

# *Chorale*



A Poetry Anthology

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which provided the soil for the seeding of *Chorale*;  
Mary Dowd, our personal sponsor,  
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which provided the home for whatever flowering you find here.

# *Chorale*

A Poetry Anthology



DEERBROOK EDITIONS

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FIRST EDITION

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Why do we write? A chorus erupts.

Because we cannot simply live.

—Patti Smith



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## Preface

In a rich, quiet morning, Ralph Waldo Emerson reaches me through the fog of our cultural materialism: “We are a galaxy of individual stars sharing our lights together.” Good medicine for my spirit.

Here is a *Chorale* of singers that goes beyond quality and pitch of any one voice, voices honed by a commitment to each other’s quest of meaning and value in reflection, memory and experience through poems.

A retired mathematician, minister and lawyer; a singer and bee keeper, teachers and dancers, spanning almost thirty years in age, from 60s into our 80s. We initially came together for a series of workshops I taught in 2016, meeting at a long, rectangular table on the top floor of Yarmouth’s Merrill Memorial Library. At some point, we moved to a ground floor niche with wrap-around windows and a round table in the Library’s children section, where we grew into this writing group of 10 poets.

That was home base, working together for the grail of poetry winter nights, snow swirling round just beyond the alcove windows, until the spring coronavirus turned all our lives inside out. These last few years we have continued to meet twice a month during Zoom gatherings.

We are deeply grateful for the gift of that round table during those earlier years bonding, especially for the support of friends Mary Dowd, MD, a poet herself and Library coordinator for poetry; and Heidi Grimm, the Yarmouth Library’s Director. Their love of creative writing, their hospitality, warmth and keen interest and trust in our work, along with that of the staff, continually nurtured us.

Special thanks go to our designer and publisher of Deerbrook Editions, Jeff Haste, for delivering us to you in the elegantly designed book with his original cover painting. “Tone art,” one of the *Chorale* poets spontaneously observed: “Tones, like color in the music of voices.”

Among our diverse interests, memories and themes you’ll find elements of poignance in the way beauty and loss often couple, a sense appearing to grow as we age, kin to the deeply stirring tones of the cello, beyond words but not beyond what images evoke. Thus, our call to figurative language—poetry.

Here we have it, my delight in commending our poems to you. Let these voices stir and harmonize, breathing greater life into your own heart’s affections.

*Martin Steingesser*



*Melissa Mirarchi*



## Stone

I see you  
I am drawn to your smoothness  
    To the color and the shape of you

I pick you up  
And rub you  
Between my thumb and fingers

I tuck you into my pocket  
    And I carry you home  
To my garden  
Where I'll balance you  
    On another stone  
    Amid the peonies and lady's mantle  
    The lupine and campanula  
My kindest and most patient teachers

And you will be there for a while  
    And the garden will die  
And be born again  
A hundred  
    And a thousand times

And I will be dust  
And you will be found  
    Tucked into a pocket  
    And carried home again

## My Mother's Hands

My mother could put her hands flat on the floor without even bending  
her knees.

(She found this quite useful for pulling weeds and impressing her little  
children.)

My mother's hands snapped string beans, fresh from Happy Hollow  
Farm.

And divided the strawberries she grew herself into five identical bowls—  
always careful to make sure her eagle-eyed children found no  
inequities.

My mother's hands massaged VapoRub onto small, hot, spotted chests  
and put Band-Aids on wounds, whether real or imagined.

They tended hamsters, parakeets, rabbits, fish,  
a myriad of dogs and cats, and a palomino horse.

My mother's hands worked knitting needles,  
trailing long, even cables and perfect woolen ducks.

They baked bread. Thumped it. Sliced it thin.

And flipped the English Pancakes that she was famous for—  
buttered them, sugared them, rolled them up tight.

My mother's hands cut crooked bangs,  
shorter and shorter in vain attempts to make them straight.

They washed and braided and ironed hair.

They ironed endless baskets of clothes  
and my father's white handkerchiefs.

My mother's hands held her children.

And her children's children.

And their children.

Her fingers stroked their cheeks.

With each generation, my mother's hands changed.

Smooth skin became wrinkled and liver-spotted,  
embossed with blue-rope veins.

Her fingers grew crooked  
and so very thin her ring came off  
for the first time in sixty years.

The last time I saw my mother's hands  
    they were hot and clenched,  
like the fists of new-born babies,  
like spring buds about to open.

And their skin was as thin and translucent  
    as tissue, wrapped around a precious gift.

## Winter Solstice

The sun will set at four today,  
and if I could,  
I would be asleep by five.

And I'd dream all through  
the long, dark, night.

Like the birds.  
The ones that  
didn't go.

That huddle on dark  
naked branches,  
knowing  
in their hollow bones  
that even the woods  
and the fields are sleeping  
frozen  
and silent  
and pregnant  
with spring.

# Outrageous

Oh!

To be

unreasonable  
To be utterly  
reprehensibly  
*unforgivably*  
badly  
behaved

Oh!

To point fingers

and make  
accusations  
you *know*  
aren't even  
true

To scream

and rant  
and rave  
without  
shame  
without  
apology

Oh!

To know

that even then

even after all that  
you are still undeservedly

unjustifiably  
preposterously

loved

## Unraveled

The man in the church basement  
    raised his hand  
and when he was called on  
he stood.

He was shaking.

He said he hadn't  
    had a drink  
    In twenty-seven days.

He said it was hard.  
He said very hard.  
He said he believed  
he was coming unraveled.

That was his word.  
    Unraveled.

Like the sweaters that I,  
    the youngest one,  
had finally outgrown.

Unraveled  
in my mother's hands.  
    Wound tight in a ball,  
    put away,  
and forgotten.

Until, in due course,  
it was picked up again  
and knitted into something new.  
    Something more fitting.  
    Something  
        beautiful.

*Deborah Pfeffer*



## O' Donohue's Grave

One white horse alone in a field.  
Stepping over stone after stone,  
I passed famine walls  
laid up dry by impoverished men  
longing to be fed.

Stone church on barren land,  
burial grounds,  
Celtic crosses planted in peat,  
lichen and limestone  
making vows  
to each other.  
One white horse.

His grave, not stone—hazelwood,  
sacred Celtic tree.  
Pilgrims left tokens,  
religious medals, sunflowers,  
one spiral shell,  
a poem in plastic  
tacked to the grave  
*Beannacht*, his blessing poem.

He wrote it for her,  
his mother, Josie  
petitioning the wind for  
*an invisible cloak*  
*to mind her life*.  
He wrote it for her consolation,  
for the protection of the old *currach*  
just there on the horizon seen through  
the open hazelwood heart.

He wrote it for me—  
for me today, standing here,  
hard aground after a long voyage  
peat dried on cracked boots.

## Meditation on Wintering

Winter mornings  
I search blankets of snow  
for the tip of the  
Buddha's topknot.  
Admirable,  
the way he keeps  
his head above it all  
for so long.  
Blasts of raging wind and ice  
bury him in drifts  
even he could not endure  
and so, he disappears.

I saw it coming  
from my preferred view  
to the back garden,  
where he sat content.  
Storm after storm,  
snow cover for his hands  
held in meditation mudra,  
his face erased,  
topknot last to go.  
He vanishes  
along with winding paths,  
flowerbeds, stones,  
ways familiar.

Disappearance  
lives in me as both  
terror and longing,  
an edge of awareness,  
watching the self sit,  
utter emptiness hovering.  
I step back, away from  
becoming wind  
to return here, to this garden,  
bare maple awareness,  
dog on the doormat,  
the hand-woven life  
of the unenlightened.

**Nancy Austin**, raised sons, kayaked with eagles, crossed at Checkpoint Charlie, rode Iron Rooster across China, taught in NYC, painted reflections—blue glass bowl, climbed into Bryce Canyon, recorded stories of Botswana women, slept in cow pasture on bicycle trip—St. Petersburg to Archangel, lived by the sea, loved deeply, and laughed with women.

**Bill Gregory**, is a retired minister living in Yarmouth having served UCC churches in California and New England. He has been trying to find words for love which are often beyond saying since he said yes in his late twenties to the Spirit calling, to be himself and for something worthwhile.

**Alan Harawitz**, is a retired NYC secondary school teacher, living in Falmouth, Maine for the past 10 years. His poems have been published in more than 100 literary magazines, as well as anthologies. Most recently, his first collection of poems, *The Day I Met Ava Gardner*, was published by Deerbrook Editions. In 2020, Garrison Keillor read two poems from the book on his program *The Writer's Almanac*.

**Sarah Hyde**, grandmother and honey farmer, is inspired by her participation in and witnessing of the beauty and fragility of nature. Reciting poetry to trees, bees and barred owls on her farm is a daily ritual. She can be found gazing for hours into the eyes of a newborn grandchild.

**Melissa Mirarchi**, award-winning copywriter turned professional dog walker, wrote her first poem at age ten: *We have two puppies/Twelve weeks old/They're very cute/But very bold/They chew on everything they see/But most of all they chew on me.* She's still at it. "Nothing takes the place of persistence."

**Deborah Pfeffer**, is an award winning poet and essayist whose writing is inspired by travels to remote and inaccessible places. She leaves the familiar to find unexplored places in herself from which to write. Currently she is finishing *Mates*, a story of a four year journey on her sailboat *Piper*.

**Kathy Slack**, native New Yorker and performer, lives and teaches voice in Midcoast Maine. Chasing the poetry bard for years, hoping to publish finally came true. She has studied with poets: Ada Limon, Kevin Young, Marie Howe, Richard Blanco and others. Thanks to Judy, Martin and our Royal River poets.

**Martin Steingesser**, Portland's Inaugural Poet Laureate 2007-09, who can't sing a line in key, found his voice in tune writing, performing poems and teaching. He is delighted and honored the Chorale poets tolerate and help him hear and tune his off-key notes.

Preview more of his songs in *Yellow Horses* at [https://issuu.com/deerbrookeditons/docs/yellow\\_horses\\_preview](https://issuu.com/deerbrookeditons/docs/yellow_horses_preview) or hear him in recital at Portland's Greenhut Galleries <https://youtu.be/my2v8YqAPQU> .

**Nick Stone**, lives on an island off the coast of Maine. Much of his life has been spent on salt water. After graduating Princeton with an honors degree in English, he served in the U.S. Coast Guard on a ship between Boston and Greenland. After a long legal career in Boston, he retired and began seriously writing poetry. In 2017, he published *FRAGMENTS*.

**Judy Tierney**, is a devotee of Mother Goose, the great Taoist bird, who creates poems that billow and bellow, lift off papers and screens, to be warbled over rooftops, sung (off key okay) in vacant lots and crowded elevators, revealing the wisdom of the ages for those with ears to hear. Most of her poems are attempts to restore Humpty with Elmer's Glue.

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“Winter Blue,” by Martin Steingesser, first published in the Portland Press Herald column “Deep Water,” Copyright © 2018 by Martin Steingesser. This version Copyright © 2022 by Martin Steingesser.

These poets write about passages—their own and our country’s—looking deeply at the world as they find it. They investigate those profound memories that shape us throughout our lives and examine the natural world that can transform us every day. They are a community of writers, and their poems at times become a call and response, voices joined together to create images and stories that evoke and complement each other. At a time in our world when darkness feels omnipresent, these poets remind us that there is light in everything as well.

—Stuart Kestenbaum, Maine’s 5th Poet Laureate