



# Volo Bog's

# Peatland Poetry Challenge Winners

Presented by Friends of Volo Bog with  
Illinois Department of Natural Resources  
at Volo Bog State Natural Area  
Ingleside, IL

2023

Backdropped by *Rose Pogonia in a Field of Starflowers* by Michael Schmitt



# Matriarch

First Place Ekphrastic

by Ursula Bielski

In the heart of the summer bog  
Life teeming in a sea of green  
You are a lone reminder  
That all of this will go.

Forgotten by the tender touch of spring  
Each bone of your old fingers showing  
Bleached by years of Augusts  
Dried by winter after winter after winter.

Your gnarled arm is scarred and split.  
It hurts to stretch your withered hand to Heaven.  
*Take me*, you whisper  
But it's not that easy.

The emerald pines  
The coneflowers and cattails  
A billion blades of grass.  
All are woven  
Inextricably  
Between your toes.

*Stay with us.*  
Mired and mixed forever  
Among the green and young  
We will hold you up.  
You will show us how to last.

Inspired and backdropped by *Bogscape* by artist Michael Schmitt

Image stretched to fill page.



# The Invitation

Second Place Ekphrastic

by Tim Sroka

I am Mshike, earth-grasper, Shaman,  
and this is the Wabskoki where I dwell  
amidst the rising roke.

This has been my home for ages as many  
as the skutes upon my shell will tell.

The Spirit sent grandfather  
deep into these primordial waters  
and he returned with the chthonic gift of mud  
from which land was created, and in which we lay our clutches.

Mire now dominates where water once reigned.

My lair now slowly fills with the moss of seasons past.

Royal ferns and tamaracks slowly blanket the waters

Providing shelter for water snakes, muskrat, mink and heron.

Sumac, winter berry, and cattail flourish, nourish, and  
consume what once was all Mbish.

In the mist, with air heavy and cool,

I too come to lay the eggs of the next generation

In the susurrating silence of the living-dying bog.

Inspired and backdropped by *Bogscape* by artist Michael Schmitt

Image stretched to fill page.



# Midas Touch

Third Place Ekphrastic

By Elizabeth King

Golden tamarack pines

Egrets lying in wait

Gilded reflections

A glow so encompassing

King Midas might have touched the page

Inspired and backdropped by *Egret with Tamaracks*

By Arlene Doran

A. DORAN





# Stalwart Through the Years First Place Landscape & Vegetation

by Jesse William Olson

For at least the twelve thousandth time, the eye of the bog will freeze over,  
the pupil will go glassy and a blink of snow will cover it;  
tomorrow will be cold, but this has happened before.

So many blinks in a lifetime.

Before,

the crunch of leaf fall littering the dirt at the trailhead as we set off,  
cold in October wind through the grasses, around fallen trees;  
wind carrying the spores of the sphagnum, the heart and floor of this place.

The buckbean and fern, spike rush and sedge  
have mostly browned now, not dead but dormant, sleeping below  
the tamaracks who blaze a wheat-gold iris,  
and the oaks further off who burn yellow to orange, red to brown.

A few leaves still cling to the willow, twitching gently before  
the long expanse of brown and dampblack bog, which shines – from patches  
where the water has breached the floating mat – reflections of a steel sky.

Backdropped by *Fall in the Bog* by Helmut Rosenberg, stretched to fit page.



Before,

*...continued.*

in summer, the hiss of crickets, the cattails motionless in the still heat of mid-day.

Small winged things waft from inflorescence to leaf-shade;

we too basked beneath trees in this place we came to

to forget our lives for something wilder, something calmer.

Water doesn't flow here, it just gathers,

is held in itself and fills until the boundary between earth and pool blur,

and so much of this is life built on life built on water.

The depths of wet and peat and slow decay

float this garden of flourishing above.

I too wish to be filled with myself,

I too am a life built on life built on depths of mystery,

and I too feel myself floating at the surface too often.

How is it that I feel so grounded here

in a place where ground is so ill-defined?

My eyes cloud too. Sometimes I lack clarity,

but the eye of the bog stares silently up between blinks,

for now, while the peat thrives and falls,

before it fills forever,

with the confident stillness of something that knows its purpose.



# Nothing Stagnant

Second Place Landscape & Vegetation

by Faith Mellenthin

Let us float above the sphagnum moss  
As a solid piece among the tossed,  
The tangled, and the heaping peat  
Composed of ancient, rooted feet.

Here I clamber, and breathe a bit  
Gasping at the gold tamarack's wit.

A tale of balance and limited growth  
Where triumph comes to one with both  
A rigid bark, but swaying veins, and  
Patience to sit and wait for rains.

Here, the biggest move is taken slow,  
For nothing stagnant this way grows.

Take root, if you wish. Though I do not.

I'd rather tread lightly above the plot  
And leave what's been preserved in peat  
As a fleeting being with restless feet.

Backdropped by *Golden Hour in the Bog* by Sinead Carus

# The Bog and the Buddha

Third Place Landscape & Vegetation

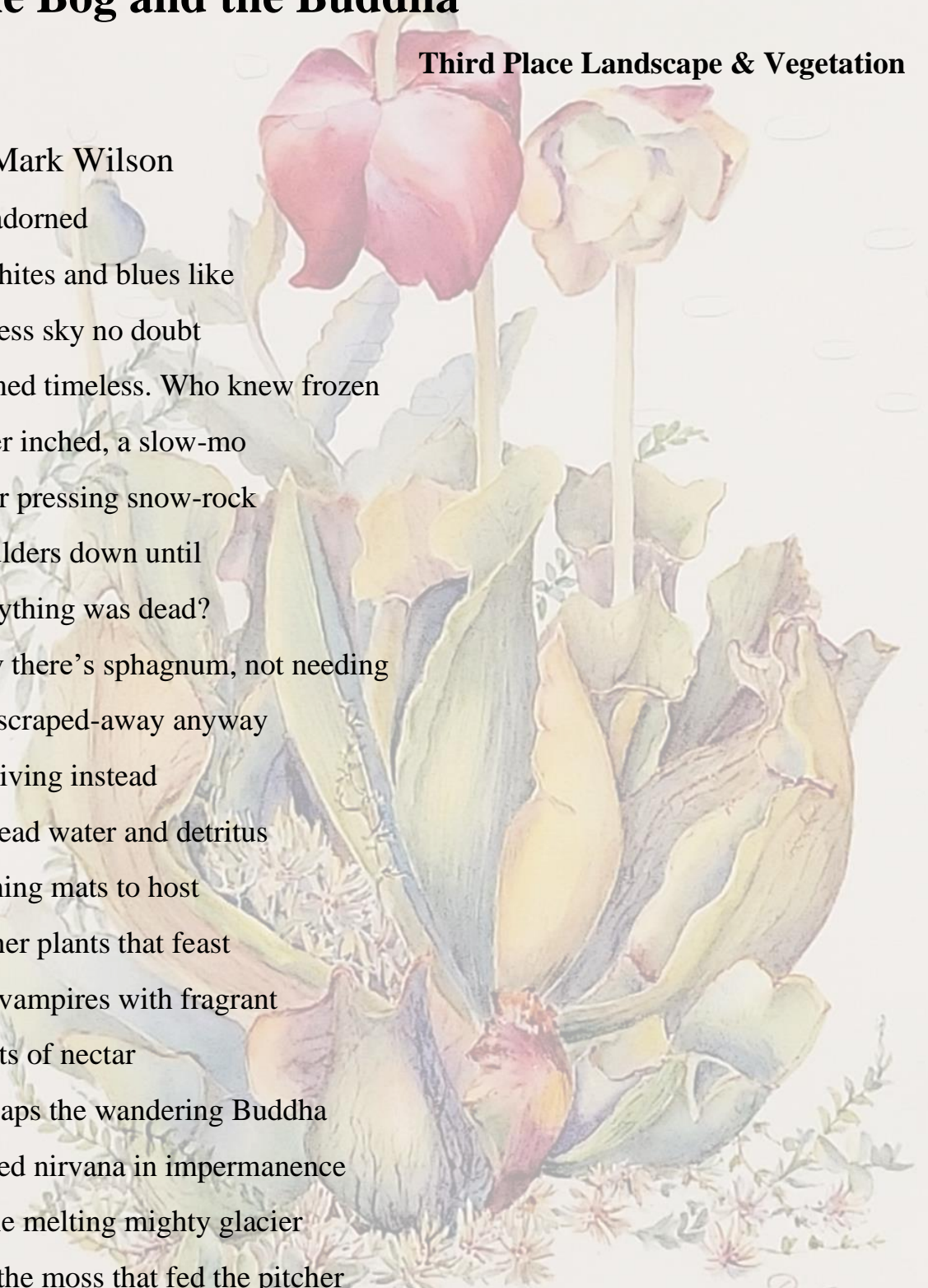
by Mark Wilson

Ice adorned  
in whites and blues like  
endless sky no doubt  
seemed timeless. Who knew frozen  
water inched, a slow-mo  
killer pressing snow-rock  
shoulders down until  
everything was dead?

Now there's sphagnum, not needing  
soil scraped-away anyway  
but living instead  
on dead water and detritus  
forming mats to host  
pitcher plants that feast  
like vampires with fragrant  
scents of nectar

Perhaps the wandering Buddha  
sensed nirvana in impermanence  
of the melting mighty glacier  
and the moss that fed the pitcher

Backdropped by *Northern Pitcher Plant* by Beverly Behrens





# Bogwalk

First Place Bog Culture

by Mark Wilson

Leatherleaf lanterns

identical lampshades

dangle neatly above the peat

whitening a mired path

recycled plastic

for half-lid mothers dragonfly children

acid men seeking direction

through the bog

Caution Floating Walkway Ahead!

the sign says

irony warning walkers

of what they're in for

a schwingmoor

that twitches like a giant when

no-see-ums dance

upon his skin

A blind appears along the peat

sphagnum edge

with a slit to spy two angels—

Trumpeters, juveniles—

Backdropped by *Beautiful Bog* by Sinead Carus





**brown-snake necks stretch**

*...continued.*

**to blare across the four winds**

**Come, Come!**

**as if to share the rapture**

**Mathew hovered once**

**behind this blind**

**impressed enough to make a note**

**pocketknife letters below the viewing slit**

**proclaiming like swans**

**significance, existence, presence**

**Mathew Was Here**

**in this bog**

**One April morning a dragonfly**

**followed his weary mother**

**cautiously or not**

**past the leatherleaf**

**through pine-scent spring fresh**

**needles of tamaracks in the sun**

**along the floating walkway that makes**

**the bog quake when**

**he saw the blind and**

**heard the trumpeters' calling**

Backdropped by *Beautiful Bog* by Sinead Carus



# Neighbor Chain

Second Place Bog Culture

by Sandra Sarsha Petroschius

I

The girl lifts the small bowl. The granddad, hollow-cheeked,  
Tan cap, canvas belt loose-looped on his jeans,  
Stirs porridge on promethean pipeline coils then  
Flecks bubbling barley cereal with sweet woody cinnamon.  
Spoons sustaining grains into her plastic bowl  
Covering the purple dinosaur grinning up from its base.

Exotic, yet familiar, the neighbor eats at this table.  
Hollow-cheeked, sheepskin cap, leather belt, he tastes  
The barley lacking golden flax and pale smartweed.  
Born when the counting back of millennia mattered less,  
Born with fine-crafted iron spearheads near at hand,  
Near as his now and ever neighbor's machined steel pot.

The girl shifts, eyes a neighbor descending.  
Hollow-cheeked, she is fully capped, her belt signals  
Ecospheric enemies, even now alerting to her lungs'  
Time-soiled air, to her meager menses, to the dinosaur bowl  
Preserved within her. Porridge pathways into her vessels,  
Moisture mounts, mocking what it once sustained.

Backdropped by *Ebb and Flow* by Katherine Wicks



## II

*...continued.*

**The cosmic comrades bow to their destinies.**

**None satisfied with a little, their people rise reaching.**

**Rock to spear, spear to machine, machine to rocket,**

**Destinies dependent on pleasing their gods.**

**Lying in layers of Tollund peat, the iron neighbor**

**Transmits mystery from his boggy burial,**

**Preserved forever. His destiny—**

**Pleasing the gods of bounty.**

**Dust walking, the granddad soon is scattered into the air,**

**Claimed by cancer-clustered river water at Cape Fear,**

**Preserved forever. His destiny—**

**Pleasing the gods of invention.**

**Straining for a limb on the tree of life, the woman,**

**Tech-trusting, yet unsealed, dons her shields,**

**Preserving hope amid cascading crises. Her destiny—**

**Sacrificing to the gods of fertility.**

## III

**Prophetic, the guiltless girl befriends**

**Barley, bog, river, air, time. Holds her place**

**Perpetually with neighbors in the chain.**

**She pushes away her bowl.**





# Song of Solace

Third Place Bog Culture

by Brit Wallraf

The cool earth,  
my shoes,  
squelch,  
stuck.

My feet  
glide out of my worn sneakers.  
My toes caress the mud  
and I let myself sink in

My dream of what this is,  
However it is not.

For I am,  
a bog body.

The red winged black bird,  
*oh ka lee,*  
calls out  
of the other birds  
calls out  
and the echoes  
of the other birds  
chiming in around  
fill my ears  
with a song of solace.

Backdropped by *Highbush Blueberry* by Melissa Pierson

Melissa



# Congratulations to our winners!

Many thanks to *all* our participating poets in our first annual *Peatland Poetry Challenge*:

- Ursula Bielski
- Jessica Brubaker
- Dana Fine
- Elizabeth King
- Faith Mellenthin
- Jesse William Olson
- Sandra Sarsha Petroschius
- Stacey Schrecengost
- Timothy Sroka
- Brit Wallraf
- Mark Wilson

Thank you also to our featured artists whose beautiful artworks enhance our booklet celebrating Peatlands through Poetry.

## Your *Peatland Poetry Challenge*

Committee – Jane Richards, Rob Baker, Emma Flickinger and Stacy Iwanicki

### **Volo Bog's Peatland Poetry Challenge**

*In celebration of Bogs & Fens at Volo Bog State Natural Area*  
**International Bog Day \* Sunday, July 23, 2023**

*Bog Snorkeler by Sinead Carus, Bogs in Art 2011*

**Submission Categories:**

- *Bog Landscape & Vegetation*
- *Bog Culture*
- *Ekphrastic*  
*Google it :0)*

**Two Age Categories:**

- **Adult**
- **Youth**  
Ages 12 -17...  
must have parent/guardian approval and signature



**Get/request Submission Guidelines by:**

- **Emailing**  
dnr.volobog@illinois.gov
- **Visiting**  
FriendsofVoloBog.org
- **Phoning**  
815-344-1294
- **Stopping**  
at the Visitor Center

**Submissions Accepted Through July 12**

**Awards:**

**First-place winners will be invited to read their poems aloud during our International Bog Day celebration at Volo Bog SNA on July 23.**

First-, second-, and third-place poems will...

- receive a ribbon
- be displayed at Volo Bog State Natural Area
- be published in a pdf booklet made available on the Friends of Volo Bog website. Writers retain all rights to their work.

Volo Bog State Natural Area is an Illinois Department of Natural Resources site located at 28478 W. Brandenburg Road, Ingleside, IL 60041. Phone 815-344-1294, email [dnr.volobog@illinois.gov](mailto:dnr.volobog@illinois.gov). Friends of Volo Bog is a 501(c)(3) membership organization. [FriendsofVoloBog.org](http://FriendsofVoloBog.org)

Friends of Volo Bog & Volo Bog State Natural Area