make your way through now, the wind gusts turning into shrieks. Your bare feet press over the hallway tile, mount the stairs. The tiles on the bottom are cracked, stained. He made you spill red wine, that’s it. It’s seeped into the porcelain.

You shouldn’t drink so much, you know that. You had just sworn to quit, but you didn’t want to waste the bottle. It was a gift – *a wedding gift, a housewarming, something to get you through the honeymoon days. After that, you’d switch to vodka, he’d need screwdrivers to screw.*

You dig your nails into the underside of the banister. The house is so empty that every movement echoes, and your nails attempting to dig tunnels in the wood is no different. You stop at the landing, staring up into the second floor.

You wonder when you stopped breathing. Do you even have the ability to breathe now? – *his hand around your throat, in bed, in the hall, pulling closer, shoving forward.*

The winds aren’t letting up, but there are voices now, too. There are people. There is *life*. Your hand brushes over your abdomen, *life*. You step forward, reach for a doorknob, to *touch*.

*You were alive once – in wedding photos, in sunlight, in the summer – you’re certain of it.*

Something stops your hand, holds it in the air, a feeling in your gut. A memory climbing through your stomach like a black widow.

The door is pulled open, your hand inches from the cold purchase of the knob. Three people stand in your bedroom. A man and woman, young and fresh faced – *sunlight, summer, smiles* – and a woman in a pantsuit, portfolio in hand. They are happy, they are laughing. They walk right past you without a glance.

*You lived here once. You occupied this room, you laid in this bed – fingers brushing skin and nerves sending shockwave through your spine.*

The bed is just a frame now, mattress long gone. The pillowtop was his favorite, he lay on every mattress in the store before he chose it. He threw you down atop it in the middle of Mattress Firm and told you he loved you – *he pushed you down.*

You do not breathe anymore. You do not *live* here. Did you ever *live* in this place?

There are no picture frames here, but you remember where they were – *sunlight, summer, smiles.* He took them with him, he must have. To remember, surely.

There is a long-burnt bonfire in view of the window; you pretend you don’t see it as you turn back to the hallway, away from the things gone, instead to these strangers, to the *empty.*

### **About the author**

Brittani Miller is a healthcare worker, cancer survivor, and chronic illness advocate. She holds her A.A. from Kaskaskia College, B.A. in English from University of Illinois at Springfield, and currently studies in the Master of Fine Arts in Writing program at Lindenwood University. She is the two-time recipient of the UIS Rosie Richmond Award for female writers, and her writing has most recently appeared in Pink Panther Magazine and COPLAC’s Metamorphosis. Her debut chapbook, *My Body, Like Tentacles*, was released in June 2022. You can follow her on twitter @brittaniwritesor at <http://brittaniwritesbooks.com>.





# Poetry



# Those Mines

written by Chris Bunton

Those mines ruled my world—  
the coal mines of Southern Illinois.  
My family came from  
the Tennessee mountains  
to dig in those mines.  
They fought the Civil war and died.  
They farmed and mined.  
They sang, fought and prayed.  
Working men breathing that dust, killing themselves every day,  
and drinking it away at night.  
Union men from Lewis day,  
beating scabs to death.  
Living in coal mine camps,  
those little towns today.  
Every morning, down the hole,  
every evening drink some more.  
The barbecues and parades,  
the strikes and bar fights.  
Threats on the phone,  
“We’ll kill your wife,”  
Now, there’s a gun by the bed.  
Every business bowed to coal,  
every man worked it somehow  
‘til the day coal died,  
and those mines closed down—  
Spelling the death of the little town,  
and the life they knew.

## About the Author

Chris Bunton is a writer, poet and blogger from Southern Illinois. He can be found on Patreon and Medium.



# There is Magic in This Place

written by Lana Shaw

Magic is in the air  
All around  
Money is exchanged  
Treats are purchased  
The door is wide open to enter  
Walk into inviting blackness  
An empty seat  
My heart skips a beat  
Staring straight ahead  
Anticipation  
Listening to the random music playing on it is stopped it is interrupted at the precise time.  
Magic is in the air  
Stars are floating in the air towards me  
The outside world is gone  
I'm no longer in my seat  
I have entered another land  
Am I witness?  
Or participant?  
I have lost track  
Magic surrounds me  
Today - I am in a place somewhere over the rainbow  
Tomorrow - I'm in a lovely land called Narnia  
Yesterday - I am standing beside our fallen President  
Mesmerized  
Altered  
Stupefied  
Lost in this magical land  
The lights come up  
The music swells  
I am back...  
There is Magic in this place

## About the Author

Lana Shaw works at the State of Illinois with Department of Human Services. She taught at Kaskaskia Community College for 20 years. She has published a poetry book entitled, *The Art of Living*. She is in the process of working on her second book. She received a Bachelor's of Arts from Eastern Illinois University, and she has her Masters of Arts from University of Illinois, Springfield. She revitalized a local writing group Creative Endeavors. She has performed her poetry with local Open Mic group and at the Vachel Lindsay home in Springfield, Illinois.



# Glasses, Books, and Bon Iver

written by Alexis Deomes

I didn't get to know you for very long  
But anytime I hear Bon Iver  
My mind races back to the nights you'd make me listen to him  
His voice as angelic as the smile that lit your face  
You'd always recommend me books  
Though I'd never get around to reading them  
I always tried to,  
Because I would've done anything to impress you  
I can't even smell clean linen and books  
Without thinking of that basement  
And I hate it more than anything  
Because you turned me into something I never wanted to be  
A hateful person  
A hateful person, who loves the smell of books  
And fresh linen  
And the sound of Bon Iver's voice

## About the Author

Alexis Deomes is a writer, storyteller, and traveler from Centralia, Illinois. She is currently residing in Seoul, South Korea with her fiancé, where she works on her latest stories and her blog. You can find her on Instagram @AlexisDeomes or view her blog <http://deomeswriting.wordpress.com>



# Mental Hum

written by Emma Kirby

My mental hum.  
The musings of my little grey cells,  
Can sometimes cause quite the conundrum.  
Leaving me with the oft sought after details

Of a wavering thought.  
Often, hah! More often than not!  
Or for the lost care I admit,  
That those thoughts turn hot.

They are the reasons for my mental fits.  
Outbursts of ideas and dreams.  
Notwithstanding or lacking  
The thread needed for the seams.

That hum hum humming  
That mental drum drum drumming  
Of a beat heard only by me.

I wonder, the clashes of quiet in my mind.  
The thunder only I  
Can hear.

What is that my dear?  
Another thought!  
Another dream!  
Another idea!

Oh my! Oh me!

I can only begin where I start.  
And then, I think again.  
Every time I am done,  
I hear the beginning of another hum.  
-EK 9/6/2023



# Sunshine on my mind

written by Emma Kirby

You were like sunshine...

Today, I decided to let in the light.  
It reflects off the darkest corners of my mind.

Bringing notice to the dust  
Now gathered on the shelves.

The shelves I have not touched since...  
But today, I cannot help myself.

I pull up a chair.  
And step up.

I steady myself.  
I see the sun has picked a book for me.

Ah I say.  
I see.

It had to be this one.  
The one where sunshine  
Was on my mind.

I take a deep breath.  
You were the sun.

But just as quickly as you came,  
You left.

The day the darkness was,  
Because the sunset

Inside my mind.

How could I ever forget  
What sunshine felt like?  
—EK 12.24.21

# The Sun

written by Emma Kirby

I remember the sun.  
Feeling its rays on my face.  
It takes me back  
To our place  
To our space.

I remember waking up in bed  
Comfortable, with your arms around me.  
I remember the warmth.

The death of our love  
Took its time.

My youth was spent on loving someone  
Who loved me.  
For a while anyway.

Our love did not happen instantly.  
It flourished and matured  
With the changing of the seasons.

The death of our love  
Took its time.

Over the years  
We grew together,  
In time and space.  
Laughter and love  
Now filled our home.

Then one day,  
Our love became frail.  
I didn't notice at first.  
But there was a crack in the surface.

The death of our love  
Took its time.

It let in the air,  
And the doubts.  
Our love was now stale.

We no longer speak.  
Our dreams had changed.  
No longer did they include each other.

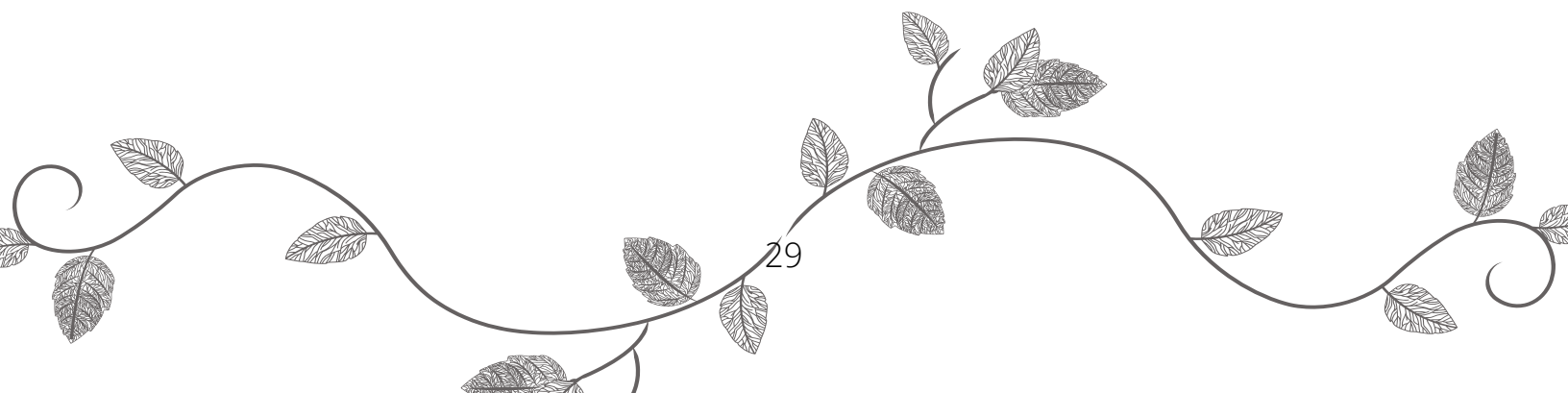
The death of our love  
Took its time.

Someday I think I will be ok.  
Until then, I will focus on me  
Even if at times I am still unsure.

I will focus on finding the sun again.  
Because I miss the warmth.  
And how it made me feel safe and secure.  
---EK 12.6.19

### **About the Author**

Emma is a small town girl, with big city dreams. She's from a small, central Midwest town originally. Naturally, grew up around cornfields. She has been writing poetry since she was about 8 years old. Coffee definitely helps with the writing process. She has a wonderful life with an amazing partner, a cute doggy, and a cat!



# Snowflowers

written by Samaria Driscoll

I see snowflowers  
Falling from the sky  
As the autumn month passes by  
I feel very sad by the coldness at first  
And frozen in fear  
I woke up from my sleep  
As I see snowflowers near  
As I walked outside  
I found myself lost  
The grass is white  
The backyard covered in frost  
The snow has helped me heal into happiness  
As I saw the petals drop  
I watched from my forest  
To see the snowflowers mop  
From the sky  
Into the ground  
The snowflowers continued to fall  
Round and round  
As the snowflowers stopped falling  
A blanket of snow on the dawn  
But when the sun shone a week later  
The snow was gone  
I still remember the snowflowers as a child  
Now as an adult, I hear them talking to me as they say  
Thank you for playing with me in the snow  
Until we meet again, happy holidays

## About the author

Samaria Driscoll is a 33-year-old from Fairview Heights, IL. Her writing has previously appeared in CentralLit and Luberta Lytle's Celebrating My Biggest Fan. In addition to writing, she helps her father, two time Golden Glove Champion Keith Driscoll, out at his gym, Driscoll Boxing Academy.



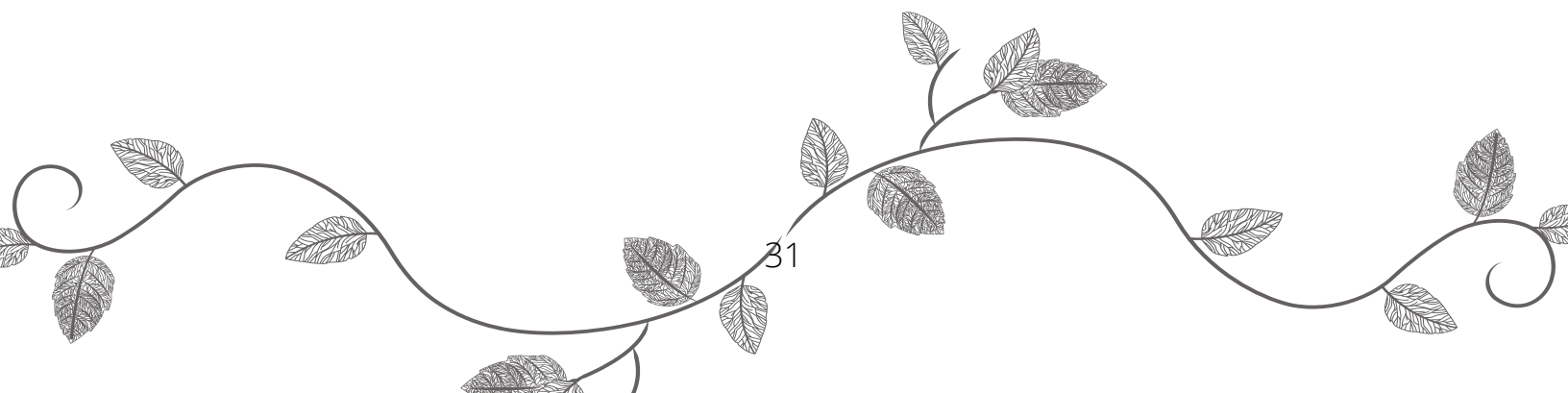
# La felicidad no es la meta, es el camino.

written by Ashley Mueth

The goal was to achieve happiness.  
Analyze the social media profits,  
A sixty-thousand dollar education,  
A working barista that measured self-worth  
With spoons of people-pleasing, the honest  
conversations of “what she dreamed of?”  
Semesters, the sand of time slipping through her  
hand, the biological clock ticking, hoping  
to find romance, a blossoming love in him,  
The morning clock - her baggy, sleep deprived eyes  
Clusters of dust, a cup of dark roast coffee swirling  
With almond milk, lifting the cup to her lips,  
sun pouring in her handcrafted stained glass window  
She catches a glimpse of the lenticular clouds  
The enhancement and mystery of the present day,  
to laughing at her crooked toe that she broke  
In the third grade, the crunchiness of fruity pebbles,  
Her mother’s eyes lighting up at her scratch art,  
Dancing at the Sock Hop to Rockin’ Robin. When  
was the last time she happily dressed up in costume  
with her best friend? When did she let happiness fade?

## About the author

Ashley Mueth is a research assistant and writer at Southern Illinois University of Carbondale. She is a MA in English Literature and MLIS graduate student. She has published poetry with *Grassroots* and *CentraLit Magazine*. She was the 2021 Jon Tribble Poetry Award recipient in *Grassroots* and the 2020 Suicide Prevention Day Award recipient in *CentraLit*. Her poetry chapbook *Sunflowers Bloom* is available for purchase on Amazon.



*"There is no rule on how to write. Sometimes it comes easily and perfectly; sometimes it's like drilling rock and then blasting it out with charges."*

*~ Ernest Hemingway*

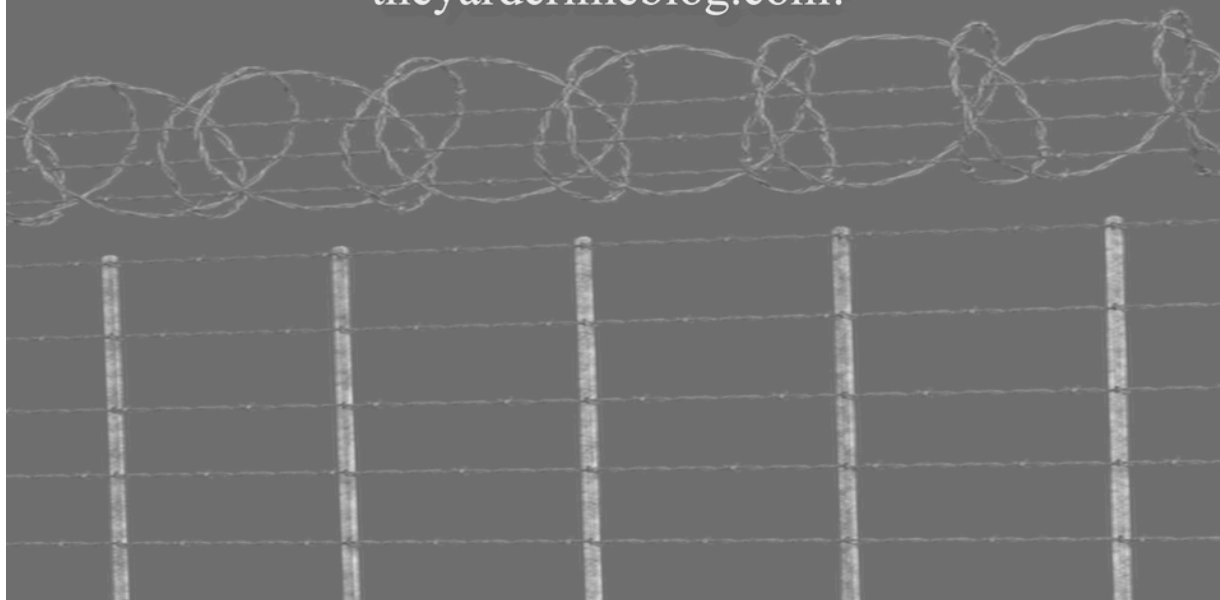


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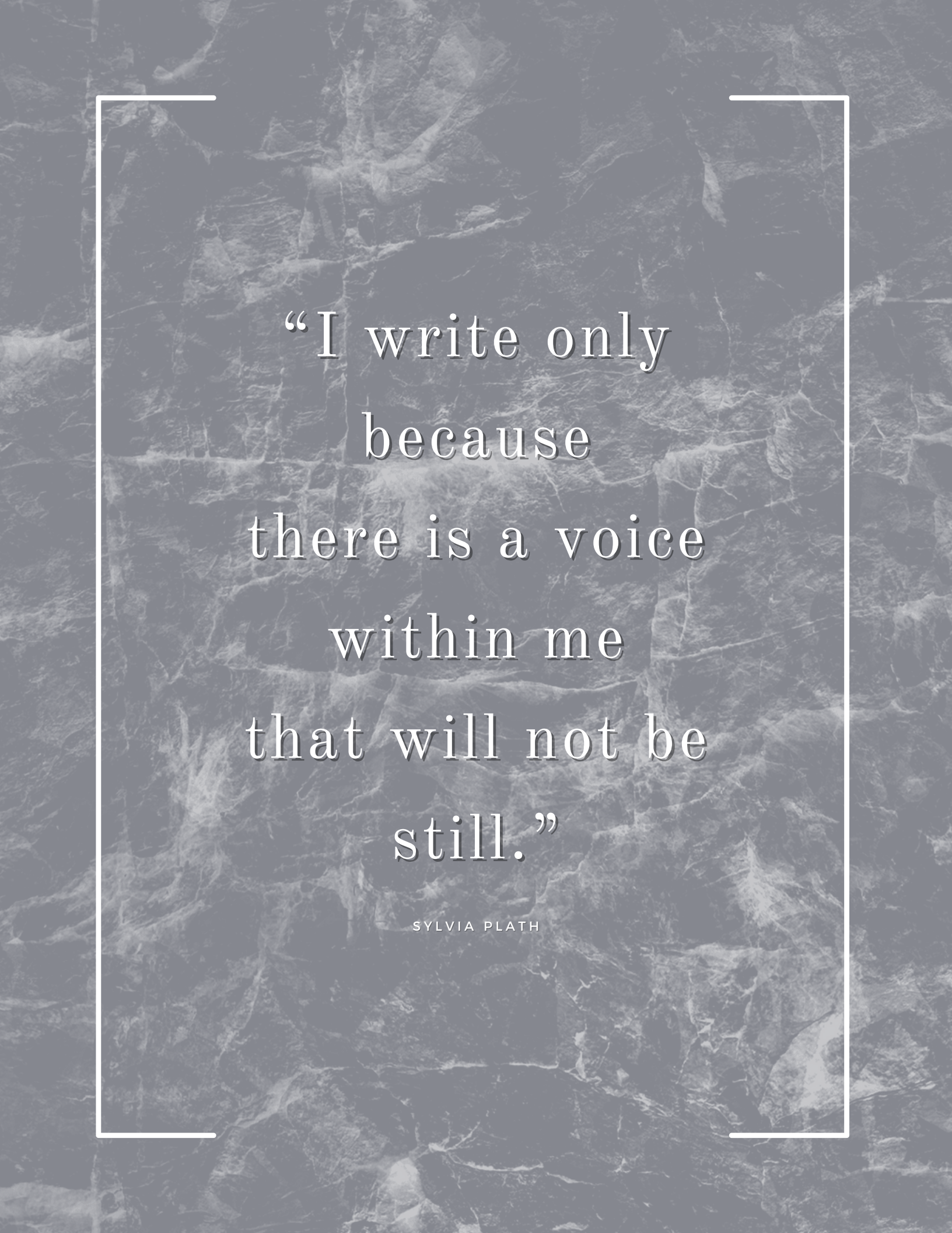


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because  
there is a voice  
within me  
that will not be  
still.”

SYLVIA PLATH