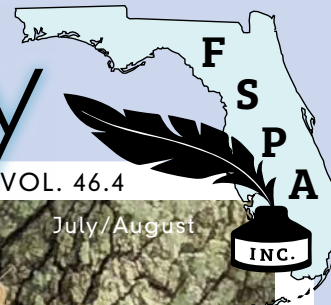


Of Poets & Poetry



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July/August

Florida's Own
**BlackBerry Peach
Poetry Prize 2019
Winner**

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B.J. Alligood



Photograph by Mark Andrew James Terry



Profiles in Poetry

B.J. Alligood:

Focused on the positive

Long-time FSPA member B.J. Alligood is the recent recipient of the coveted BlackBerry Peach Poetry Prize. We thought you'd enjoy reading, in her own words, how she approaches writing poetry, and challenges that she seems to brush off like dust on a shelf. Al Rocheleau posed the questions.

Q: Give us some background on your writing. When did you begin? Did you start as a poet and continue, or did you return to poetry later?

A: I never wrote poetry until I went through a divorce 20 years ago. I used it as an outlet to process the emotional upheaval I was going through, and afterward found I enjoyed the creative side of it.

Q: Are you predominantly a narrative poet (story teller), dramatic poet (creator of characters and personas) or a lyric poet (outlet for deep thought or emotion)?

A: I actually write all three but seem to lean more toward lyric and narrative poetry. I think that's due to the performer in me. I've always had a bit of an outgoing personality and enjoy interacting with people. Because of this I've never had a problem with stage fright and find that a good presentation makes a huge difference in how your poem is understood and received.

Q: Like many of us, you've dealt with physical and other challenges in recent years. Do those aspects of your life affect your work, or do you use some of it within the work?

A: I came down with pretty severe Rheumatoid Arthritis when in my thirties. Now, decades later, I've had both knees replaced, both ankles replaced, all ten toes fused, back surgery, etc. Thirteen operations in total. I have written a few poems about my R.A., a few dark, a few funny. But in general I refuse to let it dominate my thinking. When you are dealing with a life-long, chronic and very painful disease you can choose to go one of two ways. You can spend your time focusing on how much pain you're in (which only makes it worse) and feel sorry for yourself (and no one likes a whiner) or you can train your mind to focus on the positive things in life and enjoy what the world can offer. Besides, intense concentration on other things, i.e. writing, reading, movies, etc., helps to distract your brain from pain (uh-oh, there's a rhyme). I've always been a rebel and refuse to let obstacles overcome me. I've just learned how to either go around them, over them, or tunnel under. Doesn't mean they go away, it just means you have to adjust your life accordingly and live with them.

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Q: Who are some of your favorite poets and why?

A: This is a hard question. There's so many to choose from. I love the rhythm and cadence of Maya Angelou. I especially love her strength and defiance in "And Still I Rise". I am drawn to her message of owning who you are and being proud of it. Her body of work sings to the rebel in me to never let anything or anyone make you cower. She also had great command over her audience when reading her poems. She was a consummate deliverer of words.

Edgar Allen Poe and Sylvia Plath - He for his cadence and rhyme. Her imagery is so unique and you can feel her emotion. Both for their uniquely creative way of presenting the dark side of life.

If you love romance I recommend Rumi. His poems are ageless in the wooing category.

I really enjoy Robert Frost. His speech is plain and easy to understand yet many of his writings bare meaning on a deeper level. He provides a quick read, but then at the end, unsaid thoughts begin to form, and it beckons you to reread it slower and give more thought to what is laid out.

Q: Are your performance poems radically different from poems you write just for the page?

A: Yes. I try to make my performance poetry relatable to everyone and put it on an understandable level. Nothing loses an audience's interest faster than something that is written so esoterically that the majority of listeners don't have a clue of what it's about. I also find that audiences enjoy poetry that makes them laugh or grabs them emotionally. If they remember your performance then you know you've written a good poem.

Q: This is certainly not the first contest that you've won. Any advice for others to succeed in writing contests?

A: First and foremost, read the rules. Know what is expected of you. If it's written submissions only, be aware of the maximum number of lines allowed. What is the typeset style and size? Check for subject matter and format, etc. Secondly, if you have to include a voice recording or video be sure to include some drama or flair that sets you apart from the mainstream. And again, check the rules for formatting, time allowance, etc. Don't be discouraged if you don't win. I've lost tons contests but perseverance is key. Compare your poems that have won to those that haven't. Learn why they were better and every poet worth their salt will tell you to revise, revise, revise. Try crossing out every "and" "the" and "a" and see how few you really need to put back. Tighten up your work, use unusual imagery, try different perspectives, submerge yourself in other poetry. Improving your writing is a lifelong journey. The more you write and read, the better you will become.



Q: How many recordings of the four poems read in sequence for the Blackberry Peach did you have to do until you “nailed it”?

A: I actually did five or six practice runs with a watch in hand before I started recording. The poems could not run longer than three minutes each. This was no problem for three of them, but the one I thought was the best was a tight squeeze. And to complicate things further, I felt it needed a few pauses for dramatic effect. So that and trying to enunciate clearly when you’re talking fast was a challenge. Once I started recording I scrapped the first one and succeeded the second time.

Q: You are indeed a fine reader of your work. Any advice on how to develop oneself to read aloud?

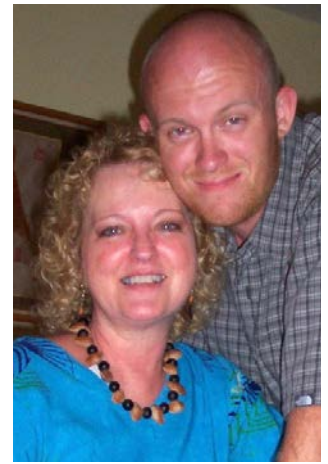
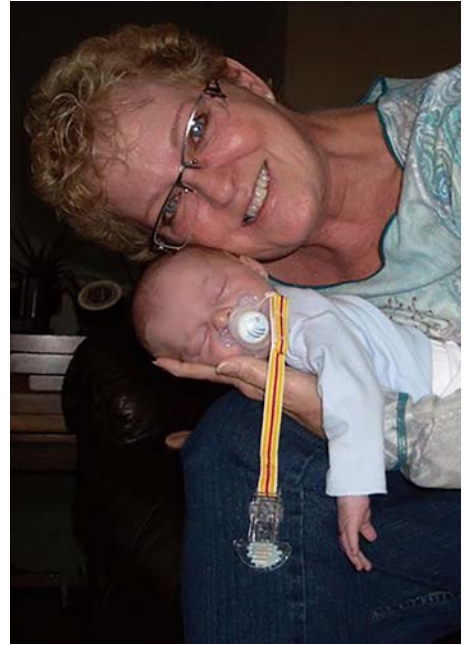
A: If you’re shy start speaking aloud at home then bite the bullet and hit some open mics. Practice makes perfect and the more often you do it the better you’ll become and the more relaxed. Don’t forget, everyone in the room had their first time at the mic at some point, so they understand nervousness and will encourage you. Poets are very welcoming and friendly people. One thing I can’t stress enough – SLOW DOWN. The faster you speak, the harder you are to understand. Also, it takes our brains a few moments to hear what is being said, process it and then understand it. When you step up to the mic, stand there a moment and don’t say anything. Just smile, take a leisurely breath and remind yourself to speak slowly, ENUNCIATE each word clearly and use some pauses (if warranted) for dramatic effect. If a crowd scares you, bring your spouse and/or friend and keep your eyes on them. Once you master these hurdles be sure to change up your rhythm, cadence, volume, tone of voice. Nothing lulls a crowd to sleep faster than a monotone, predictable pattern of speech. That’s good for putting a baby to sleep, but deadly for promoting riveted attention. Also move around. If space won’t permit it then at the very least be animated in your delivery. Move your hands and arms and make sure your facial expressions relay the message of the moment. Lastly, GET LOUD. Having run monthly open mics for ten years I’ve found one of the major problems is the soft speaker.

If this is you, be aware of the position of the microphone to your mouth and get close to it and stay there. Don’t drop your head to read your poem. Your voice projection follows the angle of your mouth. Hold your paper up next to the mic if needed. You can’t win an audience if they can’t hear you.

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Anchored at Night, Watercolor, B.J. Alligood, 2001



A selection of family photos of B.J. with her sister Chris Bonomi, elderly friend (deceased) Norma Merrell, daughter Amy Begley, son Brian Alligood, and Greyson Alligood, one of her five grandchildren.

Q: The winning poem is provided for our readers on the next page. Can you take us through the dynamics of this poem, how it came together, and how you approached the performance of it?

A: Actually, we were judged on all four poems but I'll answer this based on the poem titled "17 Years Later" as I think it's the best of the four. This is actually based on a real event that I witnessed when I was traveling out of town. I had stopped to get gas and went into a minute market to pay and what appeared to be a mentally unstable young mother and her little boy were in line in front of me. The little boy had asked for a candy bar and she said yes and handed it to him. You could see the happiness in his face but when they stepped up to pay she jerked it away from him and berated his existence. You could see from his outward appearance that he was neglected and then from her treatment of him he was obviously being mentally tormented as well. I was so upset that it still haunts me to this day. I used the imagery of birds to displace the softer human element of flesh and sharp claws and ripping beak to show the savagery of some people.

One of the BlackBerry Peach 2019 Prize Poems

by B.J. Alligood

Seventeen Years Later

All he wanted was a Snickers bar. Wasn't much. Not a lot to ask for.

Crazy. You could see it in her eyes. A young mother. Obviously made some bad decisions. The thin second-hand clothes spoke of a young lifetime of no money. But the lank greasy hair and wild eyes, they sang of asylums.

Those eyes.

They had conversations with legions of unseen persons. Naked men who whispered to her from behind pungent, putrid dumpsters in dark alleys. Her dead mother, always bitching, always complaining, a crow's beak, jabbing, jabbing over and over in the same place between her shoulder blades where she couldn't reach. Couldn't bandage the gouged flesh to keep the birds out and now they nested in there.

"Sure," she said, "you want that candy? You can have it."

Happiness suffused his little six year old face while he stood in the minute mart line. He clutched the candy bar against his boney chest. His legs mud caked and scabbed, his feet barefooted, nearly black.

When the teenager in front of them finished his transaction they moved forward.

"Get rid of that!" she shrieked wrenching the chocolate bar from his hands with claw-like nails. "You think you deserve that, you little jerk? Why would anyone buy anything for you? You're nothing!"

Her maniacal laughter flew around the store. Its talons puncturing the bread and crackers, swooping off the sports drinks and soda and perched on the counter over his head.

He looked up with six years of confusion and eighty years of despair, an empty cavernous soul.

She'd set him up for the fall and the anticipation made the execution all the more gleeful. The most fun she'd had in twenty minutes.

And I wonder, seventeen years later, what prison he's in now.

@B.J. Alligood

Two Poems that relate to illness

by B.J. Alligood

Walking Hurt

There are times
when she crab-walks

across the floor
on crippled feet

toes twisted under,
ankles without cartilage

bone crushing
upon bone

that she feels
like a privileged

Japanese geisha
whose feet

were bound
at birth

tiny, hurt
little sparrows

trod upon by
some invisible giant

The Watch

(dedicated to Amy)

She sat there
holding my hand
lightly stroking the fingers
as if they were made of china.
I don't remember if it was an
excruciating migraine or a
recuperation from one of
many surgeries
but she sat by my bed
in the darkened room
where only our breathing
could be heard.

In and out of my sleep states
she softly told me how
my face would alter expressions
while unconscious.
Lips curving, eyes roaming
under thin lids,
a ghost of a smile
vanishing as suddenly
as it appeared.

She mutely sat there for
time indeterminate
eyes memorizing my face
just watching
just stroking,
and I felt protected . . .
and held . . .
and safe.

Two Poems that relate to the sea

by B.J. Alligood

Eviction Notice*

Pockets of sea oats claw their
bony fingers at one another

and set their woven ecru heads
clattering to herald the beginning

of the storm.
Shrieking sea gulls,

reckless kamikazes,
fight and swoop

for the last bread bits
in outstretched hands.

Obsidian seas, angry with
cold currents bite at the shoreline

with foaming lips and regurgitate
the barnacled planks of swallowed

shipwrecks as Poseidon whips the
sand into thousand-needed blasts

driving bare-legged humans
off the beach

leaving the shoreline to lick its
winter wounds in solitude.

**Published in Revelry 2009
and FSPA's Anthology Twenty-Seven 2009*

Tropical Babies

(dedicated to Brian & Amy)

born of the azure seas
caressed by glossy magnolia leaves
shaded by the broad flat hands of green palms
sung to sleep by the sighs of Spanish moss

the blue in their eyes
reflected the rivers and waters
of the low lying land
Dixie in their blood

they rode the hurricanes and high seas
sliding over foamy crests
wild winds singing of their thrill
gritty sands swirling on the shore

years gone
their blood still longs for
hot sun and humid nights
tree frogs peeping in the darkness
jasmine and gardenia scenting humid air

their night dreams carry them home again
across the snows and heavy traffic of D.C.
weaving among the thorny cactus
and parched deserts of Arizona

back to where their hearts yearn
back to their beginnings.