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
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

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
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
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.
Before, 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
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

by Mark Wilson

Leatherleaf lanterns
identical lampshades
dangle neatly above the path
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 sphagnum edge
with a slit to spy two angels—
Trumpeters, juveniles—

First Place Bog Culture

Backdropped by Beautiful Bog by Sinead Carus
brown-snake necks stretch
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
Neighbor Chain

by Sandra Sarsha Petroshius

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

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

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
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 Petroshius
- Stacey Schrecengost
- Timothy Sroka
- Brit Walraf
- 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

**Friends of Volo Bog & Volo Bog State Natural Area**