

This Fragile Life

A vibrant illustration of a four-leaf clover with a butterfly and bubbles against a blue sky and green grass. The clover is green with a yellow center, and the butterfly is orange and black. There are two bubbles, one large and one small, floating in the sky. The background is a bright blue sky with a green grassy field at the bottom.

Winning Poems

From the 24th Annual

John Gardiner Community Poetry Contest

Courtesy of Friends of the Laguna Beach Library

Front Cover Design by Elizabeth McGhee

Dedicated to the memory of



John Abbot Gardiner

Photo courtesy of Mary Hurlbut, used with permission.

John Abbot Gardiner 1947 - 2017

John Gardiner was born in Hawthorne, California, and was proud to be a fifth generation Californian. He studied at UC Irvine where he received a BA in theater arts and he was an early cast member at South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa. He lived in New York for several years, where he pursued his acting career. John loved acting in Shakespeare's plays. He appreciated the complexity of the language and, much to the delight of those who knew him, could recite passages and speeches from numerous plays from memory.

John was a long-time resident of Laguna Beach and was widely appreciated as a poet, actor, teacher and raconteur extraordinaire. He read at numerous venues throughout Southern California and was invited to read his poems in Prague, St. Petersburg, and Rio de Janeiro and especially treasured the invitation to read in Ireland, home of the Gardiner clan.

John was the much-beloved leader of the Laguna Poets Workshop for the last 15 years and emceed the library's annual Community Poetry Contest for many years. He was working on his 13th collection of poems when he died on October 24, 2017.

- Ann Brillhart and the Laguna Poetry Workshop

Mike Sprake

Master of Ceremonies

Public Reading of Winning Poems, June 4, 2022



Mike Sprake was born in Winchester, England. He studied at Winchester College of Art (1966-67) and studied sculpture at St Martin's College of Art, London, under the tutelage of many 'New Generation' sculptors (1967-70). He went on to study and make lutes for some of the renowned lutenists of the time including Anthony Rooley and Nigel North. He has been involved with painting and writing since moving to the USA, over forty years ago, and is a member of the Laguna Poets Workshop. He has poems published in anthologies by Tebot Bach and Moontide Press. Recently he had the poem 'Intention' nominated for a Pushcart prize that was published in 'The California State Poetry Society's December Quarterly publication.



The gray light of morning is disturbed by a jet's turbulent engine squeal until it passes and all returns to a kind of peace in which I return to contemplate this year's competition theme, 'This Fragile Life'.

Our life is constantly adjusting and modifying with gravity and the elements at the ready to shatter one's most fragile belongings and earth's precious lives while at the same time supporting it.

Our earth is selfish, doesn't let go of anything as it spins and circles the sun. It amazes me that we have such stability on this slender thread to live and play in and at the same time are able to contemplate what a wonder it is.

Us humans weather the storms of the world and within our own community the flooding of the canyon, a fire or earthquake in another. We weather the storms within our own lives and relationships. We are both creators and destroyers, capable of the most delicate filigrees and great atrocities to the planet and each other.

It is within this enormous stage that we perform, each of us responsible for our actions no matter how small, one word spoken in kindness perhaps encouraging creativity in another.

Words, these symbols of sounds, scratched on parchment, carved in clay, or simply spoken and remembered. They are the messengers of our thoughts and feelings that allow us through poetry to express our own relationship with 'This Fragile Life'.

-Mike Sprake

**24th Annual John Gardiner
Community Poetry Contest
Winners 2022**

Adult

1st Place:

Megan Bresnahan

Crush

2nd Place:

Rich Linder

Post Op

3rd Place:

Katin Cedarholm

River Magdalena

Ninth – Twelfth Grade

1st Place:

Lance Young

Baba, for you

2nd Place:

Ally Hwang

Go with Grandpa

3rd Place:

Eric Xie

Monastery

Sixth – Eight Grade

1st Place:

Cameron Tsai

Death for an Orange Rind

2nd Place:

Cameron Tsai

I'd like to mop you up, baby

3rd Place:

Devananda Anoop

One Day

Third – Fifth Grade

1st Place:

Alexander Cheng

In Chimú

2nd Place:

Dominic Kwong

Salt and Joy

3rd Place:

Ariel Mualim

Horizon

Preschool – Second Grade

1st Place:

Olivia McNally

This Fragile Earth

2nd Place:

Noa Chapel

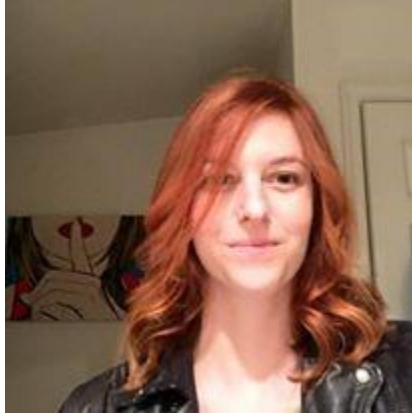
Butterflies

3rd Place:

Archer Frasso

Elsa

Adult: 1st place



Megan Bresnahan

Crush

This was meant to be a poem about first love,
the hours spent willfully centering my thinking around one
silhouette
in preparation for a magazine quiz, a game of truth-or-dare at
a sleepover—
the small magics of teenage girls mouthing a name in the
dark.

Sometimes, thinking back, I can't decide whether it was love
or just being seen, just being honest about things on ski lifts
and watching rented movies in basements, sitting still near
each other;

lying back on warm asphalt at night in the summer,
too many neighborhood lights to really see stars.

You like to fight in your relationships, you like some drama.
In ours it was usually about leaving, just one person leaving
at the end of a night, or too soon, or before something
started;
and the other theatrically breathless, fervent, *betrayed*,
stunned into a dark-eyed delivery of some final scene.

Oh, I like to remember the charged looks across rooms at the
end of a night

(a conversation, a collision, a *constellation* between us).

And we leaned into it, that stretched-taut feeling some
friendships get,

a small town pining. There are some parties I can't
remember

anyone else being at. Pithy sparking comments flying between
us,

you in just your undershirt and so close to me; me in
eyeliner,

talking into your jawline, the edges of my vision glowy and
indistinct.

Is that it? That quick alchemy across distances, across years?
What does it mean that it happens only once, only one time
exactly that way? Between breaths, this fragile life, this
intimate unraveling.

Adult: 2nd place



Rich Linder

Post Op

One eye at a time
You come to

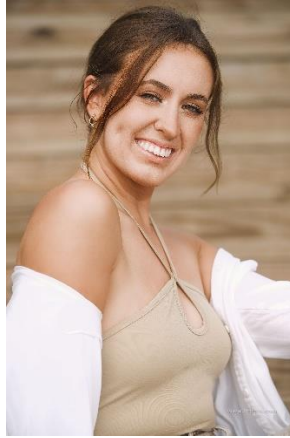
You wonder where
You are, and why

Then wonder what it was
You just asked

Somewhere there are answers
But right now

There is fog edged with light
And a figure in green gliding by

Adult: 3rd place



Katin Cedarholm
River Magdalena

Overcast, serious, warm days
Make me think of my grandmother.
She abides by all laws of nature.
Gravity is dense in her bones.
I like to imagine she vessels a fleeting river
Inside her boulderous stout body.
I like to think it's the river Magdalena.

Her garnet eyes are perched high on carved cheekbones.
They can pick out ripe fruit and my ripe fibs.
She comes equipped with an apothecary
For when I need to feel whole again.
Coffee from her *tierra natal* is always the first thing
To touch her skewed lips before my good morning kiss.

Her sepia-aged tree bark skin
Gently nudges me into awareness,
That her fleeting river needs stable ground.
I offer her my hand up patio steps and she grips strong and
sweet like cinnamon sticks, tickling my pale palms.

She jokes of her time's end like comical tease
She has been an agent of flora and fauna
The dirt she tended to is the dirt she will return to,
Cool and deep enough for her to release her secrets.

Ninth – Twelfth Grade: 1st place



Lance Young

Baba, for you

His hope shriveled in his mouth
As he sifted for dreams between the clouds and the sea
Through the drab, gray, angry dirt
 to find that one speck of
 pitiful clinking
 gold in the grimy pan
That slipped in his muddy, calloused hands

As he crouched in the cold, wet dirt
He thought about his wife
The way she had quietly packed
His only two shirts into his worn leather satchel
Then tucked a lilac blossom in between their folds
So he would not forget

But what had almost made him break down was
As he huddled on a bench in the ship's bilge
And opened up his satchel
To the fragrance of lilacs
He found his son's beloved stuffed dog
The one he had fashioned for him out of love, straw, and a
rice sack
The one his son slept with every night to ward off the
darkness
Staring up at him with button eyes of love
Baba, for you
And just as he struggled to hold back an ocean of tears
The scent of his favorite sticky rice bun, *zongzi*
Made from the last grains of glutinous rice,
savory pork belly and Chinese sausage
Assaulted him with the aroma of home

Ninth – Twelfth Grade: 2nd place



Ally Hwang
Go with Grandpa

Play with me

He hands me black stones; I play with the white ones
But Grandpa, your favorite color is white

It is?

I shake my head and with tiny fists of fury, knocking all the
white stones off the board

I stomp out of his hospital room, my eyes glowing garnet
with a feeling I cannot name

Night approaches, wrapping my shame in her coal black cloak

As I sit on the concrete hospital stairs, my feet buried in
frigid snow

My soul hanging between the clouds and the sea

And I add another stone to the cairn inside of me

There is one stone for guilt, one for shame, one for--

Gazing out the car window, my tears are coffee grinds

When I return the next day, Grandpa silently hands me black
stones

I press my lips into a rebellious “no”

And the cairn weighing on my heart grows higher

“Spend time with him before he goes,” Dad commands

My eyes spark as Grandpa moves his black stones with
trembling hands

I move my white ones--surrounding his territory

I have won, but somehow, it doesn't feel like it

I sweep all the stones into their pouch and tell him goodbye

A few days later, as I sit in the dentist's waiting room

Mom gets a call. “Grandpa's gone,” she whispers, her voice
cracking like dried leaves

In a hearse black corner of my heart, a cyclone of sadness
whirls

I sit in the drowning blue ocean of my soul, covering my face
with my frigid hands

Garbed in sackcloth and ashes of regret. *What if...*? I will
never know now

And as more stones of regret pile higher on my towering
cairn

I am crushed beneath the weight of them

Ninth – Twelfth Grade: 3rd place



Eric Xie
Monastery

At twilight, the lonely rock juts
Like a defiant fist from the swishing sea.
Beneath the monolith I stand,
Drinking my doubts in daybreak's haze.

My rugged feet embrace jagged precipices,
Below which milky torrents clash with salt-tinged air.
I reverberate in this bittersweet limbo
Between a monk's supposed peace and tempestuous
uncertainty,
Wondering if I really want to live a life alone.

Atop the rock, my moss-clad monastery lies,
Pulsating with Gregorian morning chants like songs of
murrelets.

Solitary clouds rest above its clay tiles—
Softening in the aureate glow of dawn.

I am wedded to abstinence—to this reclusive life,
And I wonder if contemplation is my only company.
My heart slowly falls down a spiraling whirlpool
Churning with my dithering commitment to the path I chose.

Yet, as I wrestle with my loneliness,
The ambrosial honey of heavenly hymns
Overspills the granite cliff above.
My brothers' voices tug my soul into being
And clothe me in courage at last,
Reminding me that family comes in different guises
And I am not alone in the house of God.

Sixth – Eighth Grade: 1st place



Cameron Tsai

Death for an Orange Rind

In the camps she became an animal--a thing to be prodded
and probed
Amidst the thump of their heavy boots, as ghost grey smoke
and ashes filled the air
And the stench of their bodies mixed with despair

Between the clouds and the sea, she was stripped of
undergarments and hair
And a storm of sweltering shame roiled in her soul
She felt like a rag that had been used to wipe a train station
bathroom floor

In her arctic heart, there was only mournful rain
As the smoke of her grief swirled in her soul, choking her

When the frozen ground yielded to a soft carpet of sand
Cesia looked up and saw the horizon rippling like a ribbon
above the sapphire sea
In the sea's belly, boats bobbed as the white gulls sang in
ancient cries
Were they lifeboats? Were they being set free?

She quivered on the cliff of hope--
her frozen toes yearning to plunge into soft sand
And fly as she did as a child
When the sun had embraced her like a blessing
And food had been so abundant she had fed the leftovers to
the birds

Now, she would risk death for an orange rind
She would lick soup from the floor

The sputtering roar of B-29s split the sky
And suddenly, the sky was filled with stars, not spinning balls
of gas
But the white ones painted on cerulean and sage green Allied
planes

The door of hope opened, and she ran through it
Right through the merciless storm of bombs
Right through the wrathful rain
And finally
To freedom

Sixth – Eighth Grade: 2nd place



Cameron Tsai

I'd like to mop you up, baby

In this forest of plastic umbrellas, between
the clouds and the sea and the sordid rain
There came a prickling of wind and the breath of a tsunami
“I'd like to mop you up, baby.”

I froze

As the cigarette smoke and the stench of decomposing
garbage and the
bus diesel and the acrid odor of
gas station coffee

Mixed with the blazing acid hurricane

In my head

And all of a sudden

I remembered waking up amidst the clink of forceps and the
pain and the screaming pink antiseptic soap
And the stench of rubbing alcohol and despair

All because *he* thought it was okay to
Drag me outside when I was unconscious and
Violate me behind the frat dumpster and
Then say to the judge I LIKED IT
REALLY?!!!!*%4*!
Under what rock was he born that he didn't realize
That those five minutes of pleasure and power for him
Caused me five thousand years of pain

I am back in the forest of umbrellas now
And a stranger is jeering at me
Asking if he can mop me up like bread and sauce
While a scorching storm kicks my soul
until it rattles and my thoughts are engulfed in velvet flames

Sixth – Eighth Grade: 3rd place



Devananda Anoop
One Day

One day
I will not be here

One day the sun will set
And the rays of the rising sun will not touch my face

One day the birds will chirp outside my window
And I will never hear it
For I am deaf and blind and mute to the universe

One day my family will sit around a dinner table
And I will be no more
Never able to laugh and rejoice
And give my love to all

Or maybe,

One day everyone I love will go
And I will be alone-

Wondering why
It wasn't me
Death took away

Third – Fifth Grade: 1st grade



Alexander Cheng
In Chimú

Between the clouds and the sea, the grass carpets the ancient
city
Mowed in the jaws of grazing llamas
Where the shadows of Intihuatana, the ancient sundial,
Moves to depict the seasons
Here, the stones whisper stories of the mothers who wept
as they carried in their arms their precious children
To be slaughtered in the rain
Mighty Tlaloc, please stop the rain
They plied the children with sweet *chicha*, the purple corn beer
that made them sleep
Gentle Ixtlilton, please cradle him when I cannot
She turns her head aside as she hands her only son to the
high priest
Who sits in a pool of rain and blood of the 268 children who
came before
She turns away, but cannot help but glance back
as the high priest shakes the great maize rattle to call upon
the gods

See, look what we do in your name

As the high priest hastily smears cinnabar on the boy's face
and lips

His heart was drenched in rain

As he raised his giant copper knife the wood quails stopped
singing

as he sliced the child's breast bone and wrenched out his
heart

And held it to the sky

Look what we do for you, Tlaloc

Now, where once crimson, plum, and amber tubers sprouted
in terraced slopes

And the grassy aromas of amaranth and roast guinea pig once
perfumed the air

A pizza shop stands beneath which the children sleep

The last great treasure of the Chimú

Third – Fifth Grade: 2nd place



Dominic Kwong

Salt and Joy

A jungle of sadness screeches in my soul
As a hot carpet of golden sand
brushes against my body
Burning me like a cooked crab
With salt in my eyes
and sand in my mouth
I taste gray loneliness
As seagulls soar above
the wreckage of my ship
like white winged clouds
The sound of the sea is liquid boulders
breaking into pieces
Just like my demolished heart
And the air is tinged with blue sadness
I gaze through bleary eyes at the shimmering sky
Then blink as green hope flutters on my shoulder
“Ahoy, captain!” my parrot screeches. “Are you okay?”
And suddenly--
I taste the salt and joy of the aquamarine sea
And my heart blooms like a golden balloon

Third – Fifth Grade: 3rd place



Ariel Mualem

Horizon

On the horizon, beyond the sea
There is a place you cannot reach
Although it's true, don't be blue
We have our own life on the seaside too

When all seems down,
And happiness is nowhere to be found
Please don't feel empty and lost
Just find the ocean and look across
To unearth all your happy thoughts

Don't step aside, don't go away!
Let's all enjoy the rest of the day
Come together, bask in the sun
You can always have some fun

The horizon will be there, and so will you
Meet your friends and find your crew!
Have a great day on the beach,
You'll feel complete
Ignore the sad, it has been beat!

Preschool – Second Grade: 1st place



Olivia McNally
This Fragile Earth

I'm just a little planet
How hard could this be?
But my humans are disrespectful
and walk all over me

They're using up my resources
And in my oceans they pollute
They buy these fancy stinky cars
That they think are cute!!!

Once I was beautiful
And had a lot more green
Now there is concrete everywhere
People are so mean!

I need people to love me
To save my soil, my air, my sea
I'm just a fragile planet
That's wrecked so easily

So please recycle your plastics
Your glass and paper too
Reduce your waste and reuse everything
C'mon people, get a clue.

My hope for all of us
Is that I become healthy and clean
I'll be plentiful and strong
My fragile life - just an old dream

Preschool – Second Grade: 2nd place



Noa Chapel
Butterflies

Delicate butterfly
Fluttering in the sky
Landing on a flower
Laying an egg
Egg hatches baby caterpillar
Eating leaves
Cocooning into new life

Preschool – Second Grade: 3rd place



Archer Frasso

Elsa

Elsa, my dog

Held like a baby

Delicate and small

Black and white with a hurt hip

Even though she passed away

She's with me

Her collar tops her ashes

Her memory is in my fragile heart

The Annual John Gardiner Poetry Contest
is made possible through the generosity of:

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*We look forward to your participation
in next year's
25th Annual John Gardiner
Community Poetry Contest.*

Next year's theme is

“Downtown”

Booklet and Prizes
Courtesy of
Friends of the Laguna Beach Library
and Glenda & Patrick Curran

2022

