

Poetry Series

Sally Sandler
- poems -

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Sally Sandler(April 29,1950)

At once transcendent and accessible, Sally Sandler's writing gives voice to her somewhat overshadowed generation of Baby Boomers. She illuminates their shared concerns over the passage of time and fading idealism, the death of parents and loved ones, and the loss of the environment, while maintaining hope for wisdom yet to come. Sandler often writes in classic forms to honor poetry's roots while also addressing contemporary issues. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan and lives with her husband and her dog, close to children and grandchildren in San Diego, California.

3 A.M. Encounter With The Moon

The moon invites herself into my room
and stirs me from a deep and rumpled sleep—
a mythic mistress climbing from her tomb,
or silver siren rising from the deep.

Tonight she flaunts her diaphanous veil,
scatters shards of light across the sheets,
grazes cheeks, and lips, and drifts at will,
aware that this seduction will be brief.

For five bright minutes—ten—she owns the room.
The shapes and shadows have been rearranged,
my heart's no longer heavy from the gloom...
the very aura of the night is changed.

But glow from this enchantress will be gone,
and only faded memories of her charms
will linger still beyond the fetal dawn,
when morning chill has settled on my arms.

She suddenly retreats beyond the glass,
and, swiftly as she entered, she has passed.

Sally Sandler

A Long Way From Kansas

Somewhere between
first grade
and old age
my youth peeled away
like sunburned skin.
Hands that used to
make forts,
and make out,
shout at me now
for steroid shots.

The soundtrack for life
isn't BB-19
on a chrome jukebox
in a diner on Tenth.
The jukebox came down.
And so did my chin.
Those tunes blew away
like colored balloons
released from
our playground
before the Cold War.

Maybe I'll fly a balloon again
soon, and discover
what pasture it splashes
with pink.
It could touch down
in Topeka ...
although
I know I'm a long way
from Kansas
by now.

Sally Sandler

A Map To The Soul

My poems are a map to the soul—
a twisting road to feelings undiscovered.
With each word I write, each truth uncovered,
I stumble a bit closer to the whole.

I embark each day, not knowing where—
just following the road is all that matters.
Sometimes I'm saving elephants, savoring flowers,
or revealing fears I thought no longer there.

What truths and fears are those? The truth of grief,
the dark mystery spoken by the wind,
that right around the corner is the end,
that children grow and leave ... and life is brief.

I'm in this for the trip—not the arrival—
to destinations I have yet to know.
I delve into the landscape of a soul
carved in part by struggle and survival.

With paper white as cloud, and rhyme antique,
I chart the trip and map the unknown deep.

Sally Sandler

Absence

The air lost weight today
just after the saws
took down the giant tree.
The ample bosom of leaves,
the fullness of bird song
and gravity of shade
are pulp with the grinding.

The tree was a cathedral
in our backyard sky.
In place of cupola,
column
and buttress,
now a façade
of suburban gray,
and no leaves turning.

Five men, one truck
and one afternoon,
enough to change the
landscape of the sky.
A century of habitat,
a poet's gentle bower,
fed to the dragon jaws
oiled and waiting.

A guilty fragment of sunlight
sneaks across the fence,
uncertain of its welcome.
In the corner, a leafless breeze
holds its breath.
Anemic flies worry the air
like mini-ghosts, evicted
from their homes
without warning.

Absence.
Like when my sister left home—
the one who helped us dress

each day for school.
Now the sun reddens
my bare back,
and my shadow impatiently
fans its face.

Sally Sandler

After The Climate Changes

A hundred thousand years... what will they find?
After lapping hungry at our feet
the creeping seas rise, and then retreat.
Will humankind be fossil over time?

What traces from the life of our tribe—
like ancient middens buried in sandstone
with hidden bits of pottery and bone—
what part of modern man survives the tides?

Perhaps the plastic shovel washed away
from a child's castle on the shore,
the unicorn tiara that she wore,
the pink jelly shoe she lost that day.

Or from a boy's kite, the nylon string—
the dragon kite that tangled, you remember?
Will they leave a trace, my family members?
Please, the great-grandchildren. Anything?

Those relics by themselves won't tell the story
of how we feared the changes... powerless
when politics devoured our progress,
or why we failed to save the planet's glory,

left ruins for our grandchildren, and theirs,
and finally betrayed our planet's heirs.

Sally Sandler

Ashes Rain, Coast To Coast

What ashes fall upon the winter snow
that traveled through the ozone to our door
from liquid fires, raging as they flow
like rivers to the California shore?

A wedding dress in flakes as fine as whispers,
the fragments of the crib a father framed,
all the photo books, brothers and sisters.
Alas ... these ashes bear too many names

and smoke-stained faces to identify
the separate family stories raining here.
But history says a place called Paradise
was lost, and now their past is singed and seared...

and mingles with a jet stream in the sky,
and rains across the continent like tears.

Sally Sandler

Autumn, And Shifting Tides

We walk the seashore—as we always do—
and pause, taking in the recent changes:
the sky is water-colored deeper blue,
and you and I—we briefly note our ages.

The waves are colder, sand is mirror smooth.
Gone are children's footprints, and their laughter
mere echoes, now that they've returned to school.
They rush to age, while we wish we could linger.

But autumn finds us here, growing older,
accepting longer shadows in our eyes,
believing reefs and boulders we climb over
bring us closer to becoming wise.

Like a gentle teacher, autumn guides
us by the hand, through time and shifting tides.

Sally Sandler

Bargains With Time

So bare and unprotected was your heart ...
you asked me softly, pausing from your thought,
to "Care for it—the only one I've got, "
and I accepted, knowing that we'd start

to bargain, in our silent way, with time.
We'd bow to history, build our summer days
with bridges from the past, our debts repay,
and hope it bought a few more years sublime.

And so I held your heart (and you held mine)
with wonder—surely magic! —in my hand,
and dreamed each day together, every second
would linger, from the bargain made with time.

But seasons passed, and autumn turned its head,
and time did not abide by vows unspoken.
Winter looked in on your empty bed,
and time didn't care our hearts were broken.

Sally Sandler

Begin Again To Rig The Mast

In my memory it was more
than mother's ash we delivered
to the harbor by the bay,
on a warm August eve.

It was father who that time
needed help to be born,

to let go silent cries of grief
into the forgiving wind,
to breathe deep the scent of pine
into his remaining lung,
and feel the supple summer breeze
swaddle his arthritic bones.

To be embraced in nature's arms,
and lullabied by lapping waves,
rocked by the earth's turn
toward the ships moored at sea—
they so many silver stars
in a dim darkling sky.

And later when her ship set sail
to a far imagined shore,
he commenced again to stand,
squint his eyes against
the sun,
and begin again
to rig the mast.

Sally Sandler

Dear Forest, Please Forgive Me

The day I knew I'd fallen out of love,
immune to fascination of your spell,
I wasn't rocking with the wind above,
intoxicated drinking in the smell

of forest pine. And deep underfoot,
little craving for the virgin pillow
of needles; and around my ankles, dirt ...
and by the stream, only silent willows.

No more attuned to wildness in my soul—
highways and the city steal my time,
parking lots instead of forest floor
consume me. And I'm too much in my mind

to feel in my bones your gentle rhythm,
to hear and smell the perfume in your breeze,
to be seduced by stillness, and the hymns
whispered by the choir of your trees.

Will you let me love you once again—
if you can survive the savage part
of humankind that threatens you with end—
and I return, offering my heart?

Sally Sandler

Dear Tree

That you could whisper through unseen webs
and care for the earth with a mother's love—
I didn't know, I just didn't know.

That you could harbor so much in your cells,
sequestering carbon that threatens the world—
I didn't understand, I didn't know.

That you could give even more than your heart,
as if food and firewood weren't enough—
I was plain ignorant, shamefully so.

That you could shade the ground that I walk,
and under your branches you shelter my soul—
I thought I knew. But what do I know?

That when death comes, you surrender the carbon?
It's not enough to say I didn't know.
I must atone for it, rapidly so.

Sally Sandler

Deep Forest Wind

I long to hear the ancient wind that sighs
throughout the tops of old forest trees
and fills the primal canopy of leaves
with melancholy echoes—hollow, high.

The history of the world is in this wind.
The force we cannot see is yet so vast
it's touched every present, every past
and secret since before the dawn of man.

To hear the wind's bellows fill the sky
is to feel its lungs breathing me toward home
and memories deep within my bones,
without fully comprehending why.

As mysterious as Stonehenge, this old wind;
and so I lift my face and breathe in.

Sally Sandler

Even More Than Hope: Painted Lady Butterflies

Like spirits, they will dart across our path
in drifts, and zig-zag past our cheeks and hands
just out of reach, and whirling toward a land
far north of us, by predetermined math.

It seems a miracle, winged migration—
almost as hard to fathom as moon flight.
What tiny compass guides them day and night
in rivers of raw determination?

Their journey symbolizes more than hope:
They breathe into each moment the belief
that happiness as real and bright as wings
is just ahead ... and therefore we can cope,

and fill heavy hearts with newfound lightness,
and bathe a moment more in their brightness.

March 2019: Record numbers of Painted Lady butterflies migrate from Mexico to the Pacific Northwest; the exact location is embedded in the genes they pass along to their offspring. Multiple generations of each starting butterfly

Sally Sandler

Grief Not Shared

Perhaps this grief was not meant to be shared—
not meant to be examined, or assuaged,
or black and white, like print upon a page ...
not even by the ones who truly care.

In doing so, my grief is diluted
like water mixed into a vintage wine.
And who can understand this loss of mine
in truth? It's only me to whom it's suited.

I'd rather have the full experience
and suffer, if it's acid on my tongue ...
and let my tears run raw, and linger long,
and the salt burn my lids, and feel intense.

I will learn to keep private, loss of love;
talk diminishes what's not understood.
Despite all those who try to do me good,
it drowns out the sweet whispers from above,

and I need to make space to feel and hear
the voice still calling me, in gentle tones,
and feel in full my hurting heart, my bones,
and wade into the water without fear.

My love has sailed this water, after all,
and I wait at the shoreline for his call.

Sally Sandler

I Should Have Asked All The People I Loved

If only I'd asked you what was your favorite
star, or flower, river or tree,
poem, or hymn, or memory,
then I'd have riches to count in the spring ...
words to find peace in, songs I could sing.

If only I knew how you lived with disease,
with heartbreak and failure, and loved ones leaving,
with parents passing ... your aching, grieving,
how you were buoyed by your faith, your believing ...
how like a soldier you kept on living.

If only I'd seen the place you'd be buried,
and understood why you wanted to be.
Now I know that you're nearby a stream,
or behind a church, or in my dream ...
or a garden, or beneath an old apple tree.

If I could be certain you'd still feel my love
sure as a star that shines in the dark,
then I'd be ready to live with my heart,
to face any minute or day apart ...
to wake like the sun—to walk, to start.

Sally Sandler

Just Then, The River Stopped

In honor of the moment you were gone
the river stopped running for a second—
the surging water stopped, and had to wait
to course through the channel toward its fate—
as your soul sailed to the stars that beckoned.

A river that's as certain as the sun
that rises above it every morning,
paused ... incomprehensible and brief,
and the moon hid behind a cloud in grief,
and blue became the color of our mourning.

Impossible... a huge river halting?
No more so than a world without you.
Both events just cannot be imagined.
Only in our hearts can such things happen,
where sure as you are gone, it must be true.

Now the river flows and finds its way
and as you chart your journey by the stars
we're soothed by the murmur of the waves,
and needn't fear the shadow of the grave.
We'll find you by the river, never far.

In memory of a life lived in full, on the banks
of the historic Detroit River and its tributaries.

Sally Sandler

Lichen On A Stone

Age comes upon the stone
dressed as lichen, paper thin,
the delicate rosettes slowly
etching into marble skin.

A symbiotic work of art...
was that the stone carver's design—
the work matured by nature's hand—
or had he other plans in mind?

Much the same, the scars of living
gently gnaw at our façades
until our ages are engraved,
and youth is but an old charade.

We could acid wash the stone
to rescue it, and try to slow
the certain steady scroll of time...
or let the graceful lichens grow.

Sally Sandler

Music Of Friendship

The music of our friendship,
a symphony, I think,
of women growing older,
our hearts played in sync.
And belly laugh percussion
the rhythm of our years,
and shared sorrow sounds
of pianissimo tears.

Your hello's brillante—
it sparkles, like your eyes.
Mine is more allegro—
cheerful, uncontrived.

Over time together
our memories compose.
Our story: shared stanzas
that each of us knows,
crescendo celebrations,
and diminuendo woes.

In keys major/minor
our composition grows.
Like merlot, it ages—
music to the nose—
and glows luminoso
wherever our path goes.

Sally Sandler

My Father's Grave

The grass won't grow where you were laid to rest,
though years have passed since you were buried there.
Other's graves are green, while yours is bare.
I feel this with a new ache in my chest.

The time is marked by more than year and date.
Since moss and lichen crept onto your grave
your name is blurred, like tears upon a page.
That's ample time for soil and seed to mate

and sod to grow. And yet the earth refrains
from knitting a warm counterpane of green.
Perhaps such a repose is not your need,
since blood and bone and element have changed:

Your spirit isn't resting there today.
It has no need of warmth. It's gone away.

Sally Sandler

Ode To A Sulfur Butterfly

Of all the hues of summer,
I remember you as pale
yellow, with little shimmer,
your name unpleasant smell.
Not legend, like the monarch,
or glamorous swallowtail,
or self-important admiral;
I didn't see you well ...

until you left the garden,
and only now I tell
you, they say you bring good fortune,
happiness and wellness,
joy, rebirth, and youth.
(Perhaps I'd been deceived
by appearance, from the truth.)
The ancient tribes believed
you manifested souls
of children they had cherished—
if seamen glanced at you
pre-voyage, they would perish.

How many souls shimmered
before my eyes this summer,
and how many rebirths
while I ignored
your timid color?

Sally Sandler

Old Apple Tree

"The world breaks everyone, and afterward
many are strong at the broken places."
Ernest Hemingway, "A Farewell to Arms"

A century of apples broke its back—
in the dappled shade, that farthest tree—
the trunk lies horizontal in the grass,
too weak, for now, to battle with the breeze.

It bears a scar—a scion tree was grafted
to the rootstock, where the bark is rough.
The apple wears it like a soldier's medal,
with quiet fortitude. The tree is tough.

Perhaps in time the tree will lift its head
and glimpse the hope remaining for survival—
an old soldier struggling from his bed
before the bell tolls death's arrival.

Maybe it will sprout some new roots,
their reedy arms grasping at the ground,
and twist a new trunk toward the sun.
Come autumn, maybe apples will be found.

But I'll be too old to see their faces, if
the tree grows strong at the broken places.

Sally Sandler

One Path

One path emerged, in fall—midday,
leading left from foot-worn trails.
It bore a warning —walk one way—
granting time to turn away,
back through scented sagebrush hills.

Always curious—some say bold—
I took the path, began to climb.
Sage to rock turned gray and cold,
daring me to scale, grab hold
the canyon walls of sand and lime.

The path was merely one shoe wide,
steep and still—no turning back.
And as I wandered deep inside
I slipped, and struggled with my pride,
and reached for safety in the cracks.

until the stone was bleached and pale,
and steps began to blend with sky.
Now the walls were smooth; a veil
of time and wind and life's travails
had polished them, and so would I.

At the crest, I paused to mind
my footing on the vaulted ground.
The ocean view was worth the climb.
And in my life—led by divine—
no better path can I have found.

Sally Sandler

Paint The Sky San Diego

I'll paint the sky an ultra-marine
blue wash for this scene,
but strong enough to complement
the ruby husk of pomegranate.

Spanish tiles and rooftop trim-
red with yellow cadmium;
and color fruit with Hooker's green-
in winter paint it tangerine.

Mix some white with Winsor lemon—
yucca blooms of clotted cream on
spires, like delicious bells.
Then, settle on the ocean swells...

where sky is white, with cobalt blue,
like skim milk stained with one or two
blueberries. Ocean less intense;
and on the beach, a broken fence

completes the composition hues
with rust, a counterpoint to blues.
And what of Payne's grey, and umber?
Save for fires in September.

Sally Sandler

Precious Seconds

A single second—only one,
"one one-thousand"—that is all.
And in that void, a race is won,
a hawk strikes, the dove falls;
the rain begins, the drought is done,
the atom splits, the future calls.

Time enough to say, "I do, "
and seal a love against the fates;
or, beseeching, "I love you, "
regardless of the vow that breaks.
A falling star fades from view,
the night swallows fire it makes.

Cars crash, a bone breaks,
the cat jumps and milk is spilled.
In the little time that takes
the addict takes a deadly pill.
A spirit reaches open gates,
leaving dust upon the hill.

A button's pushed, a bomb drops,
a final suture—healing starts.
The tiger dies when gun pops,
a muttered utterance breaks a heart.
The midwife cries, "Push, don't stop, "
and in that time, a life embarks.

Much begins, and so much fits
within a second—easily.
The space inside is fathomless,
a window to eternity.

Sally Sandler

Return To A Canyon

Crest Canyon Preserve, San Diego, California

Twenty years ago I walked this path,
edging my way down the sandstone slope.
Now it's scaled by faded redwood steps,
grey and weathered as my hair, the grain
exposed like many veins on my hand.

With the ease of youth, I walked my dog—
an elegant young hound in search of quail,
she sailed over sagebrush like a bird.
Now a smaller dog is at my side,
efficient nose to the ground, low,
briskly sniffing out woodrats and scat.

There is comfort in the unchanged place—
familiar with its glossy toyon leaves
and lemonade berry bushes grey
blanketing the chaparral slopes.
Puddles gleam in the shallow stretches
where tadpoles hatch in the early spring,
and brown sugar sand leads to the sea,
threaded with the tracks of mule deer.

In the city, wilderness survives
and seems indifferent to the time it took
for wooden steps to fade and start to slump,
for parents to get old, and dogs to die,
for children to get married, and grey hair,
for me to fight a war against disease
while just a hill and three blocks away.

Shouldn't I be glad that certain things
carry on well without us ...
that really need not lean on us at all,
but continue their unsentimental creep
across a gravel path, a canyon floor ...
alongside an ancient sandstone wall?

Signature: A Red-Tailed Hawk

Hushed as dawn, the hawk glides,
her wings superior and wide,
and calibrates the wind's heft
and sees the rabbits scatter, hide.

Drifting free as feral breath,
and feathers falling after death
from sacrificial doves—we mourn
their partners and their empty nests—

she hovers high above the shore
without a wing flap, leaving more
than cursive writing in the sky—
a presidential signature.

Heeeeere, she screams, and plunges by,
tasting with her hungry eyes
a least tern, who lingered long
and missed the mistress of surprise.

We could envy one so strong,
with power pure as hate is wrong,
and vision absolute as air,
but I prefer the sparrow's song.

Sally Sandler

Sonnet For The Lost Woods

Who pauses to pay homage to the trees
buried in a concrete cemetery—
those that were a leafy sanctuary
brought by civilization to its knees?

Where were the mourners, when the forests died—
the noble warriors mankind didn't save?
No flags or flowers placed upon their graves,
no one recited last rites; no one cried.

Departed souls, and we can only mourn
for all the soldiers prematurely downed ...
for every tree that fell without a sound
was guardian of a time when we were born.

A house we can rebuild, a bridge, a road ...
but trees will leave us pathless when they go.

Sally Sandler

Spring Is The Thing

Spring is the shy thing—
a new blade of grass
peeking its face out
from under the thatch,
to see what the sun brings,
to listen to birds sing ...
timid, and wondering
if winter's passed.

Spring is to green□
what grass is to spring,
and the burst of ozone
during a rain,
when trees are dressing,
and flowers unearthing,
and nature is birthing,
slow and serene.

Spring is a wager
on winter's decline—
the roulette wheel
that points to the sign
that dark is receding,
and nature is breathing.
The stake we are gambling
is rebirth of mind.

Sally Sandler

Taking Grandchildren To The Cove

The children saw a perfect ladder
rather than a twisted tree,
but little did it really matter—
they ran far ahead of me ...
the leaning trunk they quickly straddled,
riding low across the grass.
Mounted neat on horse and saddle
off they galloped, fierce and fast.
Then their steed turned pirate ship—
magic I was glad to see—
and up they bear-walked, not a slip,
the ladder to the canopy
of sylvan leaves, and then set sail,
and squinted at the silver sea.
Left below, I kicked the soil
and wondered at the child in me
that still would like a tree to climb,
find pussy willows near a stream,
who thinks a tire swing sublime,
and suffers the broken dream.
I've schooled them in the magic of
a fallen leaf, a twisted tree ...
now it's me—the autumn leaf;
me a child they cannot see.

Sally Sandler

The Conch Shell

The coarsened name belies this silken treasure,
with iridescent dome and spiral apse.
Imagination slips inside with pleasure,
to behold the opus of blown glass.

Perhaps a queen lived here (not homely pauper) ,
within these walls of vaulted pedigree,
with sheets of silk moiré and pearl-lined coffer,
and deep in strains of Handel symphony.

But if a pauper, she was very clever—
as well, a soul of generosity—
to create such beauty, and forever
bequeath to us the mystery of the sea.

Does it work? Ask children passing near.
Listen! All of Time is what you hear.

Sally Sandler

The Cork Oak

Yours is not a clear or classic beauty.
Nothing like the leaves of liquidambar,
the flowers of the purple jacaranda,
or stature of the regal redwood tree.

More like a strong and stately older woman,
homely more than fair, since you were born.
And look past skin that's creased and cracked and worn:
there's youthfulness and vigor deep within.

Elastic cork, so supple and so vital,
the conjuring of atoms in your crust,
regenerates itself after it's cut,
and lives long past the wine inside the bottle.

In truth, beneath that furrowed edifice,
resilience is the beauty you possess.

Sally Sandler

The Empty Page

The paper glares—naked, white.
I nod, I stare, I cannot think,
but it demands I try to write.

I make up an excuse tonight:
my printer has run out of ink.
The paper glares—naked, white.

To prime the pump, make things right,
I think I'm going to need a drink.
The paper says I need to write.

Growing dark, I need more light.
My neck is stiff. I have a kink.
The paper glares—naked, white.

I didn't bargain for this fight.
I toss the paper at the sink,
where it nags me: Start to write.

Still watching me long into night,
that brazen paper doesn't blink.
There it glares—naked, white.

All my verse is sounding trite.
Insanity? I'm at the brink.
The paper glares—naked, white,
and demands I try to write.

Sally Sandler

The Offering

Out of breath, we reach the place
where mountains peak high,
and the earth curves like a whale's back
where sea meets the sky.

In air as pure as child's grace
we try to comprehend ...
that we can gaze with God's eye
so far across the land,

and that together we might lift
the vessel that we share,
and the hot ash and our heavy hearts
will scatter in the air,

to be the dust and drink and bones
and oxygen of each
that ever lived and breathed and loved,
or crawled up on the beach.

That all breath is one breath,
we try to understand ...
and what we watch become the sky
once held the soul of man.

Sally Sandler

The Other Side Of Beauty

Before me floats a miracle in white,
shimmering like a snowfall in the frame
of my camera, incandescent light,
a peacock of a sort seldom seen.

All white feathered tail and breast and face,
a vision strutting by the camera field
and posing with a fan of Spanish lace.
I capture on my film the ethereal.

For him, peacock blue does not exist—
his beauty coming from the unexpected.
Jarring as a bolt of lightning is,
splendor causes him to be rejected

by his own, his life a world devoid
of any others, living in a canyon
empty, but for dust and white noise.
Forever he must live without companion.

The elegance to my eye—the regal grace
captured for all time in my frame
is for him a sentence and a curse.
The other side of beauty is the pain.

Sally Sandler

The Strength Of Mountains

Silence is the language of their choice—
the mountain peaks holding up the sky
that shoulder it and never question why,
like Atlas propping up the universe.

I think about the stoics of the world
who, like the mountains, deal with fate in quiet,
who see the battle and in silence fight it—
no passion shown, and no emotion heard.

But passion and emotion have their place,
and every mountain has a weaker side:
rivers run like tears they may have cried,
carving canyons in each stubborn face,

and rearranging boulders as they course.
All the mountain ranges I admire
are vulnerable to tempests, and to fire,
and shaken by a temblor's violence.

The forces that make mountains tremble are
full-throated and impassioned when they speak.
Perhaps emotion is not something weak ...
no more so than the impassive martyr.

Sally Sandler

The Warbler

The warbler dies with little sound—
the slightest bump on window pane.
The dog's ears lift, then fall again;
the bird is silent on the ground.

Wind blows swiftly, time won't stop,
north of us infernos burn,
waves curl and seasons turn—
even though the warbler drops,

and lies in dirt, its wings in folds.
The ballerina's dance is done:
its feet are stiff, head bent down,
a final bow as bones turn cold.

How many dramas and small deaths
occur each day, that don't mark time?
Indifferent Nature seems unkind,
and turns away from dying breaths

of mortal birds—to surge along,
stoking apocalyptic storms.
But I heard the bump. Now I mourn
the absence of the warbler song.

Sally Sandler

This Grief Of Mine

Place no limits on this grief of mine—
don't try to cheer me out of feeling sorrow.
I need to wear it for a longer time
and won't be ready to let go tomorrow.

The ragged tears that burn and sting my eyes,
the knot that's tied inside my throat and chest
are raiment needed for my long good-bye,
and bind me to the soul that's laid to rest.

And so I wear a shroud of blackest black
and wrap myself in aching disbelief,
knowing when I last discard my cloak
our closeness severs. I'll be sadly free.

So long as I can bear to wear my grief
I stay united with the life so brief.

Sally Sandler

Tiger Fire

The fire waits with tiger paws
on silent haunches by the hill,
then mounts the rock with clinging claws,
and contemplates the moment it will

pounce—on sagebrush dry as bones,
under a ghostly quiet moon,
slink through tinder, stalking homes,
and spring atop a shingled roof.

In blazing orange black white cape
it roars at scorching desert sky,
dives on prey, devours the take,
smoldering embers in its eye.

We scan the canyons, fear the sight
of fire—the tiger in the night.

Sally Sandler

Timber Of The Family Tree

In the picture, he stands before
a tree—they said a sycamore—
his face the color of dusty leaves,
dry and drifting by his feet.

Shoulders stiff and lifted, he
leans for balance against the tree
and wears a smile, fixed and bright
as the Vega star in the autumn night.

The timber of the family tree,
blown and battered by winds from sea,
he bears his creased and crumbling bark
through stormy days, and colder dark.

Leafless—though he pays no mind—
bent, as well, by winds of time.
Layers of wisdom embrace his soul
like rings on the sycamore, as it grows old.

Sally Sandler

Twist Of Fate

If snow had drifted in the night,
or sleet beaten on the shore...
if sheets of ice had glazed the road,
and wind whipped against your door ...

and you were late—the clock ticked,
and stormy weather stole your time—
or if you took the path more slow,
worried into change of mind ...

If you had veered, and turned back east,
to safety of your home and hearth,
huddled to outlast a storm,
and bowed to whims of Mother Earth ...

Or, if the butterfly wings beat,
and altered atoms in the air—
the weather changed, chaos ensued,
preventing you from being where

you were, when steel met with steel,
crushing glass and cracking bones
and hands that clutched the steering wheel—
instead of broken, you'd be home.

Then the fates would feel defeat.
The tea leaves that lined the cup
would tell a vastly different tale—
pointing toward chance and luck.

Sally Sandler

Wednesday Night

Someone in Yemen dies
while I write.
Somebody somewhere
screams in the night;
nearby, somebody else is
left crying.
Somewhere in California
a spark
springs like a snake—
Paradise dying?

Somehow a mother
confronts a wall that
punishes her as she waits
for asylum.
Somewhere a prisoner walks
through a gate,
and freedom is gone for
a man complying.

It matters not that I
stare at a screen
composing on silent keys
in the night.
Someone in Yemen dies
while I write.
The earth pivots and rolls
to the right,
and each of us clings to it,
most of us trying.

But somewhere in darkness and
death is a light...
we're told we can go to it...
look for it shining.

Sally Sandler

What You Will Need To Plant A Tree

You won't need books, or cutting-edge tools,
or class on a Saturday morning at 8,
or much in the way of gardens or lawn.

Only two things—a small patch of ground
inside your soul that yearns for some shade ...
a leafy umbrella to soften the sun and
the granite-hard edges of everyday life—

and also belief that the future will come.
Imagine the time writ in delicate rings
the color of sweet maple syrup, each year.
Trust in the sapling you hold in your hand ...
go ahead, dig deep, hold on, then let go.

Your dog will help you loosen the soil
in a panic of fur, a pinwheel of paws.
And don't forget kids. They love shovels and mud,
and climbing a tree doesn't ever get old.
You were a child once, beneath a big tree.

Sally Sandler

Zoey's Good-Bye

Maybe right now I won't put away
her little red collar, her favorite bed—
just in case she comes back one day,
in case I can smell the top of her head

and ears, and hear her pawing the door
when I come home and turn the key.
Maybe I'll stroke her chest once more,
maybe she'll even come back to me.

Maybe I'll turn, and she'll be there,
watching me so expectantly.
She'll follow me closely down the stairs,
and rest on the couch, where we like to be.

Maybe, again, she'll climb on the bed,
turn in circles and then settle down,
and warm my chest by laying her head
right where the top sheet is folded down.

Maybe—I hope— I'll remember the feel
of her tousled fur, silky and sweet,
the sight of her dark and sparkling eyes,
and brows that twitch when she's asleep.

Maybe I'll feel that love again,
the kind that only a dog can give,
a piece of God, for mortal men,
I wish she were given longer to live.

For Zoey, our beloved Miniature Schnauzer
August 31,2007 to March 5,2018

Sally Sandler