



2023 eBook



Thank you to our guest speaker,
Zeina Azzam,
Palestinian American poet, writer,
editor, and community activist.



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Thresholds

Betty Ann Webb Gressling

Drinking champagne

We sat on the kitchen floor

Giddy celebration

Glasses raised

We sat on the kitchen floor

Youthful anticipation

Glasses raised

Life ahead unlimited

Youthful anticipation

Our first house

Life ahead unlimited

A future to unfold

Our first house

Infinite tomorrows

A future to unfold

Drinking champagne

As we empty the house

We sit on sofas

Surrounded by moving boxes

Mourning decades later

We sit on sofas

Selling feels like betrayal

Mourning decades later

There will be no champagne

Selling feels like betrayal
Even if it is time to go
There will be no champagne
We remember moving in
Even if it is time to go
Surrounded by moving boxes
We remember moving in
As we empty the house

Three Bridges

Vidya Suri

Three bridges lead to the shadow realms,
Three bridges of black, gold, and grey.
Three bridges hold off the gathering hoards
Watching the sun rise, and peak, and fall
Until the shadows reign.

Three bridges lead to the shadow realms,
The first gate, obsidian, a warning holds
And from the first, the most turn away
But the price is low, it demands only pain, so
I place my hand on the jagged black gate
And I remember:

Behold my towering fortress of the sand!
Stone walls defy the desert's endless rage,
For who else would dare to stand sentinel here,
In emptiness mocked by the dust laden winds?
Here, at the end of things, I raise my empire.

Behold my mighty fortress of the sand,
Beside the dried lake which once had reflected
The whiteness of their sacrificial dresses,
Lit by flickering flames that soon fade into

Absence, like my architraves, falling.
Out of this nothingness, my world will rise.

Behold my mighty fortress of the sand,
Crumbling fragments of columns, once sturdy,
With archways now cracked like memory, failing
They once hosted thousands and now hold one only;
These pillars my palace, these black birds my legions
This desecration is timeless, in a way.

Three bridges lead to the shadow realms,
The second gate, gilded, a warning holds
And from the second, the wise turn away
But the price is low, it demands only vice, so
I place my hand against the fading gold,
And I remember:

Pearl glazed petals in the lilac light, I saw
White sails unfold to meet the rising of the sun
Alcoved within viridian hills
Sparkles skim mirror-pools of morning dew
Reflecting the future imperfectly.
My exile is over and I'm coming home.

Three bridges lead to the shadow realms,
The third gate, broken, a warning holds

And from the third, the rest turn away,
For the price is high, it demands nothing yet, so
I place my hand against the misty grey,
And I remember.

In the shadow realms, shadows wander
Concrete streets empty of strangers.
Everywhere, everyone is a stranger.
Concrete buildings, vast husks, so lifeless
Speak of asphalt and ashes, and absences.

I am in a shadow realm, and here
In this grey half-world there is no light and yet
No darkness, but instead an absence,
Like puddles of rain on a dreary midday
Passing through crowds of colorless souls.
In the shadow realms, shadows reign.

I am in a shadow realm, and here
I can remember only fragments
Like their glowing white dresses
White, as blossoms in the evening light,
Or as the depths of the flame as it guttered away.

I always thought that white was death, and that
Death was the worst of all my grief, until

I searched for you within the shadow realms

And found only absence.

Here at the end of things, I raise my empire.

Monumental

Benjamin Byrnes

In the dense underbrush of the valley
between eternal melancholy and infinite rage
screams a mother's wild, raw soul
whose child is taken too soon.

The mother who would give her eternity
to Satan for one more day
with the child who only wanted mommy
to hug in their final breath.

The mother who'd have taken
ten thousand bullets
so their baby wouldn't take one.

Years and tears won't stop
and bedrooms become shrines,
while souls wait to reunite.

When she returns to the house
and flicks on the light in the room with rainbow walls
and kneels and pulls her knees to her chest
on the bed with Paw Patrol sheets,
and clings to the brown bear with marble eyes.
Until the day she flicks the light switch
and hears the pop and then darkness, and that day
when the last light goes out—

that day, there will not be enough oil on earth
to burn the house fast enough
to charred glowing embers.

The rage of millions of mothers
enough to scorch the earth tenfold,
and create a raging heat to smelt steel
from wooden stocks and iron from cold frozen hands
who refused to let go.
Melting them to erect iron and steel monuments,
miles and miles of shining metal—
gleaming memorials of thwarted hope
reflecting every broken promise,
etched with the names of every child we failed
to protect to have a fighting chance for one more day.

If I Were to Die

Olivia Gamertsfelder

If I¹ were to die before you knew me
What, then, would there be left behind?
If I were to run² before I walk to thee
How could I fall before I fly?
If all the calm³ before the chaotically
Unsaid words before I then cry
Is like the tears before I could speak or plea
But yet the truth behind my lie?⁴
If, then, the truth within my faithful falseness
Was the hello in your goodbye,
How does my heart then beat faster in shortness
If I can feel it beat on time?
If how I love thee⁵ is the only darkness⁶
Within the heavens and its sky,⁷
You must be the only guardian angel to bless,
The devil⁸ in my soul's disguise.
Like a blooming rose within a winter's dress⁹
Has all your love for me gone dry?
Has then the only breath where life was given death¹⁰
Left you to fail before you try?

It is not that I am forced or scared to guess,

But I am scared to ask you why,¹¹

If I bloom do I then live to love life less,¹²

Or do I then live to die?¹³

Today Isn't the Day

Susan Roland

Today isn't the Day
Nor is Tomorrow
Or even the Next
But someday it will come
Maybe one night while you doze in moon light
Or a morning when you wake in the sun
Flowing in on moon beams and daylight
Growing strong with Honesty and Trust
Yes, Peace, Equality and Harmony
Will come to those who give
Love to all Beings

Funniest Poem

Winner: Aaliya El-Amin, "The Eating Well"

Runner-up: Tanner McClelland, "Busted"

Honorable Mention: Tara Ayn Bahr, "I M Perfect"

Honorable Mention: Laura J. Bobrow, "Reflections on Aging"

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The Eating Well

Aaliya El-Amin

Is it just me or do you gorge when bored
Wolf down a whole bag of chips
Or forgo the bowl for the carton of ice cream
Finish an entire pizza and a whole enchilada
Top it off with a two-liter bottle of cream soda
Netflix binge is not only on the tv but expanding my waistline
Flicking channels with grub hub on repeat
Go home every night to sleep, eat, and forget
A bad habit masking the real deal
Eating crappy just to past the time
Filling in the gap until the next day
Busy body to couch potato
Break the chain and get back active
Trying hard not to continue this ridiculous habit
Remind myself food is a tool to energize
Every time the tv is on
Step away from the chips

Busted

Tanner McClelland

The sneaky teen sneakily
sneaking out of the home above mine
proves not to be so sneaky at all.

Imagination leads me to believe that
somewhere in the process of crawling on
the magic carpet ride of a lifetime

with her pimpled prince,
this ambitious neighbor miscalculates
her step, weekend after weekend,

and that is why it is 86 degrees
in my apartment, the result of what
a maintenance man thought to be

a large mammal repeatedly
crashing into our air unit in the night.
Whichever seems right, the unsuspecting mammal

or the recently blanketless girl in love,
really has no impact on the fact
that I am sweating over a sub-average meal

of whole kernelled corn and white grape water,
but I suppose since the spirit of one
is more honorable than unbecoming,

I will alert the parents with nothing more than a poem,
the child with nothing more than a street cone
connected to the first condom

I've purchased in my life,
and myself with a vicarious, 75c toast
to a much cooler and lighter day.

I M Perfect

Tara Ayn Bahr

My alarm overslept, awesome start to the day
So much for healthy grapefruit...guess I'll grab some Chick-fil-a

Pass the Peloton running to the shower
Feeling guilt already, even at this early hour

Habit stack! Brush teeth while you meditate!
Notifications pinging, make it tough to concentrate

Looking in the mirror, need to pick up the pace
No amount of Erase Paste gonna fix this face

Like elderly sloths the children move
Doesn't look like my luck's gonna improve

Quick glance at the clock, more time is what I need
*Can you **please** buy lunch?* I beg. I plead!

*"But David's mom makes his lunch **every** day!"*
Wait for it...mommy guilt is on the way

Throw each kid a waffle, yell at them to get ready
Fighting a zipper that's stuck, 4 inch heels...not so steady

One child whining they hate their shirt, the other hates his shoes
Checking Facebook, wow – how much weight did she lose?!

Varicose veins in my neck from yelling “Run! Run! Bus!”
Quick kisses, “love you’s!” exchanged between all of us

Open the front door and oh wow it’s pouring...not cool
With the monsoon, guess I’ll be driving them to school

Not shocking the carpool line’s insane
Novice dad getting yelled at, “hey buddy, wrong lane!”

Sprung to take the Greenway, cause I’m living large
Wait, what? Seriously? That’s the rush hour charge?!

Driving a mini-van, navigating the parking lot maze,
Tesla, Tesla, Rivian, Tesla, I gotta ask for a raise

Run to make an elevator, where every button is pressed
Close my eyes, take a breath, and try to be less stressed

Rush to my desk, need to get settled before the meeting
Can’t miss it, because of course, it’s the one I’m leading

Round the corner and what’s all the commotion?
“Congratulations!!!” they shout – you got the promotion!

Reflections on Aging

Laura J. Bobrow

You can't appreciate a mirror
if you face it squarely.
Adjust the lighting, tilt the frame.
Your form is there, but barely.
See how your lines have disappeared.
Those lines were there unfairly.
You've never felt the twinge of age.
Well, yes, you have, but rarely.

Now bob your head and pirouette
and dance without-a-care-ly.
A young gazelle could not please more
or move more debonairly.

Morning Mayhem

Abinaya Ayyamperumal

In a bustling house, chaos unfurled,
Mom and dad set out to conquer the world.
Multitasking, their noble endeavor,
To make the morning routine smoother than ever.

But in this modern age, there was one more thing,
Gadget addiction, oh, what chaos it would bring!
Phones and screens, a family's constant temptation,
Adding more layers to life's funny narration.

"Come here, my little one," mom exclaimed,
But the toddler was absorbed, phone gaming unchained.
With toothbrush in hand, she aimed,
But the child's eyes were glued, unbrushed and untamed.

To the bathroom she dashed, with a purpose so clear,
But there sat her child, engrossed in a screen so near.
"Oh no, I washed the wrong child!" she wailed,
While the other one scrolled, giggling, totally unveiled.

Meanwhile, dad entered the bustling scene,
Eager to help, his intentions pristine.
But his eyes caught the glow of his smartphone bright,
Forgetting the task at hand, he lost in the digital light.

The baby cried, the chaos did grow,
"Daddy, put down the phone, let's go!"
Dad scrambled, realizing his little mistake,
"But wait, let me capture this moment, for goodness' sake!"

And then, in a comedic twist of fate,
Dad attempted to brush the tangled hair, oh, what a state!
The brush got stuck, a comical sight,
Dad's bewildered face, pure delight!

Breakfast time arrived, a scene so grand,
But distractions were plenty throughout the land.

Dad poured salt instead of sugar, a funny mix,
The baby spat the cereal, mom's suit in a fix!

And then, oh my, what a sight to behold,
Dad put on mom's outfit, feeling rather bold.
He strutted around, thinking he looked just fine,
But mom couldn't stop laughing, "That outfit isn't mine!"

Amidst the laughter and mess, they understood,
That screens and mix-ups brought laughter, no falsehood.
In those crazy moments, memories were made,
When gadgets took a backseat, and love never strayed.

So moms and dads, take heed of this tale,
Don't let screens steal life's joys, nor prevail.
Embrace the chaos, the laughter, and fun,
For in those moments, the best memories are spun.

"Cheers to a screen-free life, throughout the day!"
They raised a glass, their love shining in every way.
In the jumble of socks, brushes, and toys,
They found the purest of joys.

Oh, moms and dads, in life's hectic race,
Put down the screens, let laughter take its place.
For in those moments, when technology unfurls,
You create a world, brighter than pearls

Poems about Loudoun

Winner: Margit Royal, "Blue Ridge Mountain Sojourn"

Runner-up: Martin P Bromser-Kloeden, "The Not-So-Secret Mountain"

Honorable Mention: Mark Becker, "Route 9 to Harpers Ferry"

Honorable Mention: Elena Capofari, "now"

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Blue Ridge Mountain Sojourn

Margit Royal

Twilight,
Like a breeze-born shroud,
Settles upon the smokey shoulders
Of these Blue Ridge hills,
Soft colors seeping
Into time-worn seams,
Like water wending its way
Among boulders,
Rivulets of violet and gold,
Spilling
Into the valley below.

Ancient Allegheny warriors,
They stand,
Tribal and silent,
Guardians of trails tangled by time,
Keepers of secrets
Long ago laid bare by winters' ice
And the savage winds of March,
To be born again
When softer seasons
Gradually
Take their turns.

My sojourn begins at dawn,
Beckoned onward
By the unfurling of spring,
Whose mysteries wait
Beyond the bend,
Walking, counting,
As breath and heartbeat
Synchronize
With the rise and fall of slopes,
Until serpentine shadows fade,
And we all disappear into night.

Sleep comes calling,
A serenade of tiny harmonies
Sung by nocturnal wanderers,
And I,
Lulled by moonlight's waltz
Among the outstretched arms of forest,
Send my thoughts to the dance,
To be twirled into memories,
Soon to be released
Backwards,
Into pools of dreams.

Dawn, ever faithful,
Arrives bearing mountain lauds,

Melodies sweeping webs of slumber
From the corners
In which they were spun
Through the night,
While Aurora's whisper,
Sweet with the scent
Of sun-warmed dew,
Murmurs
About the journey ahead.

Last night's spirits,
Ethereal and wise,
Linger,
Then fade into mist,
Silent sentinels,
Transformed by sunlight,
Setting my course,
As we awaken
To birdsong
And promises held
By the new day.

The Not-So-Secret Mountain

Martin P Bromser-Kloeden

A mysterious secret was hidden in plain sight
What a plan, a conspiracy theorist's utter delight
For deep within a sylvan forest lies a doomsday fortress
Adorned with a granite crown and dazzling lights that blaze at night

I wondered how they could be so vain
To think we Loudoun country bumpkins had no brain
That we would not see what they built facing right toward us
A mountaintop citadel ready for the few when the sky spits nuclear rain

Come see those lights for yourself, revel in the folly of global mistrust
For if that day ever comes it will be hard for me not to stare in disgust
To know they cared for themselves but for us were thoughtless
Black helicopter rides to safety for the chosen are neither fair nor just

Route 9 to Harpers Ferry

Mark Becker

On a summer night like this
the road is made for driving,
when a Shenandoah moon
shines low the horizon.

A “welcome home” aroma
greet me at a country fair;
funnel cakes, cotton candy,
honeysuckle sweetened air.

As crickets chirp and chitter
on discordant singing saws,
old bull frogs belch and bellow
deep mud puddle mating calls.

Threads of silky mist are spun
like fine webs upon the fields;
the spindly, silent spider
lightning crawls across the clouds.

On a country road like this
the night is made for driving,
when summer fills the distance
between leaving and arriving.

now

Elena Capofari

black asphalt road wraps velvet ribbon through Civil War era gravestones
Andy says bread slices are sticking out of the ground in Union Cemetery
“and those over there are popsicles”
with only 6 years on Earth
he doesn’t know of death and it’s tenderness
luckily
not what lies underneath Loudoun’s late summer green grass
we walk over on the way home from Ida Lee
me
looking at dates that ached in the hearts of their long ago
lived sisters daughters mothers
and
Andy skipping grief
in the soil he floats above
remember?
seeing only sunbeams because the end isn’t near
no recollections of regret yet
on Wirt St
he reminds me that “Virginia is forever”
because he is little and
time is an illusion
still
our new home is not new
wooden floors smooth in sunken curves
from all who stood here before
us
who cried laughed hugged
who felt young inside like me
even when the mirror showed age imprinted
across the face in lines of all the times
I was surprised I cried I open up
in reverence as we walk through
downtown Leesburg
hear St. John’s church bells chime hour
feet firm on Market St turn West see the sun
set a swollen August
I wish these minutes could pass like mountains move
so I could hold on too
him at this age...

At a Stoplight

Bobby Sorensen

Where do these people come from?
Were they born, screaming and squirming, on our medians,
Were they born with scrawled signs and mournful eyes,
Or do they appear when the household incomes rise?

Are they factored into the counts, the surveys,
Do they know we always top the list of the richest?
It never seems to be the same ones twice,
Yet always they take the same tack. What am I to do?

How do I explain them to the kids after hockey practice,
How they'll just spend it on drugs, self-medicate,
Conversation stifled by their presence outside the window.
Tonight I'll have to chase down my SSRI with a triple IPA.

Where do they go at night? Or in the colder seasons?
Not into any of the newer developments -
Not to live, work, and play in a sham urban square,
A simulated city, but ideally not every aspect of the city.

When the overpasses are all built
And all the medians are gone, so they too, will be gone
Sunk down below the surface of the new landscape.
They will melt into darkness, recede back into shadow.

For now they haunt our medians, silently searching for our eyes.
Searching for eyes in the turn lanes, eyes behind tinted glass -
Silently looking for confirmation of our shared human folly
And spoiling my trip to the new Target.

Love Poems Category:

Winner: Heather Sullivan, "What is Love?"

Runner-up: Gavri-El, "Three-Part Structure of Love"

Honorable Mention: Sonik Malik, "Morning at the Beach"

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Honorable Mention: Shruti Sekar, "The Planets and pluto"

What is Love?

Heather Sullivan

How can I write a love poem

If I'm still asking myself,

"What is 'love'?"

Is "love" when someone

Ogles your body

And takes what they want?

Is "love" when someone

Forces themself on you

Despite your desperate cries?

Is "love" when someone

Strips your childhood self

Of clothing and innocence?

Is "love" when someone

Uses you up

And leaves you for dead?

Is "love" selfish?

Or is "love" different?

Is "love" selfless?

Is "love" when someone
Extends a helping hand
With no ulterior motive?

Is "love" when someone
Uplifts and cares for you
Unconditionally?

Is "love" when someone
Protects and defends you
From the evil in this world?

Is "love" when someone
Lays down their life
So you may live?

How can I know
Which is "love"
When I know both?

Three-Part Structure of Love

Gavri-El

Our love has structure all its own.
Three parts, infused, aflame with want.
My brain still tingles with the thought.

Words

Your tongue drips syllables so fast,
they slip my grasp despite my speed.
You spoke of craving surrender,
of needing me to spark more fire.

I wondered if such nervous talk
meant you, down deep, just ached or laughed.
It took a year to see how true
your burns and cares would prove to be.

Songs

Your life's a soundtrack on repeat,
your magic summons songs you need:
a childhood fave, rippling with joy—
we sing along and lose our selves.

Bodies

Your melody embraces mine,
I catch your rhythm, heat your beat.
Our centers touch, our power spreads,
We blend and whirl, then cling and purr.

Morning at the Beach

Sonik Malik

Bright morning by the sea
Gloom descends on me
I'll leave her alone says the mind,
I'll just let her be.

Sunny-faced people walk by
As I tread the lonely sands
Every step a leaded weight
Every breath a dread sigh.

Abandoned by you on a whim
The heart a lost fugitive
Far from its home
Turned into a silent scream.

Just then the rising tide
Licked at my feet
And gushed into my soul
I met the truth, I cried.

This tiny, short-lived wave
Flung far from mighty depths
Dancing surf on distant shores
Is not headed to a vaporous grave.

The soul then glimpsed a beatific view
Ripple and Ocean are forever bound
Just so is our inerasable fate
My Center, my Home is You.

Orpheus and Eurydice

Greg Friedmann

Behind me on the trail, I hear you stumble;
I turn to see you fall, roll downward. I rush
back to you, help you up, brush you off. You say
you're fine, but still I see you — falling, falling.

I think of Orpheus and Eurydice, their fateful tumble,
and wonder: how could he, knowing the blank life
awaiting him without her, not rush back, not seize her,
not join his fate to hers, Hell's rules be damned?

We are entering now the same darkening woods
we once helped our parents navigate and endure.
We know falls here are serious—unlike the
happy tumbles we took as kids, rolling down

grassy slopes on summer afternoons,
eyes closed to bouncing sunlight, laughing
harder at each bump until reaching the
bottom of the hill in dizzy hilarity.

There is no hell, Eurydice. Take my hand,
hold me tight: we'll roll and tumble down
the soft grass, laughing harder and harder,
returning breathlessly whence we came.

The Planets and pluto

Shruti Sekar

i feel like pluto

ellipsing a void so cosmic so infinite
a universe that does not exist for
a dwarf

to meet a star like you.

i want to be Mercury who completes
a revolution in a few days
in tandem with your heartbeat.

i want to be Venus who blazes
brighter and bolder than a supernova
whose touch is a warm memory to you.

i want to be Earth who thrives
on sustenance of spirit that boasts
your shine and smile.

i want to be Mars who manifests
traces of a future unimaginable
under the spotlight of a thousand people.

i am just pluto
how could i ever defy
gravity for you to remember
me?

i want to be Jupiter who leads
the footsteps of the titans and
commands the presence of a room.

i want to be Saturn who floats

on the throne of giants
gilding rings of golden moons.

i want to be Uranus who glimmers
the prettiest shade of cerulean
green and resembles mermaid scales.

i want to be Neptune who sings
like angels flying in the wind
whilst seeing you shine from here.

i am just pluto
as i stand in their shadows
how could a dwarf planet
so small so cold so desolate
ever compare to anyone else?

yet you are the Sun.

everytime you see me
the lightyears we've been away
fall apart into celestial confetti.

You still tell me

my walk across edges of the galaxy
to look out towards the cliffs
and see cosmos you could never reach
remind you of home and adventure
all in one.

You still tell me

I am Pluto
and your love for me
is more than the number
of stars in the universe.


You still tell me

despite our distance

that you'll

Never

let Us go.



Thank you
to all who
submitted
an entry.