

OCTOBER
2025



FRESH INK

INLAND EMPIRE
CALIFORNIA WRITERS CLUB

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Hello Writers,

I'm back from our September retreat, where we dove deep into the art of self-editing and tackled a worksheet filled with pesky grammatical pitfalls. It was a great reminder: writing is when our creative genius takes the lead, while editing calls on our sharp, analytical minds to comb through manuscripts line by line. (And yes, writing this, I'm suddenly very aware of my comma use!)

So, what's next?

Mark your calendars for **Saturday, October 11th** — it's the **Riverside Book Festival**, running from **11 AM to 6 PM**. This is a first-time event featuring poet laureates, a panel of award-winning authors, puppeteers, food trucks, live music, and plenty of networking opportunities.

We're hoping a few literary sleuths will scout potential guest speakers — if you've got an eye for talent and a few hours to spare, we could use your help!

Many of our board members are tied up that day, and many member-authors will have to choose between attending the critique workshop or joining us at the festival. That's where you come in. **Booth duty volunteers needed!** The morning shift is already covered, but we still need help for:

- 12:00 PM – 3:00 PM
- 3:00 PM – 6:00 PM

I'll be reaching out individually, but if you're free and want to get involved, let me know before I start chasing you down!

Also... did you feel that?

Yes — the rain! The air's cooling, the sweaters are coming out, and it's the perfect time to settle in with a warm drink, your work in progress, and either your inspired creative side or your eagle-eyed editor brain.

Be chill, and get the writing done!

Warmly,

Judy Conibear Kohnen



EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue was edited using
Canva



Hello, readers.

t's October—the spooky month! Halloween decorations are popping up everywhere, people are planning costumes, and horror movie marathons are already in full swing to set the mood.

First, I want to shout out a big thank you to the writers who submitted their work. I had a lot of fun designing this issue— especially playing with the spooky visual while still being colorful to accompany the amazing stories.

As the month goes by and we lean more in the horror vibe, there's something creeping in: Superstition. Whether it is urban stories, legends, October brings out people's fascination and curiosity of the supernatural. Social media and the Internet amplify this— one post can quickly go viral and people can immediately start believing that the library is haunted or that something is cursed.

Which is why I thought this was the perfect theme for this month.

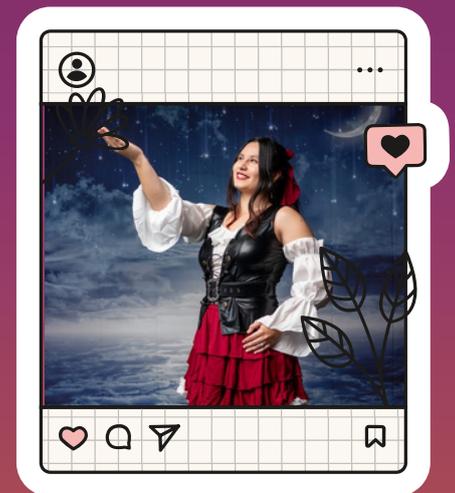
One fascinating superstition I stumbled upon online is the so-called AO3 (Archive of Our Own) Author Curse. According to internet lore, writers who post their fan fiction on the platform are more likely to experience strange bouts of misfortune. The belief began when readers started collecting authors' notes left at the end of chapters, many of which described tragic or unlucky events—car accidents, the loss of loved ones, illnesses, ect—yet these writers still managed to update their stories. The pattern became so noticeable that it became a running joke—and, for some, a self-fulfilling curse as the misfortune continues to strike many writers. The phenomenon even earned its own entry in the Urban Dictionary.

Whether or not the curse is real... Well, that's up to you to decide.

I hope you enjoy the stories in this issue. Thank you for reading.

Ink to page, tales unveiled.

Anaïs Hamel



@globetrotteuse99

Bonus: Litchi says hi!
Our furry assistant decided to contribute to the newsletter a little bit.





Saturday, October 25, 2025, at 10:10 am
 Ovitt Family Library,
 215 E C St, Ontario, CA 91764



Transparency in Word and Picture:
Translating Abstract Imagery with an Expressive Tongue
Presented by Mia Bruce



Program Description



How can you interpret an abstract art piece with writing? As a visual artist, my goal is to create a work that fully encapsulates an idea, a belief, and an emotion. Art can capture a snapshot of my mind, but it's a vague picture. What transformed my art practice was using writing as a tool to guide the viewer in my work. There is expressionistic strength in the written word paired with artwork. I use writing as a magnifying glass to emphasize my artwork's meaning. It's difficult to be vulnerable with your artwork, more so with writing. The temptation of leaving vague couple-sentence descriptions for artwork is often indulged. But the outcome of surrendering to the strength of expressionistic writing is powerful. We each have our beautifully crafted, individual voices that ought to be shared, in image and word.

Words can awaken a still picture. Words resonate in people. Words speak beyond definition. Words can edify or shatter someone. Proverbs 18:21 states, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue..." There is a responsibility upon every one of us in our verbiage. Writing with and without imagery carries the responsibility of using words for life instead of death. "How are you using your words?" is the question often posed on an art piece I am sharing. In this question, I can unravel a wound spool of abstraction with writing. I am pleased to share with you all the approach I take in integrating my artwork with poetry and the transformative power of expressionistic writing, as well as its impact on my personal life and artwork.

About the Author

Mia Bruce is an artist based in Southern California who operates on her soul through a paintbrush. She has continuously used art as a therapy since early adolescence, analyzing life's deeper questions in imagery. Her intriguing dialogues found in her art invite viewers from all over the world to open up the conversation of vulnerability and transparency. Bruce weaves symbols, ideas, and dreams within a general concept and creates her tapestry of surreal imagery. Her artwork deals with symbolism, such as teeth being a symbol for an insatiable appetite, muscles demonstrating pride, eyes reflecting the soul, etc. She believes her work to not be admired for its craftsmanship but rather for its boldness in transparency of subject matter. Ugly yet beautiful. Abstract yet identifiably human. Bruce has been published in Curious Publishing and Visual Art Journal, as well as independently publishing her zines and books.



OCTOBER 2025 MEETING
WHAT'S COMING UP



AUGUST 2025

MEETING REVIEW

“Surprising Things I Learned While Writing a Historical Novel” by Ben Alirez

Saturday, August 23, 2025, at 10:10 a.m.

Ovitt Family Community Library

215 E. C St., Ontario, CA 91764

On this day, club members gathered anxiously to hear about Wayne Purcell’s historical fiction novel, *Justice for All: The Search for Big Poker Tom*, a project which took him no less than fifteen years to complete.

But first, the club’s president, Judy Kohlen, provided updates on the September Writers Retreat and the Riverside Book Festival in October. She then handed the reigns to Sam Nichols for a proper introduction of our guest speaker, whom he first met at the critique group when his book was being proofed and edited. To the group’s wonderful surprise, the novel would go on to become a 2023 Spur Award Finalist with the Western Writers of America.

As Wayne took the stage, he described himself as a nature boy from Garden Grove. Despite fully expecting to become a park ranger one day, God had other plans, and he served as a pastor for several decades (now retired).

The inspiration for his story began in a waiting room, as Wayne was perusing a magazine. It wasn’t long before he came across an article that absolutely captivated him. Titled “Paiute Revenge,” it was about a Native American named Poker Tom who disappeared while visiting Bridgeport California to gamble in 1891. Heavily engrossed by the tale, he removed the pages and found himself returning to it repeatedly. He was convinced the story had great potential, not something to be relegated to the dust-heap of history.

In the story, an estimated two-hundred Paiutes converged on the small town, armed and seeking answers for Poker Tom’s absence. What unfolded once a person of interest was found was a bizarre set of circumstances and unmitigated violence. As Wayne put it, his novel is “not a children’s book.”

For the remainder of the presentation, Wayne shared several personal observations he made while working on a weighty historical project, an ill-fated event that occurred more than a hundred years ago. This was his advice for those contemplating historical writing projects:

a) Historical societies, museums, and libraries can be insightful resources. Others include books, magazines, and newspapers, the latter being especially helpful.





b) Research can be a tedious endeavor. If details vary, you must decide which chronicle was the more accurate or probable. Sad to say, the Mono County Courthouse underwent a purging of records in the 1970s or it may have substantiated more facts from fiction. Not to be deterred, Wayne inspected the tax assessments of that time. A long surviving scrap book was also rumored, though he was unable to verify and locate it. Some supposed resources also proved unavailable (possibly because descendants were unwilling to share details that might disparage the family name).

c) In a story involving Native American tribes, resources from tribal headquarters proved invaluable. However, because descendants still inhabited the area, Wayne was forced to exercise discretion with sensitive matters. In the case of one character, a fictional name was used.

d) Railroad and water issues with the Paiute people played a prominent role in the story. As were rumors of a serpent that inhabited nearby Walker Lake and a prophet/dreamer named Jack Wilson. Wayne even brought along a Lakota Sioux garment known as a ghost shirt for all to see and incorporated local legends into the storyline.

e) An author must be willing to fill in the blanks in a historical record. And although some things may not be historically supported, a degree of creative freedom is acceptable so long as it is plausible. As Wayne noted, historical fiction is debatable by its very nature.

f) In terms of the writing process, Wayne relied heavily on a critique group—a resource he found extremely helpful. World building was another challenge, describing settings and locales in detail. Being an analytical thinker and not overtly emotional, Wayne turned to *The Emotion Thesaurus* by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi, which proved an invaluable tool. The right balance of dialogue versus narrative was also trying, as was a tendency to indulge in tangents. In fact, he managed to trim his novel down from 90,000 words to 70,000 words by the time he finished.

g) The sheriff of Bridgeport was the protagonist in the story, but details on his life were sparse. Oftentimes, Wayne found himself staring at his picture trying to imagine what kind of character and forbearance he brought to one of the town's most difficult times.

h) The back of the book has a fact from fiction section, and information on his website (waynepurcellauthor.com). He is also proud of the fact that the current residents of Bridgeport and the Paiute people themselves find his story favorable.

Throughout much of the presentation, the audience participated with thoughtful questions and Wayne elaborated on his answers. In closing, Wayne believes that editing is a must. The type of publishing must be given careful consideration. For example, traditional versus self-publishing. Marketing is another endeavor and having a good launch is a must. Getting good reviews. Getting it in stores. Using your social media platforms. Determining your most likely readers. Other considerations of note: Setting up a website and keeping it updated. And finally, artwork for your projects, such as the book cover. In Wayne's case, he used AI to generate the graphics.

Afterward, several people joined Wayne for lunch at local favorite Eden Garden Fusion Grill. All in all, the presentation proved very enlightening, especially in the areas of research.

Benefits of IECWC

MEMBERSHIP

- ALL AGES are welcome!
- Entrance into monthly meetings
 - (in-person or remotely through Zoom)
- Access to monthly speakers on topics related to the craft
- Exposure & practice by submitting to our monthly literary newsletter, FRESH INK
- Network with other club members
 - (various levels of expertise, mentors)
- Participation in Critique Groups
 - (in-person or remotely through Zoom)
- Your OWN PAGE on our Club website at no additional cost
 - Highlight your bio, photo, website, social media, and published books
- Opportunities to serve on the board or on committees of our branch
- Camaraderie among other writers at all levels, all genres, and all ages!
- Partake, volunteer, and/or help plan our Spring and Fall Conferences which are provided at little (or sometimes no) cost to our members
- Annual opportunity to showcase your work at Open Mic events.
- Annual opportunity, each January, to attend/appear on our Panel of Authors
 - Members who were published the year before
 - Learn/share advice on the publication process, ask/answer questions, and buy/sell your books on site
- Annual opportunity to submit, read, and assist with judging the competitive Statewide CWC Literary Review, with readership of about 2,000 members and their readers and associates
- Simultaneous Co-Membership into California Writers Club
 - Our state-level parent organization at www.calwriters.org, with additional volunteer opportunities

- Read/advertise in the Tri-Annual CWC Bulletin available online, free of charge
 - Access to news from the other CWC Branches throughout California, gaining perspective about other serious, mostly published, writers, editors, Web designers, graphics experts, etc.
- Potential for your writing to be chosen to be displayed in the Southern California Writers Showcase at www.socalwritersshowcase.com
- A wonderful addition to your curriculum vitae or resume!
- Access to the monthly IECWC Blind Review Team
- Utilize our FACEBOOK PAGE to get your works word out to the public interested in writing

JOIN or RENEW at:

<https://iecwc.com/membership-meetings/>

Active
\$65

Supporting
\$65

Student
\$15
ages 8-22

Renewal of Membership
\$45

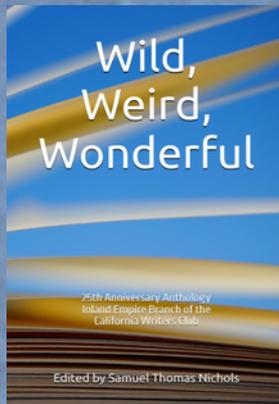
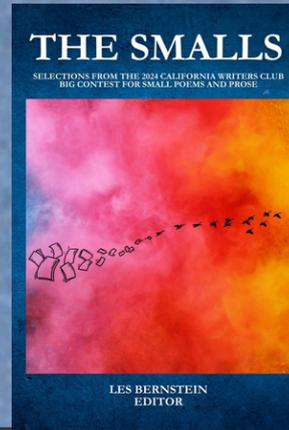
Renewal deadline September 30.
On October 1, CWC shall drop all delinquent members from the rolls. If dropped, you must pay the new \$65 member enrollment fees.

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THE SMALLS

The Smalls includes selections from the California Writers Club 2024 "Big Contest for Small Poems and Prose." This is a vibrant collection of unique voices chosen from the contest entries.

<https://a.co/d/45iqsdm>



Wild, Weird, Wonderful: 25th Anniversary Anthology Inland Empire Branch of the California Writers Club

<https://a.co/d/0SVxupt>

This collection includes short stories, poetry, memoir, nonfiction, memoir, original drawings and photographs, and one novelette entitled *Murder in Huckleberry Heights*.

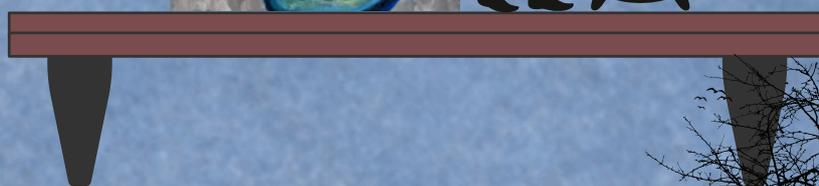


This anthology contains the varietal work of eighteen members of the Inland Empire Branch with several genres being represented.

Vision & Verse: A Fusion of Art, Photography, Prose and Poetry

The multi-talented artists and writers featured within these pages have come together to create a dialogue between their respective mediums. This collection showcases the beauty of visual art married with the magic of the written word.

<https://a.co/d/2zu0Afx>



TWENTY9 PALMS BOOK FESTIVAL

NOVEMBER 7-8-9 2025

FREE ADMISSION REGISTER ON: TWENTYNINE PALM BOOK FESTIVAL EVENTBRIGHT

The Twentynine Palms Book Festival returns for its third edition this fall, running **November 7–9, 2025**, with a three-day celebration of storytelling, creativity, and the unique history of the Mojave Desert.

This year's program brings together nearly 90 established and emerging authors for a lively book fair, **14 live sessions** at the Twentynine Palms Community Center, and **8 off-site events** staged in some of Twentynine Palms' most iconic venues.

Highlights include:

- Opening panel: *Where the Hell is 29 Palms?* tracing the landmarks that define the city's identity
- Sessions of Comedy, Desert artists, Environmental storytelling, Israeli Jazz, Children's literature.
- Desert Noir, a joint initiative with Palm Springs' NoirCon (October 23–26, 2025) that explores crime fiction and its adaptation to film and television—bridging the High and Low Desert just two weeks apart.
- VIP conversation with environmental writer Josh Jackson on his book *The Enduring Wild: A Journey into California's Public Lands*, and another with filmmaker and historian Gerard Gibbons, who uses boxing's golden age of the 1920s to tell a story of family, heritage, and America itself.

Off-site Highlights include:

- Poetry Happy Hour at the 29 Palms Inn,
- Voices of the Desert at The Palms in Wonder Valley,
- Noir in the Boneyard at the 29 Palms Public Cemetery
- Red Light Lit at The Out There Bar—an electrifying mash-up of literature, music, and performance.
- Workshops at the Old Schoolhouse Museum will cover publishing strategies, AI for writers, and the fifth annual Mojave Noir.



TWENTY9 PALMS BOOK FESTIVAL

NOVEMBER 7-8-9 2025

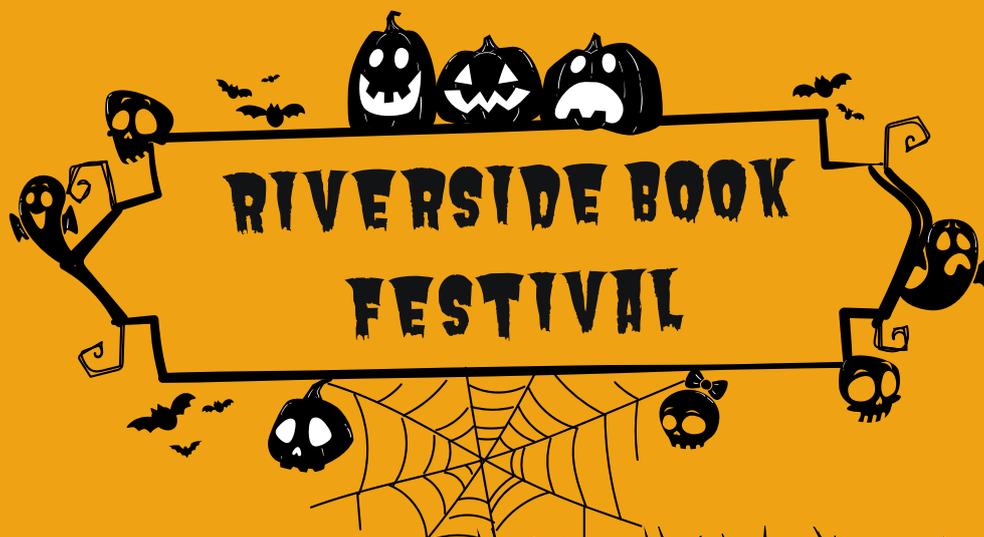
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2025 AT 10:00 AM
TWENTYNINE PALMS COMMUNITY CENTER
14 LIVE SESSIONS

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

WHERE THE HELL IS 29 PALMS? | PANEL DISCUSSION.

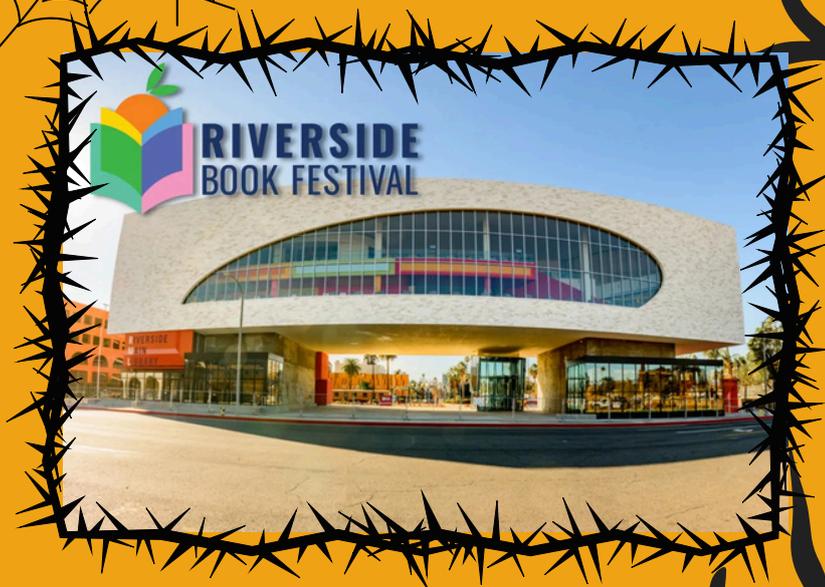
This opening session explores the landmark stories that define Twentynine palms and anchor it's unique identity in the Mojave Desert. from the *Desert Trail* newspaper, the historic 29 palms inn and Campbell house, and Bagley's General Store, to the vital presence of the Twentynine Palms Marine Base, these pillars of heritage, history, and community have shaped the city across generations. the discussion will be led by **Steve Brown**, longtime hi-desert resident, award-winning journalist, musician, and publisher of the *Sun Runner: The Journal of the Real Desert*. he will be joined by **Lieutenant Colonel John J.McBrearty**, U.S Army (Ret.)/LCpl & CPT USMC (Emeritus), who will reflect on the marine base as a cornerstone of the city's identity. Adding their perspectives are **Heidi Grunt**, representing the legacy and ongoing role of the 29 Palm Inn; **Jim Bagley**, speaking on behalf of Bagley's General Store, a foundational institution in the towns development; and **Ann Congdon**, representing *The Desert Trail*, the newspaper that has chronicled and shaped Twentynine Palms life for decades. Together, they will reflect on how these institutions have defined the city across generations and discuss what it takes to preserve and share their legacy





Saturday October 11th
Riverside Main Library
11am- 6pm

Free & Open to
Public



For the first time Riverside is hosting it's book festival Featuring over 50 exhibitors, author talks, book signings, and themed zones like the Children's Pavilion and New Books Discovery Zone,

CWC is proud to announce that we will be exhibiting at the festival.

Come visit our booth & support our members books

Deadlines

Submissions are due the 20th of every month



Content Limits

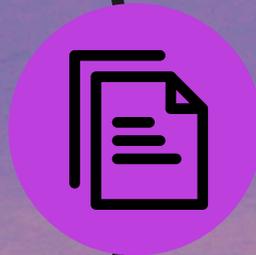
Submissions with the following will not be considered:

- Excessive or gratuitous violence (violence for violence sake)
- Excessive or gratuitous profanity
- Excessive or gratuitous sexual situations or pornography
- Political or religious agendas that are meant to persuade or denounce

Form

- Prose word count <1,200
- No line count on poetry

Send as an attachment
Google or Word document
Times New Roman
12pt font



Photos

Accompanying images are optional

We can only publish digital images that **do not violate copyright**

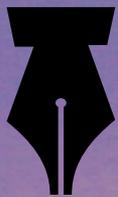
You are encouraged to submit photos you have taken



Email

iecwcfreshink@gmail.com

Check your email periodically for suggestions from the editor



FRESH
INK

guidelines

Poetry Musings

By Samuel Thomas Nichols

Superstition

The mention of *superstition* brings back memories of when I was a lad in the 1960s accompanying my Arizona uncles to the fabulous Superstition Mountains to be regaled by fantastical stories of the LostDutchman Gold Mine and imbued with the dream that I would one day wander that expanse and be the one to discover it.

And memories of living in Bloomington with my (not yet) first wife when Stevie Wonder released the single version of his amazing song, *Superstition* on October 24, 1972, just days before my flight to Lackland Air Force Base and boot camp in San Antonio, Texas.

And the irrational memories of black cats and witches, ladders, broken mirrors, four-leaf clovers, knocking on wood, hats and umbrellas indoors, thumbs up passing graveyards, step on a crack and break your mother's back, and tossing that spilled salt over my left shoulder.

And the many superstitions I learned as an anthropology student peering into the inner secrets of other cultures. In parts of Europe, a spider in the house is good luck and a sign of prosperity. Here in Native America, whistling at night summons the evil spirits. In the southwestern Navajo culture, there's the belief in skin walkers, i.e. witches capable of shapeshifting, often attributed with possessing supernatural powers.

Yep, superstitions stick with us long after we know they're bunk, and yet, we can't shake them. And while a full inventory of superstitions is impossible, we still find them entertaining as evidenced by my two-and-a-half-year-old grandson who just last week tried to convince Denise, "Grandma, there are ghosts living in my closet." No, he doesn't believe they do, but his parents begin Halloween in August, and he falls heavily into the spirit of the spooky season with the Mickey Mouse Playhouse and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.

I cannot define where superstition, legend, mythology, and folk beliefs diverge but one of my favorite poems based on believing in the improbable is John Keats' (1795-1821) Romantic narrative poem, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which is based on the belief that a young girl might see her future husband in a dream if she correctly performed certain rites on the Eve of St. Agnes. Consider,

*They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have visions of delight,
And soft adorings from their loves receive
Upon the honey's middle of the night,
If ceremonies due they did aright;
As, supperless to bed they must retire,
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require
Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.*



Not so unlike my childhood teaching than an apple peel, pared in one long unbroken spiral, when tossed, will form the initial of your future betrothed. Of course, there is also Keats' sonnet, *Written In Disgust Of Vulgar Superstition*, which rails against human irrationality.

*The church bells toll a melancholy round,
Calling the people to some other prayers,
Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares,*

*More harkening to the sermon's horrid sound.
Surely the mind of man is closely bound
In some black spell; seeing that each one tears
Himself from fireside joys, and Lydian airs,
And converse high of those with glory crown'd
Still, still they too, and I should feel a damp, –
A chill as from a tomb, did I not know
That they are dying like an outburnt lamp;
That 'tis their sighing, wailing ere they go
Into oblivion; – that fresh flowers will grow,
And many glories of immortal stamp..*



In European superstition, folklore, and myth, the Erlking is an evil elf that lurks in the forest waiting for children who stayed too long and slays them with his touch. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the German poet, captured this vile creature in his poem, *Erlkönig*, which was later set to music by Franz Schubert, among others. The enduring poem was written in eight polished quatrains. Consider this translation in the public domain by Edwin Zeydel:

*Who rides so late where winds blow wild?
It is the father grasping his child;
He holds the boy embraced in his arm
He clasps him snugly, he keeps him warm.*

*"My son, why cover your face in such fear?"
"O don't you see the ErlKing near?
The ErlKing with his crown and train!"
"My son, the mist is on the plain"*

*"Sweet lad, o come and join me, do!
Such pretty games I'll play with you;
On the shore gay flowers their colors unfold
My mother has made you a garment of gold."*

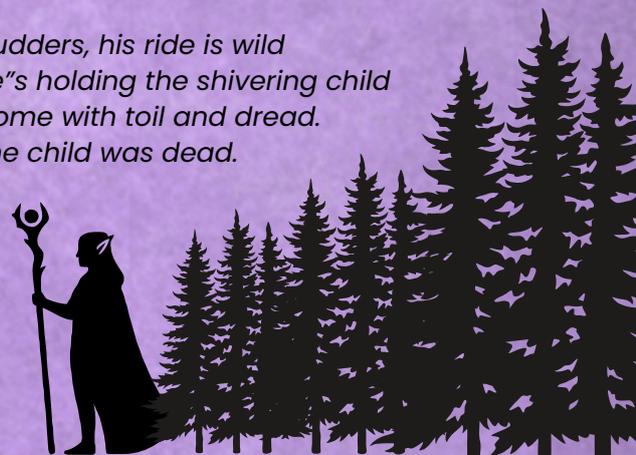
*"My father, my father, o can you not hear
The promise the ErlKing breathes in my ear?"
"Be calm, stay calm my child, lie low
In withered leaves the night winds blow."*

*"Will you, sweet lad, come along with me?
My daughters shall care for you tenderly;
In the night my daughters their revelry keep,
They'll rock you and dance you and sing you to sleep"*

*"My father, my father, o can you not trace
The ErlKing's daughters in that gloomy place?"
"My son, my son, I see it clear
How grey the ancient willows appear."*

*"I love you, your comeliness charms me, my boy
And if you're not willing, then force I'll employ!"
"Now father, o father, he's seizing my arm
The ErlKing has done me the cruelest harm!"*

*The father shudders, his ride is wild
In his arms he's holding the shivering child
He reaches home with toil and dread.
In his arms, the child was dead.*



Still a favorite since I was in my teens, and now here we are approaching All Hallows' Eve, a prelude to All Hallows' Day (All Saints Day) or the Gaelic festival Samhain, but we all know it's really a time for having fun, as Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) so aptly put it in his (public domain) poem, *Theme in Yellow*.



I spot the hills
With yellow balls in autumn.
I light the prairie cornfields
Orange and tawny gold clusters
And I am called pumpkins.
On the last of October
When dusk is fallen
Children join hands
And circle round me
Singing ghost songs
And love to the harvest moon;
I am a jack-o-lantern
With terrible teeth
And the children know
I am fooling.

And like my grandson's innocent fascination with Halloween, so too, I think, was Sara Teasdale (1884-1933) in her (public domain) poem, *Dusk in Autumn*.

The moon is like a scimitar,
A little silver scimitar,
A-drifting down the sky.
And near beside it is a star,
A timid twinkling golden star,
That watches like an eye.

And thro' the nursery window-pane
The witches have a fire again,
Just like the ones we make,—
And now I know they're having tea,
I wish they'd give a cup to me,
With witches' currant cake.



Aristotle considered us to be the *rational animal*, because we possessed the capacity to carry out rationally planned projects. But, given the immensity of the irrational beliefs and superstitions we cling to, we could easily be deemed the *irrational animal*, and that's kind of okay because dichotomies beget diversities which, in the end, beget knowledge and that is best of the lot for all of us.

Woooo-ooooh-ooooh-ooooh, BOO!



The Play That Must Not Be Named

by Abigail Handojo

The season of superstition is upon us! I can't think of anything more superstitious than theatre or anything more theatrical than superstition. What with its broken legs and ghost lights, whistling and wood knocking.

I can still recall Journalism class last Halloween... How strange it was masquerading as a pirate while writing about Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy and watching *The Nightmare Before Christmas* all at the same time. We were tasked to draft a feature piece and I chose to research The Play That Must Not Be Named (in a theater). Here are some edited excerpts from my article...

"If you were to compile a list of Shakespeare's most popular plays, Macbeth would undoubtedly be among the top three. It was written in England between 1606 and 1607 and is loosely based on King Macbeth of Scotland's rule in the 11th century."

Historians believe Shakespeare wrote the play specifically for the viewing of King James I. But after watching the performance, the King forbade the play out of disgust for the sheer amount of bloodshed.

To this day, actors know not to say Macbeth in theaters because it "curses" the production. How, why, or when this superstition came to be are murky questions that bring about even murkier answers. Allegedly, it originates from the sudden death of Hal Berridge (the original actor of Lady Macbeth) on opening night. This caused William Shakespeare himself to take up the role last minute (talk about "show must go on!").

Since then, many other incidents have occurred.

- In 1849, the great Astor Riot was started by two actors during a performance and ended with over twenty people dead and a hundred injured.
- In 1937, Macbeth actor Laurence Olivier was nearly crushed by something falling in the wings of the Old Vic.
- In 1942, three actors died during its run and the costume/set designer committed suicide."

What in the occupational hazard is wrong with this play?! Who would ever want to be a part of a production that could potentially be their last?? They should replace bios in the programs with epitaphs! All that to say, congrats to the people who screwed their courage to the sticking place.

September 6th, I returned to my hometown with murder and madness on the mind. That night I watched Shakespeare in the Vines' last show of the 2025 summer season: Macbeth.



Half of the time I was immersed in the story, impressed by the director's choice to project a floating dagger on the stage and use a phonograph as the Weird Sisters' (witches') cauldron.

Vintage music played in the background, successfully setting an eerie mood. The set was a grim, looming thing with jagged tree branches and old furniture set pieces. Actors were draped in midnight blacks and blood reds, their faces painted beyond recognition.

The rest of the time I spent crossing my fingers that nothing truly bad/unscripted would happen, especially to the four actors I consider my friends! The scene where Macbeth lights a match (whilst sitting at a wooden table on a wooden set surrounded by flammable wooden branches) had me holding my breath. Once the show was over, I was told that the force of Macbeth's agonized slam against the table caused a mirror to fall backstage, but luckily it sustained no cracks.

I wonder how many incidents have turned coincidence into superstition simply due to the choice of play. Do we mistake madness for meaning? With no scientific explanation behind the unfortunate chain of events surrounding Macbeth, theorists are left to speculate. Could it be causation? Correlation? Witchcraft?? Call it what you may (as long as it's not the title of the play.)

To entertain a murky question of my own: if I were offered a role in this play, would I be foolish enough to accept, or wise enough to resist a tragic fate? Or vice versa, wise enough to accept or foolish enough to resist the role of a lifetime? This is the kind of indecision that causes Shakespearean characters to go mad. (I'm looking at you Hamlet.)

Let me leave you with a dare. For those risk-taking readers who like to test their assignment is to utter "Macbeth" at the next theater you visit. And for extra credit, live to tell the tale.

*"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more.*

*It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."*

*Macbeth
Act V, Scene V*



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MYSTERY OF SHARING ENERGY WITH OLD REFRIGERATOR

by Constance Cassinelli

There are many unexplained lessons we might want to teach our children. My goal was to demonstrate how we can share energy. The perfect opportunity arose when the compressor on our seventeen years old double door GE refrigerator began sputtering as it struggled to get enough electricity from inadequate wiring in this one hundred years old house.

I developed a night time ritual of immediately slamming off all electrical loads that might be competing and draining power away from this well worn appliance. Often this happened during our dinner. In pitch dark we'd jump up from the table and run to our refrigerator to hug it so we could share some of our energy with it.

Of course the refrigerator would eventually come back on from not having to compete with other demands, but I truly wanted my young sons to believe that we have a mysterious power and energy source that can't be explained.

On one occasion when my son, James, had a friend joining us for dinner, he asked the kid who was suddenly sitting in darkness, "Well, Robert, aren't you going to help?" Soon there were four of us hugging it and sharing our vital energy. The kid never discussed this mysterious ritual with us but continued to send Christmas cards to me for four decades.

The day arrived when we decided to protect our food storage with a new appliance. Timing was perfect. My husband knew a guy who rebuilt appliances and desperately wanted a double door copper colored refrigerator. We didn't sell it to him. We were just happy to have him haul it to his workshop free of charge.

He plugged it in at its new location, then stepped across the street to the coffee shop to grab a sandwich. As he sat by the large window, he watched the fire truck pull up in front of his shop. The refrigerator's motor and compressor had ignited. Apparently, we shared too much energy with it.



EL DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

BY ANN CASAS

Death
The inevitable
End to life
We must celebrate it
Like our ancestors did
On El Dia de los Muertos

A swirling of autumn leaves
Burnt umber, mustard yellow
Rust red
Lead me to the ofrenda
Where death is honored
Revered
Appreciated
Never feared

My heart is bursting
With love and memories
Of those that crossed over
To the other side

A garland of marigolds
Grace the ofrenda
Grinning calaveras
White bones
On the walls
Calacas play instruments
In death
As in life

Pictures and memorias
Are placed carefully
On the table
Favorite foods
And trinkets
Summon their presence

Holy candles burn
with strength
To guide
The souls
That left us
But not
From our hearts





We sit
Chat
Reminisce

I recall
Tía Encarnacion's
Lovely raven hair
Soft skin
Wide toothless smile
Handing me tortillas
Made from scratch

Tío Ignacio's
Love for tequila
Here for you
A shot of Mescal
Salud

Roses for Ramona
From her garden
Toys for Tomas
Gone too soon

Don't be sad
Recuerdos los moridos
Remember the departed
on El Dia de los Muertos

Respect Death's power.
Embrace it.
Accept it.
Welcome it.
On El Dia de los Muertos.

THE NIGHT THE FOREFATHERS AND FOREMOTHERS SPOKE

BY DIOSA XOCHIQUETZALCÓATL

*Ancestral spirits
guide my pen
speaking of who
and where and when.*

*Trial of Tears,
Gaza, Ukraine.
Children suffer
exactly the same.*

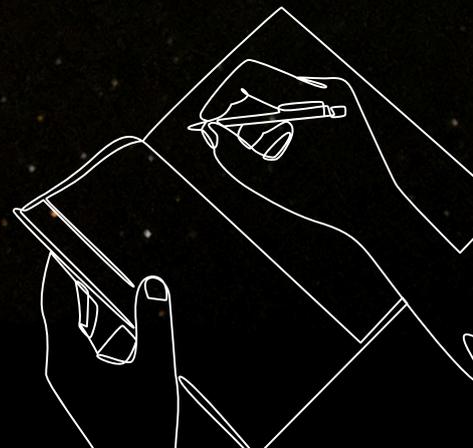
*They whisper stories
of pain and death.
These visions bring tears
while taking my breath.*

*The elders urge me
to write these stories,
those mostly unknown,
null of any glory.*

*Mid-slumber,
my Cherokee prayer
flew off the wall
twirling mid-air.*

*I lit a candle.
I laid my head to rest
peacefully knowing
I had responded to their request.*

*Ancestral sprits
always guide my pen
regardless of how
or where or when.*





END OF THE LINE

By Ben Alirez

It was early morning as Andrew reflected on the previous chapter he penned. He was pleased with his effort over the last several months. The story evoked a myriad of emotions. Strife. Peril. Fear. Hope. And love.

The author took a seat at his desk and sighed as he assessed the scene, much as he had a hundred times before. Stands stood at both ends of a stack of books—a *weighted question mark* on one side, *an exclamation mark* at the other. A polished steel *meditation ball* rested beside his computer mouse. He grasped it as he contemplated more on the task at hand, rotating it between fingers. Therapeutic, he mused. Even magical, if you believed the advertising. Of one thing, he was certain. It was a good deal cheaper than a visit to the shrink.

His eyes finally fell on the flip-page calendar turned to the date September 12, 2025, along with an attached post-it note that read, “Book start date: February 7, 2025.”

The novelist put down the marble-sized ball and paraded through his set of tried-and-true warmup exercises—a stretch of his back and neck. The wiggle and cracking of his fingers. And why not—a little shoulder shimmy, for fun.

Now he was ready.

“Almost there, Andy,” he assured himself. “You can do this, buddy. Complete this last chapter by the end of the day and the bonus is in the bank.”

He turned the page on the calendar and began pounding away at the keyboard.

Several hours later, a half dozen water bottles were scattered about the floor. There was little difference between them, for he, too, felt crumpled and crushed. Never had he been so tired and weary from a day’s writing experience. And never had he suffered from the dreaded writer’s block to this extent. The bane of every author’s existence.

“Why isn’t this coming to me?” he muttered. He picked up the meditation ball again. “Think. WWSKD? What would Stephen King do, Andy?”

He lowered his head at the foot of the keyboard for just a moment. “Think. Think. Think-k- k,” his voice trailed off as he slumped from exhaustion.

Before succumbing to slumber, he had typed three versions of the novel’s ending scene—each shifting the tone slightly—but none quite suitable for the last line of his protagonist.

The computer screen hosted all three. The first: A calm, sincere declaration.

“My darling Esmeralda, simply ask it, and my heart is yours forever.”

The second: A passionate, fervent proclamation.

“My darling Esmeralda, simply ask it, and my heart is yours forever!”

And the last: It had a pleading ring to it. A hint of uncertainty.

“My darling Esmeralda, simply ask it, and my heart is yours forever?”



His hand was still enclosed over the steel ball when one finger popped open. Then another and another as the shiny bearing rolled out, seemingly of its own accord. It spun and rotated till it came to a complete stop next to the Calvin and Hobbes book, *It's a Magical World*. All at once, the desk lamp flickered and a dazzling energy field of blue surrounded the two bookends and ball bearing. It was followed by a mystical bacon-like sizzling, minus the savory, smoky scent.

Not a second later, the three terminal punctuation marks came alive. Even the desk lamp became animated, as it swiveled its head of soft, warm light at them.

It was the exclamation mark who spoke first in his high-pitched, whiny voice. "Hyphen we seen enough already? Look at this poor, miserable soul."

The female question mark sighed. "Stretch, tell me you didn't just say 'hyphen'?"

"What, Q-t?" he answered smartly. "It's a dialect thing. I'm speaking the local vernacular." Suddenly, the point beneath his vertical line bounced, and he swung his body at it like a bat on a baseball.

Smack.

The lamp turned its head and followed the flight path.

The pinpoint went sailing into the wastebasket to be buried along with dozens of crumpled notes.

Q-t shook her loop head at him. "Unreal."

The steel ball rolled over. "Look, Q-t, Stretch is right," she said. "The guy is on the verge of a mental breakdown. Let's put our points together and see if we can help."

Stretch nodded, fully formed again. He ventured up to his snoring master and whispered in his ear. "Strong feelings! Strong emotions! Strong feelings! Strong emotions!"

"Uh, hello-o-o, are you seriously trying to send him a subliminal message?" Q-t said.

"I prefer the word osmosis, thank you."

Dot addressed her companions. "Stop, you two."

Stretch twisted his stick-figure in her direction, which was identical to all the previous sides. "Oh, you would love that, wouldn't you, Dot? Playing the part of a period. End. Finito. Over."

"Stretch, must you be dogmatic about everything?" Q-t said.

She turned next to her metal cohort. "And Dot! Stop being so dry and impersonal. Show some hutzpah. Can you do that for us?"

"What?" Stretch remarked. "You flaunt your curves at a few characters and that makes you an expert? Think again."

"So says the straw man," Q-t countered. "Besides, if you haven't noticed, Dot here is far more popular than either of us."

Dot did a three-sixty. "Your point being?"

Stretch peered at Q-t. "Yeah, *spell it!*"

Don't you mean *spill it?*" Q-t asked.

Stretch shuddered in anger. "Must every conversation with you be an interrogation?"

Q-t yelled back. "Stop interjecting and let me finish then!"

"Okay, enough," Dot scolded. "Let's end this discourse."

"What do you think I've been trying to do?" Stretch asked.

"Alright then," Q-t agreed. "Let's hurry and get this over with."

Stretch made an exaggerated turn toward Q-t. "Bet you would l-o-o-v-v-e-e to have us dash into action, wouldn't you? Shape shift? Turn me into an em dash or something?"

"What?" Q-t asked, her pinpoint jumping into her loop head, looking Stretch up and down like a giant eyeball at a Mean Girls Convention.

Dot swiveled left and right at them. "No, Q-t is right. This is getting us nowhere fast. How 'bout we each take a moment to plead our case? Best argument wins!"



Stretch straightened. "Interesting proposal."

Q-t leaned toward Stretch. "As if! It's always first person POV with you. Gimme a break."

"Break?" Dot spun fully around. "Ellipsis is here too?"

At that moment, the snoring stopped. Andrew stirred and moaned. Stretch and Q-t raced back to their places as Dot snuggled into the author's palm and fumbled with his index finger.

"This little piggy went to Writers Market," she sang gently, advancing to the middle finger. "This little piggy wrote tomes."

The slumbering giant smiled crookedly as Dot proceeded to the ring finger. "This little piggy went right-to-sleep. And this little piggy—"

A sleepy snort finally brought a collective sigh of relief from the characters.

"All clear," Dot whispered, rolling free.

Q-t lifted her head over the stack of books and bristled Stretch's way. "You weenie wannabe! You nearly woke him."

"Me?" Stretch said incredulously.

"Yes, you! You . . . grammatical error, you!"

"Oh, yeah?" Stretch replied. "Well, you're a misplaced modifier, then!"

Q-t shot back. "Comma splice commiserator!"

Dot rammed into the stack, the shock forcing both symbols to fall. "Okay, this has got to end! I mean it. Just imagine if the Writers Guild gets wind of this?"

Stretch enacted a somersault in an effort to get vertical. "Sheesh. Somebody's tense!"

Q-t agreed. "Right?"

"The only question is," Stretch quipped, "past or present?"

Both marks doubled over in shameless laughter.

"Are you both finished now?" Dot asked, shaking her circumference.

"Okay, okay," Q-t declared. "Your argument for a period. Go, Dot! Five seconds."

Dot vibrated anxiously. "Fine. Let me just say it's quite obvious from the protagonist's voice and inflection, that he—"

"Presumed inflection!" Stretch conjectured.

"Subtly inferred," Q-t surmised.

"Implied," Dot added.

"Unclear," Stretch asserted.

"You know what?" Dot said. "You go then, Stretch."

"Why not?" Stretch paced the desktop like a seasoned trial lawyer, rolling this way and that on the ball of his pinpoint. "What I'm picking up from his intonation is caveman-like enthusiasm. His is an unabashed declaration of love."

"Yeah, and I'm the captain of the Battlestar Grammatica," Q-t said. "She wasn't entertaining any of his hyperbole."

"I suppose you have the right interpretation, then?" Dot said.

"I most certainly do," Q-t claimed. "Judging from the pitch in his voice and his romantic notions, he's expecting an answer."

"Seriously?" groused Dot.

Q-t's pinpoint shot up and morphed into a hand. "Look, if you two can't deal with the symbol truth, then that's your problem," The question mark suddenly fixed Stretch with a cold stare. "Oh, gosh, I'm becoming you now."

"You're despicable!" Stretched fumed. "If the Riddler hadn't made you a household name, we wouldn't even be—"

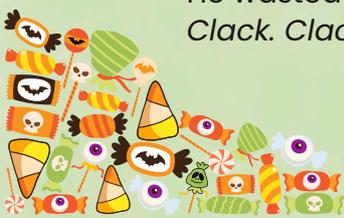
Suddenly, Andrew stirred again.

"Eek!" Stretch shrieked. "He's waking up!"

Andrew was rubbing the sleep from his eyes when it hit him. "Wait, I think I've got it."

He wasted no time.

Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. And more clacks.



He stopped finally. Read breathlessly. A beaming smile forming.

"I did it! Hey, Siri, get my agent on the line!" As he raced out the door, he conceded. "Wait, let me pee first."

The three punctuation marks (and the lamp, of course) sprung to life as he stepped from the room. Together they scampered eagerly to the computer screen to witness the much-anticipated changes. It read:

Ricardo raked a hand through his long, windblown hair and leaned in. "My darling Esmeralda, no fabric of time and space will separate my feelings for you. My love is an ocean of desire, for I am convinced that no power on earth can keep us apart. Not one. Will you . . . have me?"

He looked longingly, lovingly into her fiery hazel eyes, drew closer still, and kissed her with the hot, smoldering passion of a thousand suns.

Esmeralda finally took a breath, seemingly captivated by his countenance. His sense for adventure. His ... wanderlust. And then she reared back and slapped him.

"Hmph!" she snickered, before storming off.

The end.

As one, the trio's mouths dropped. Dot was first to retreat in disbelief, followed by Q-t and Stretch. And over the rim of the desk they fell, thumping as they hit the floor!

The lamp swiveled its head in search of them, finally looking down. Then, it too, fell over, its power cord keeping it dangling over the edge.

"Oh, hey, Lumens!" Stretch was heard to say below. "Come to hang out with us?"

It nodded emphatically when its plug slipped free of the outlet, and it dropped with a thud.

The room went dark.

"You know, Q-t," Dot said plainly, "when you were turned sideways just now, you looked just like Stretch."

"Hate you, Dot!"

The (for real) end.





Theme for November

Gathering