

# Downtown



## Winning Poems

From the 25<sup>th</sup> Annual  
John Gardiner Poetry Contest

Courtesy of  
Friends of the Laguna Beach Library

Front Cover Image: Shutterstock

**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 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

Reading of Winning Poems, June 3, 2023



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 living in the USA, over forty years ago, and is a member of the Laguna Poetry Workshop. He has poems published in anthologies by Tebot Bach and Moontide Press. His studio is waiting for his creative presence for poetry, painting, and sculpture.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of this library's poetry competition, right here in the heart of downtown Laguna Beach.

That makes it 1999 when the first competition was held at the end of the 20th century. How things have changed since then, as we move into a future of greater immersion and reliance on technology.

Thank goodness for downtown, that place we grew up visiting, where we return to explore, here and in other cities, each downtown, a unique expression of its history and inhabitants.

When I was young, downtown felt like it had always been that way, the barber shop sandwiched between a pub and shoe store. The shopkeepers themselves, their faces reliably in place behind counters of cheese, lambchops and fresh vegetables.

But merchants come and go, and roller rinks disappear; perhaps becoming a drug store next to a café that serves borscht soup and soda bread in one spot, an art gallery and cellphone stand in another, the new norm, this visceral place to where humanity is drawn.

Here in Laguna nature is a huge part of downtown, the canyon walls along the road that can become a river, the Pacific's swell with its lazing kelp beds just across Coast Highway, the coves and tide washed beaches.

Nature has shaped this downtown, where lodged near the bottom of a hill, rests a pearl of literature, the library. Thank goodness we have this creative constant in Laguna's marvelous downtown.

**Mike Sprake**

**25<sup>th</sup> Annual John Gardiner  
Poetry Contest Winners**

**25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Prize**

**Lili Bazargan**

Baba Kamal

**Adult**

1<sup>st</sup> Place:

**Kendra Stansbury**

For the Mother I Saw While Waiting in Downtown Traffic

2<sup>nd</sup> Place:

**Megan Bresnahan**

Fog City

3<sup>rd</sup> Place:

**Niki Beach**

Paintbrush

## **Ninth – Twelfth Grade**

1<sup>st</sup> Place:

**Ashley Tsai**

The Wax Apples

2<sup>nd</sup> Place:

**Eliana Merritt**

The Bench Downtown

3<sup>rd</sup> Place:

**Eric Xie**

The Day She Grew Black Wings

## **Sixth – Eighth Grade**

1<sup>st</sup> Place:

**Jubilee Sung**

The Shadow on the Wall

2<sup>nd</sup> Place:

**Isabella Lin**

Regret

3<sup>rd</sup> Place:

**Suri Charlu**

The Real Destination



## Third – Fifth Grade

1<sup>st</sup> Place:

**Saura Charlu**

The Reals

2<sup>nd</sup> Place:

**Gabrielle Trevino**

Downtown Laguna

3<sup>rd</sup> Place:

**Caroline Walden**

Downtown Laguna

## Preschool – Second Grade

1<sup>st</sup> Place:

**Aspen Alexandra Kallenberg**

Downtown

2<sup>nd</sup> Place:

**Evelyn Chung**

Peace in Downtown

3<sup>rd</sup> Place:

**Skylar Tiner**

I Like Laguna

## 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Prize



**Lili Bazargan**  
Baba Kamal

I wish I had met you before you flew away  
I'm sorry that you couldn't stay longer  
you are the light of every story my father tells  
the thought of you makes him stronger

I wish I had heard your voice  
the wisdom that everyone praises  
your kindness makes grandma smile  
the thought of you makes her braver

when she tells me of how you two met  
her eyes glint with the joy of the memory  
I can see her falling back in time  
lost in the most beautiful reverie

I wish you were here to see  
what my father has done in your name  
his work is making the world better  
and you guide him through it every day

I wish I could have hugged you and told you that I love you  
that I wish you were still here  
with every sunflower I lay on your grave  
I hope that you are smiling, I hope that you are near

**Adult: 1<sup>st</sup> place**



**Kendra Stansbury**

For the Mother I Saw While Waiting  
in Downtown Traffic

Your hatchback is open. Your son's face; soft cheeks, dreamy gaze, little arms around your neck, baby hands melting into your dark shiny hair, pink lips smushed, head on your shoulder; his safe home base. You were changing him; gently wrestling tiny half standing legs, limp with tiredness.

A bored voice shouted, "diaper!" It flew from the front seat and fell awkwardly at your son's feet.

Traffic inched forward. I glimpsed your face. The shine of your hair a mirage, a curtain drawn to reveal the truth: placid exhaustion. Your eyes longed deeply for respite, and your skin begged for the radiance of a well rested night.

In your gaze I saw you ponder: impending bedtime, appointments to make, play dates to arrange, preschools to tour, meals to plan, laundry to fold, dishes to clean, strewn toys, crumbs on the couch, the floor, and somehow the windowsill.

I saw the resolute will of mothering marching onward. The simple act of a diaper change, a miniature battle. Your weapons: tenderness and tenacity.

The light at Main Beach changes, and your husband, the diaper thrower, is revealed.

He moves leisurely, looking down at his phone – A slight smile below his pink cheeks and rested eyes.

I drove away thinking all I knew of you already, and I wished he could see.

**Adult: 2<sup>nd</sup> place**



**Megan Bresnahan**

Fog City

There's an electric current in the air as the tram wires crackle, a *thing* in the midst of happening. Between visits to hallowed ground—Cafe Trieste, City Lights, Vesuvio—I take meetings like dying, calculate revenue under management in the back seat of an Uber Pool, the yelling from Market Street abstracted, a mourning Kaddish for the dream of affordable housing, holistic solutions.

We gather in Dolores Park on nice days, the whole City, is how it feels. There are Burners with tasseled hoops, a guy selling truffles rumored to contain exotic drugs, a tall silver robot holding a boombox.

The Sunset's less gloomy than you hear, with its vintage flannel for sale and its crew of open-water swimmers; all dirty blonde, wetsuits hanging off their narrow waists. Drinking coffee outside Trouble, down Judah Street near all the tattoo shops, I feel the wind off a cold Pacific, imagine everything West of Divisadero just *leaning away*.

At night on the Juliet balcony, smoking, I like to watch the light patterns from the Bay Bridge—a pulse of red and white blood cells. The City folds around small moments: petrol sunsets, mid-city poppies—fragmented and incantatory.

**Adult: 3<sup>rd</sup> place**



**Niki Beach**  
Paintbrush

On my way home, I see  
blue sky  
rainbow wildflowers  
And the blank palette in between  
Where we could breathe  
Before we built  
The gray of our day-to-day  
Where we could connect  
and offer, give and receive  
Before we were told  
What and How to believe  
Before we expected  
and simply respected  
Before we laid  
This land  
With bombs, bricks, and bubblegum

## Ninth – Twelfth Grade: 1<sup>st</sup> place



**Ashley Tsai**  
The Wax Apples

My grandmother doesn't remember the night the thief held a knife to her throat  
Downtown, where even the rats' fleas are carriers of dread disease  
"Give me the money," the man growled, thrusting his head toward the cash register  
That bulged with a week's worth of selling fried chicken and honey butter biscuits  
Grandfather jutted his chin in protest, thinking of his children and employees to pay  
But as the robber pressed the knife against Grandmother's slender neck  
Grandfather shoved wads of crumpled cash into a flimsy plastic to-go bag  
The thief wrested it away, then thrust the knife into Grandfather's belly  
Before jumping out the broken window to melt into night

The wax apple tree is aflame with fruit from seeds Grandfather brought to America  
Grandfather deep waters it so that in summer, all his children and grandchildren  
Are flooded with baskets and baskets of resplendent pink fruit cool and crisp as pears  
In this hammock of a suburb far from downtown

I remember the hot summer nights Cam and I spent lolling  
as kids on Grandfather's bamboo mat  
Staring up at the dark bedroom ceiling as Grandfather told us his stories  
Of how he came here as an immigrant with nothing but a suitcase and a dream  
About the years he spent selling cleaning chemicals door to door

And sporting goods at flea markets  
I would drown in a cloud of boredom  
Not realizing my boredom was purchased with Grandfather's pain  
That my life of running in golden fields of wheat was solely because  
Grandfather chose to embrace sacrifice in his city of fleas  
So the question now is: what pain do I want to embrace to grow my own  
wax apples?  
'Cause I don't live downtown

## Ninth – Twelfth Grade: 2<sup>nd</sup> place



**Eliana Merritt**

The Bench Downtown

Two teenagers perch on a bench downtown,  
Sharing a cup of gelato among the crowds.  
He smiles at her, and she giggles,  
Creating a memory that will last forever.  
They'll sit here again in two years, wearing caps and gowns,  
Celebrating their future together.  
Five years later, this time in front of a sunset,  
The boy, now a man, will pull out a shiny ring.  
Not long after, they'll be back again, escaping the party to share a treat  
together.  
They'll share a smile as gelato dribbles down onto her wedding dress.  
Ten years will pass until they'll sit there again, but this time arguing on  
opposite sides of the bench.  
Finally, the woman will take off her ring and gives it back to the man, then  
storm off.  
Another twenty years will pass before the woman will sit alone on the  
bench, remembering the past.  
The man will walk up to her, holding a cup of gelato.  
Together they will sit, watching the tourists downtown.  
But who am I to know?  
I'm just a young one who doesn't know much about love, but I've heard  
of the honeymoon stage  
and the planning of the future  
and the engagements and weddings  
and the trials and heartbreaks  
and unfortunately, the divorces.  
Relationships seem like so much trouble.  
I think I'd rather just sit here and eat my gelato.  
On the bench downtown.



**Ninth – Twelfth Grade: 3<sup>rd</sup> place**



**Eric Xie**

The Day She Grew Black Wings

Downtown, on a lone highway speeding  
She dashed through the night  
Yet the crimson tail lights ahead had escaped her sight  
And she flew amidst cobwebs of shattered glass  
Arched back facing the silver moon  
Her flesh filled the crevices of the asphalt road

Darkness enveloped the world  
But she rose through  
Above her skin and bones with charcoal wings  
Her heart quivering with lightning  
Her head numb with disbelief  
A dissociated soul

By force of will  
She grabbed onto her limp and lifeless body  
Furiously kicking her way back across the River Styx  
Yet as she embraced that soulless husk,  
She remained within Thanatos's grip

So she cried the name  
Of her abandoned son  
At the heavens above.  
But God was silent  
His only response:  
A flutter of her black wings  
Lifting the agonized soul  
Into the mercury sky

**Sixth – Eighth Grade: 1<sup>st</sup> place**



**Jubilee Sung**

**The Shadow on the Wall**

*August 6, 1945*

Downtown, a girl springs over her rope  
Like the sun leaping in the shimmering sky  
For her lemon yellow delight lights up her lonely alley  
A boom erupts into an ashen mushroom  
As scuttling life and chatter evaporate into silence  
The girl is now a shadow on the wall  
In the city, where glowy embers of light dance like fireflies  
My feet clatter through black-burned streets  
Where it rains ash instead of water  
As the road crackles beneath my bare feet  
The taste of all I have lost lingers  
And the stench of smoke rattles in my bones  
My sister is gone  
But her shadow remains  
Forever etched onto our apartment wall

## Sixth – Eighth Grade: 2<sup>nd</sup> place



**Isabella Lin**  
Regret

In Antakya's Old City  
I lie here  
Like a sandwich  
in a zippered plastic bag  
waiting...for a face to call my own

I remember  
The velvet creaminess of Mama's *qashta*  
Her homemade water buffalo cheese  
She made by skimming the petals from fresh boiled milk  
Playing Seven Stones with my sister Zehra  
And sharing a chunk of smoking sesame *simit* with my dog

I remember  
My apartment dancing around me  
To the music of screams  
I am under my desk texting my friend, "What should I do?"  
She doesn't answer  
No one answers  
My mind crowds with a chaos of questions  
Until there are no questions  
Anymore

Downtown, in Antakya's Old City  
A parking lot has become a morgue  
Where 20,000 souls ponder in stuffy silence  
The disappointments that led to this...  
This \_\_

## Sixth – Eighth Grade: 3<sup>rd</sup> place



**Suri Charlu**  
The Real Destination

*Whoosh* The train comes tearing into the station at break-neck speed,  
Gravity does not have the authority to defy it, and the physics is betrayed  
Despite its high speeds, it's streamlined nose effortlessly comes to a quiet halt,

It's wind tousling my hair, but To downtown Tokyo we are destined  
Beckoning me, A technologic beast  
Warmth in the lights against chill on the metal frame  
The deafening quiet almost lulling me to sleep  
The vision of trees are blurred, houses twisted, lampoles nonexistent in a  
surrealist landscape  
This Japanese magnetic masterpiece  
The bullet that rests on superconducting electromagnets, hovers 4 inches  
above railways,

As I contribute to the 10 billion passengers it has carried  
*Whoosh* 240 mph! the Shinkansen, the backbone of Japan  
Lauding Hideo Shima, singly linked the rural to the urban  
An experience of a lifetime, a real live movie  
I pop popcorn in my mouth, the butter oozes down my white crests, onto  
on my tongue  
Lost in luxury, my mind wanders back to my real destination  
*Downtown Tokyo* The mecca of technology  
Robot waitresses standing at my disposal, alongside steaming ramen  
noodles  
Shibuya crossing to reach the addictive anime, manga and boba

*My oh my oh my oh my* Unstoppable craving of this dystopian world I have  
painted  
I sink into the fine seats, and let the threads entomb me in their grasps

I succumb to sleep and let the cacophony of voices drift away...

*Finally!* The moment arrives, and the sleek black doors give way to Tokyo

The vision, the lights, the people, present in all glory

*Pause.* Turn around, get back on the train

### Third – Fifth Grade: 1<sup>st</sup> place



**Saura Charlu**  
The Reals

The famous LA I have been dreaming of?  
A night out?  
Fancy dresses?  
Parties all night?  
Fancy restaurants?  
My imagination runs away  
My faded jeans and t-shirt turn into a sparkly bubble gum pink dress  
Our hair is primped up as Hepburns  
The walls fade into a beautiful path  
A cobblestoned path  
Flashy lights decorate the sky like sprinkles on a cupcake  
Booming music tickles our ears emerging from buildings that surround us  
Our high heels and jewelry jingle and echo on the pavement  
Every flashy light up of a sign invites me toward them  
I look down to pinch myself  
My sister's boisterous voice snaps me out of my trance  
"We're here"  
My eyes dilate to the gaze I anticipate  
Tents?  
Ragged clothing drying on lines?  
Disheveled wanderers line the streets  
Graffiti in a language I look away from  
What have we done?  
Why can't we help them?

**Third – Fifth Grade: 2<sup>nd</sup> place**



**Gabrielle Trevino**  
Downtown Laguna

Near big cities  
A town at the ocean  
Where the waves roar  
Where the surfers surf  
Down people come  
To rest on the sun baked sand  
Take a turn on Peppertree Lane  
An icy treat coming your way  
Books to share are everywhere  
Forest Avenue shops by the beach  
Where groups are coming to meet  
At sunset, a warm glow lays on the hills  
On warm nights, the moon casts silver across the water  
By day, families come down to the beautiful town

**Third – Fifth Grade: 3<sup>rd</sup> place**



**Caroline Walden**  
Downtown Laguna

Ocean glistens  
Bright cars whiz by  
A wildflower field of umbrellas along the shore  
Signs hang on shops and cafes, waiting  
Downtown Laguna



## Preschool – Second Grade: 1<sup>st</sup> place



**Aspen Alexandra Kallenberg**  
Downtown

(Clap 1,2,3)

I am here, you are there  
You can be so entertained  
Oh I can, see you now  
There is a beat, the beat of Downtown, everywhere.

If you want I can show you too  
Smiles and voices passing through  
If you want I can show you there  
If you want I can show you where.

I can do this, you can do this  
And we are the people that make our town home  
We are the helpers of the town  
I can not do it on my own.

We know where to go, we take care of each other  
We take care of this beautiful place  
Walking streets taking our voices to the beach  
So hear me now, hear my sound  
There is a voice inside us  
A voice inside us that sings.

As we walk into the night we take care of our neighbors  
We know deep inside  
We are like the stars in the sky.  
The voice inside us is so clear

When we help we sing  
We are proud as we carry our starlight  
Our Downtown the heart where we live.

**Preschool – Second Grade: 2<sup>nd</sup> place**



**Evelyn Chung**  
Peace in Downtown

I sit in the shade of a tree  
The birds sing nature's song  
I pet a bunny  
A squirrel sleeps on my lap  
A raven brings me a daisy  
I say "Thank you downtown for all this love"

**Preschool – Second Grade: 3<sup>rd</sup> place**



**Skylar Tiner**  
I Like Laguna

I like puzzles at the library.  
I like Fairies at the garden.  
I like stumps at the beach park.  
I like painting at preschool.  
I like strawberries from the farmer's market.  
I love riding trolleys downtown.

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  
26th Annual John Gardiner  
Poetry Contest.*

*Next year's theme is  
**To Walk in Different Shoes***



Booklet and Prizes  
Courtesy of  
Friends of the Laguna Beach Library  
2023

