

Unexpected Encounters



Winning Poems

From the 28th Annual John Gardiner Poetry Contest

Front Cover Image by Elizabeth McGhee, ©2026

Dedicated to the memory of



John Abbot Gardiner

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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.

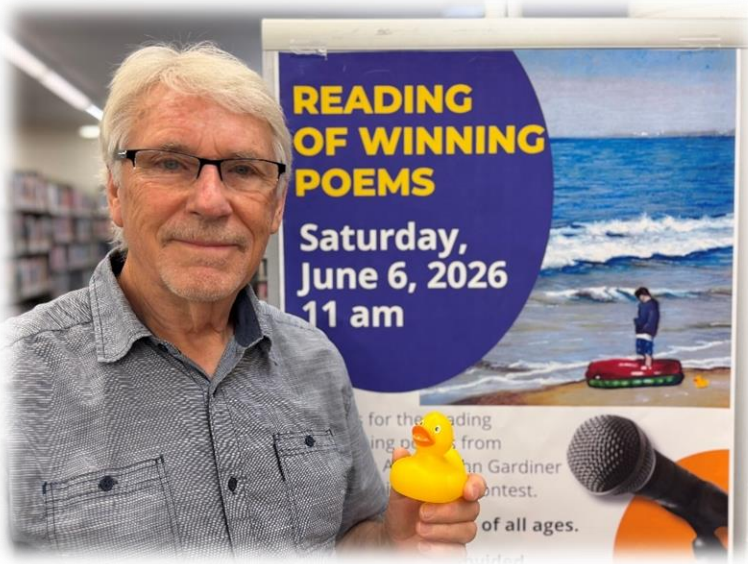
John was the much-beloved leader of the Laguna Poets Workshop for the last 15 years and emceed the library's Annual Poetry Contest for many years. He was working on his 13th collection of poems when he died on October 24, 2017.

– Ann Brillhart and the Laguna Poetry Workshop

Mike Sprake

Master of Ceremonies

Reading of Winning Poems, June 6, 2026



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.

Unexpected Encounters.

It can be said that unexpected encounters are the magical elements that enrich our lives, injected in between our daily routines with their sudden occurrences, be they tragic or joyful and our reactions to them can run deeply, both emotionally and mentally depending on what they might be.

At night in my back garden an innate mechanism of nature triggers an opossum family to instantly play dead when the porch light is unexpectedly turned on, thus creating a 'cloak of Invisibility' for their wellbeing & protection, I'm not suggesting this to be the way to deal with unexpected encounters, but it may be the perfect foil on some occasions.

In a poem featuring water, we might be drifting downstream on a lazy river, when out of the blue a weeping willow falls across it, this encounter making an unexpected turn in the poem's stream where we are diverted through musical rivulets to the estuary of metaphor and colors, perhaps transporting us to a deeper place in ourselves.

So, how does a poem arise? We talk loosely about the muse being present in musicality, amusement and bemused, that similar muse is present in all of us too, awaiting the moment like a rooster to make its statement at the dawn of a blank page as we sit ready with pen in hand.

Which brings us to this year's winning poems, captured with the aid of each person's inner muse and triggered by the theme, feelings and thoughts brought out, aired and expressed uniquely, each poem's world delighting us with surprises and transformations in the unfolding of their unexpected encounters.

From the desk of Mike Sprake

June 2026

**28th Annual John Gardiner
Poetry Contest
Winners**

1st Place:

Hridoy Kundu

Night Shift, Parking Deck C

2nd Place:

Kendra Stansbury

Morning Run

3rd Place:

Teresa McKinney

Spicy Seoul

9th – 12th Grade

**28th Annual John Gardiner
Poetry Contest
Winners**

1st Place:

Ava Hulett

Unexpected Yet Not Unwelcome

2nd Place:

Skylar DiMaggio

A Moment You Have Met

3rd Place:

Abbey Chez

Rain, Hear My Cry

6th – 8th Grade

**28th Annual John Gardiner
Poetry Contest
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1st Place:

Emilee Sung

Little me

2nd Place:

Lucas Chien

Patrick the Penguin

3rd Place:

Natalie Harb

My Heart is a Crowded Hallway

3rd – 5th Grade

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1st Place:

Malia Mason

The Way of the Ocean

2nd Place:

Annistan Lin

The Tiny White Flash

3rd Place:

Xin-Yang Saoirse Chen

An Attacker Turns into Prey

Preschool – 2nd Grade

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1st Place:

Asha Saffouri

Snacking

2nd Place:

Wesley Beutin

Snake With the Shakes

3rd Place (Tie):

Luka Mannarino

Cheetah, Cheetah

3rd Place (Tie):

Kai Mason

Nature in my Eyes

Adult: 1st place

Hridoy Kundu **Night Shift, Parking Deck C**

At 2 a.m., behind the cancer wing,
I met a fox beside the payment gate.
He did not skulk. He had the air of spring
arriving hours before its proper date.
His coat was lit with that garage-born glaze,
all amber, rust, and gasoline-blue sheen.
He looked at me the way a fire stays
a fire: alert, unashamed to be seen.
I'd come from saying, No, she's still the same,
though both of us had heard the monitors.
He sniffed my empty hands as if my shame
were something wrapped in butcher paper, yours.
Then off he went, all elegance and nerve,
past LEVEL THREE, past EXIT, DO NOT SWERVE.
I stood there with my ticket and my doubt,
as if some wild clerk had just stamped me out
of one hard kingdom, where the rules were clear,
into this one, where even grief grows fur,
where bright-eyed creatures pause, then disappear,
and leave you holding what you cannot cure.

Adult: 2nd place



Kendra Stansbury
Morning Run

Morning sunlight hurling warmth onto shoulders that are bare
against chill ocean air.

My watch counting heartbeats, counting steps, counting breathing,
it is rhythmic, wandering mind free from chatter of my children –

Then I gasp.

Slingshot onto Hillcrest from Cajon St. a sedan comes too close, I yell
“Jerk!”

An SUV quickly follows, somehow quiet like this morning, so so quiet.
I see lights in the windows, subtle flashing, can’t deny it.

Not a jerk...but pursued, he is panicked, a pariah.

Puzzle pieces lining up, videos stacking –
Men thrown to the ground,
woman pulled from her car,
mothers ripped from their children,
little boy with the blue hat now is scarred.

Restrained. Detained.

I follow them up Dartmoor towards the trail where my children like to find
favorite rocks,
where friendly hikers wave hello, where yellow flowers hug the hillsides as
they grow.

Their cars block the trailhead, I stop dead.
Three big men wearing costumes. They are scary, all in masks.

Where's my phone? At home. So stupid. No, not stupid, I should go.
One man looks, does he see me? I don't know.

Shaking as I leave, gardener resting by his truck. Streets alive now and I say,
"Please be careful, ICE that way." He nods thanks.

Informed the police chief, told the mayor, carried signs, called our reps.
Not sure of the next steps, so I write.

Adult: 3rd place



Teresa McKinney
Spicy Seoul

Doctors orders. Find a new hobby.
Walking Group 8:00 AM. Zumba in the lobby.
Bingo, Tai-chi, activities galore. Golf carts, HOA, outlived spouses and more.
Searching for my condo, they all look the same. I wave at a neighbor, I don't know his name.
Gossip and drama doesn't retire. Careful what you say, you could be next under fire.
I once strutted the runway chic and slim, now my life feels empty and dim. I'm not the youngest far from the oldest. Contemplating life with no more purpose.
Dinner for one and mindless TV. Changing channels at lighting speed. He drew me in. Flawless in bliss, slow burn kisses and plot line twists, Cinematic rides before someone dies, he met someone new, kisses and lies. Planted on my couch, I laugh at the show,
Two more episodes, do I stay or let go.
Kimchi, dumplings, yummy bulgogi. Face mask, soju, ramen karaoke. I see my glass skin, silver hair and fine lines. I crave that life so he'd be mine.
K-drama saved me, giving me hope...softly teaching me how to cope. Ukulele, Bible study, pickle ball and dance.
I rewrite my life, and my heart dares romance.
Bucket list: travel partner who doesn't need me to be on time.
Visit Seoul on social security's dime.
Midlife crisis, not quite true. I want more spice. It's long overdue.

9th – 12th Grade: 1st place



Ava Hulett

Unexpected Yet Not Unwelcome

Slicing through the darkness speckled with gems
A beacon of light cascades across the sea
A rotating disk that reflects like a diadem
The warning horns urged you to flee
But something kept you planted there
Amidst the rush and roar
A feeling vibrating through the air
That this could be something more
Alone and afraid among the howling night sky
You take a step forward to see the object of dismay
As the air clears, you let out a cry
For it's a figure you see not so far away
Slowly approaching, you can't turn back now.
Where fear once was, courage suddenly takes its place
You keep advancing, though you don't know how
And you make contact with eyes in a face
Not so different than you and I
Though foreign in tongue and unusual in stance
From life in a galaxy far in the sky
This meeting must be more than chance
Unexpected yet not unwelcome
What defines a friend?
And how can we spot them?
These boundaries are ones you can transcend
For unusual encounters that come as a surprise...are often the ones that
will truly open your eyes

9th – 12th Grade: 2nd place



Skylar DiMaggio
A Moment You Have Met

As I walk through this place,
unfamiliar faces all around,
footsteps, car horns, and laughs,
my ears are filled with sound.

The sidewalk is paved almost perfectly,
but there is one tiny crack
Suddenly I'm a child again,
my sister hopping over it as I watch behind her back.

Returning to the real world,
but not for very long.
An aroma of fresh cookies catches me,
and I hear a special song.

Suddenly I remember those cold winter days,
playing in the snow with no worry in sight.
Just my family laughing next to me,
inside is the smell of cocoa and warm candle light.

That memory fades, and I find myself in the present.
Yet again, I encounter a vision of the past.
A young girl playing at the park with her grandparents,
I never knew that time would move so fast.

With each and every day that passes,
there are some times you will never forget.
What may seem unfamiliar is just unexpected.
Every day brings a moment you have met.

9th – 12th Grade: 3rd place



Abbey Chez

Rain, Hear My Cry

Through the rolling desert hills of isolation
I lie still in the darkness—grasping whispers of hope
They are praying for me—chanting light into my darkness
Hoping seeds sprout into wishes rushing through the rain
To turn this end into a new beginning

And this is how I learn:

It is only by the rain a seed may learn to grow
It is only by the rain that this once lonely hill
May transform into a garden
As the rain rinses the past
to create room for the future to blossom
Within each drop, a new chance is born

For while a storm may destroy, it can also create
Room for something else to grow
In a storm, we can see weeds for what they are
It was only in the storm I knew
That I was not broken—only transformed

I was once a lonely, tawny hill
Who did not know I should seek stormy clouds for healing
It was within these storms that each splash of rainfall
Pieced me back together
Thread by thread, needle by needle
I sewed a storm into a necklace of sparkling rain
For I learned through the most treacherous storm of all
A barren hill could learn to bear flowers

6th – 8th Grade: 1st place



Emilee Sung
Little Me

I saw me from the past today
She had a coke
I had a sprite

She had a book about unicorns
I had a book about romance

She was wearing tight, showy clothes
I was wearing a baggy clothes

She had on her light up sketchers
I had on my converse

She wore her hair in a high pony tail
I wore my hair down, nicely brushed

She played many sports, she never committed to one
I committed to playing volleyball

She started talking about life
My eyes began to blur

She started talking about joy and happiness
I looked at her and felt a pang in my chest

She started talking about friends
I warned her
She talked about love

I got reminded of him

She said she wanted to be a teenager

I told her she didn't

My eyes began to water, what's wrong she asked?

We grew up.

6th – 8th Grade: 2nd place



Lucas Chien

Patrick the Penguin

There once was a penguin who didn't think it was nice
That his once spacious glacier was now a cube of ice

There wasn't enough room for his wife or his kids
Really he felt his life was on skids

And in addition to this he could no longer find food
To feed his growing hungry brood

So he plunged into the water to find a sea full of fish
Because that's what his kids considered a tasty dish

After plunging into his giant bath
He realized he was no match for the ocean's wrath.

The currents carried him far away from home
This was no place for a penguin to roam

He swam against the current as he tried to return
But he could not make it despite how he yearned

At last a boat picked him up and carried him to shore
Where he found himself on sand; it was snow no more

Patrick waddled as if he were home
2,000 miles was a long way to roam

But when the Australians saw a penguin on their shores
They stopped what they were doing and ran outdoors

For Patrick represents what we do for love
Under a sea of sky and the heavens above

6th – 8th Grade: 3rd place



Natalie Harb

My Heart is a Crowded Hallway

My heart is a crowded hallway
between classes.
A cacophony that passes through me.
laughter brushing my shoulders,
names echoing off lockers.
Some stop for a second,
leave fingerprints of memories,
then disappear
when the bell rings.
No one stays long enough
to notice
I've been standing here
the whole time.

3rd – 5th Grade: 1st place



Malia Mason

The Way of the Ocean

Invigorating ocean, magnificent waves,
moving, twisting, curving,
like a Wavy Turban Snail,
I hear the ocean in your shell.
Spiraling, a familiar shape.

Someday, we will go inward.

The gentle ocean breeze
blows salty, cool air.
Tides collect mermaid trees.
Ocean, is Mother Earth's blanket—
comforting, warm, embracing.

Waves flow like a feather,
lifted by the breeze,
weightless, guided,
without resistance.

When I am with you,
I feel freedom.
Near you, happiness.
I surrender to you,
with gratitude.

Tides breathe in and out,
An unexpected encounter.
Ocean,
you have changed me.

3rd – 5th Grade: 2nd place



Annistan Lin

The Tiny White Flash

I was swimming, just moving around,
Going in circles, up and then down.
The water was blue, the day felt slow,
I wasn't thinking of much, you know.

I dipped my head and came back out,
Then felt something strange, no doubt.
My tooth was gone, just not in place,
It disappeared without a trace.

I stopped right there, didn't make a sound,
Just looking and looking all around.
The pool was big, just blue and deep,
Like it could hide it, like it could keep.

I moved real slow, then a little fast,
Hoping somehow I'd find it at last.
Then suddenly there, a tiny white flash,
I reached down quick, no time to think or ask.

I grabbed it fast, held it tight,
It felt so small, but also right.

3rd – 5th Grade: 3rd place



Xin-Yang Saoirse Chen
An Attacker Turns into Prey

A ripple through the sand snaked its way out,
the sight of the spider filled me with doubt.
Only to see the tarantula pounce on a soul,
to cut the rat's life string was its only goal.

How fast the rat scurried to escape the paws
of the hunter, who stood in silence for a pause.
But that only angered the now raging "lad",
as it charged furiously and leaped like mad.

What the tarantula missed was its nearing fate;
today was also the tarantula wasp's date
for finding its prey and not starving to death.
The spider would feel its last surviving breath.

Still the spider charged towards the kangaroo rat,
unaware of the suffering it would feel like that.
The rat slipped away in the second it would take,
but the spider had made a tremendous mistake.

The arrogant killer believed it would not fail,
but the wasp knew that soon it would prevail.
The spider was snacked on by the lucky winner,
and the tarantula's life force grew thinner.

Its rash decision showed me on this very day
that a ferocious predator can turn into prey.

Preschool – 2nd Grade: 1st place



Asha Saffouri
Snacking

I've noticed Mom has started snacking,
Pizzas, pastas, she's attacking,
It's been a little strange to see,
How much she puts away with glee.

I feel it's not at all polite,
To tell her that her clothes look tight.
She always tells me to be healthy,
"More important than being wealthy."

I think I'll have to act, confront her,
Voice concerns and call for order,
You see it was the final straw,
When she consumed the last bear claw.

I called an urgent family meeting,
To sort through this excessive eating,
"Mom, I have to rein you in"
But she just rolled her eyes and grinned.

She pulled me close, wrapped in a hug,
"It's true, my pants are feeling snug."
"You see, I'm eating for another,
Soon you'll have a baby brother!"

Preschool – 2nd Grade: 2nd place



Wesley Beutin
Snake With the Shakes

We were walking
in the trails of El Moro Canyon.
It was burning hot.
We could see the flag, and the ocean, and yellow flowers.

The dirt started moving
so we stopped
and
looked
and
saw
a BIG fat snake
and it rattled.

We backed up faster and faster.
It went hissssss
and
it kept going
the way it wanted to go
into the bushes.

Preschool – 2nd Grade: 3rd place (tie)



Luka Mannarino
Cheetah, Cheetah

Cheetah, Cheetah,
As fast as can be
I roam around as freely as can be.
Cheetah, Cheetah,
I love to eat.
I catch my prey,
Until I get deer meat.

Cheetah, Cheetah,
Lion is my attacker.
I run, run, run,
Until they can't run faster.

Cheetah, Cheetah,
I hold my baby in my mouth.
When there is a loud sound in my house!

Preschool – 2nd Grade: 3rd place (tie)



Kai Mason
Nature in my Eyes

The ants are working to get food.
The roly-polies are in a good mood.
Birds are tweeting,
Squirrels are eating,
The lizard is a dude!

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*We look forward to your participation in the
29th Annual John Gardiner Poetry Contest
with theme
“A Hundred-Year Message”.*

*The 2027 contest theme commemorates
the Centennial of the City of Laguna Beach.*

Booklet and Prizes
Courtesy of
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2026

