

## Steve Miller BSFS Annual Poetry Contest 2026 Winners

### Terracotta Warrior

Once I rode in the army of the Qin Emperor  
before the Yellow River devoured millions of lives,  
before the red cliffs acquired their engravings  
in what you now call  
Middle Kingdom.  
In my eyes dripped sweat and coating my tongue was  
blood  
as I drank the tears of soldier and child.

My master, buried in stone, I guarded  
onto death. Xi'an above me fell and became  
dusted with sand.  
My master slept but I—  
ever watchful, ever guarding—  
never did.

Until they opened his tomb and sunlight sprinkled  
like enemy arrows  
as they unearthed me, my horse, my brethren.

Long years I stood behind a clear-water case,  
paraded on foreign soil  
while men in dyed cotton stared and captured me  
in flashing lights  
and women in crinkly robes and thick glass eye shields  
leaned close to examine me.  
Until one day I heard, in a language I barely understood,  
“A fake.”

I screamed  
my truth, or would  
if my mouth moved.  
They dragged me from the transparent glass,  
hauled me down mobile stairs,  
propped me before gawking eyes.

I'm leading my horse on concrete walkways.  
I'm watching skylights from communication poles.  
I'm standing guard outside latrine doors  
until, in yet another tongue:  
“No room. Toss it.”

Figures in autumn-grass green  
throw me on a horseless carriage.  
My scent, my world is drowned  
in rotting wood and thrice-steeped tea and water-  
melon  
devoured to the rind.  
The carriage stops, tilts, spits me on a hill  
of torn bags spilling candy wrappers and crushed  
bowls and broken toys  
like a stomach  
distended, exploded.

Gulls pick at my armour. At night  
bears lumber from the darkness.  
In their eyes I search  
for the souls of my brethren,  
and in mine they find dust and time.

Covered in sour beans and rain-soaked straw,  
I watch and I wait,  
on the hill of my own tomb,  
for my master's return.

Y. M. Pang  
1<sup>st</sup> Place – © 2026  
*Ontario, Canada*

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### The Planet That Learned Our Fear

The planet looked harmless—  
breathable disc, delicate gravity,  
Oceans organized like open hands.  
We landed smiling,  
carrying banners and instruments  
trained to degree everything but dread.  
The soil was warm,  
pulsing faintly,  
as if recalling a heartbeat.  
Plants inclined toward us,  
not for light,  
but for sound.  
Our strides instructed them on rhythm.  
Our voices instructed them in language.  
Our fear instructed their purpose.  
The planet was alive—  
not with intention,  
but with imitation.  
It replicated our expressions in stone,  
our freeze in moving terrain,  
our bad dreams in climate patterns.  
Mountains modified themselves  
into outlines of running men.  
Storms learned to wait  
until we were nearly safe.

The planet did not abhor us.  
It examined us.  
Predators developed molded like memories—  
childhood fears, unfinished apologies,  
faces we fizzled to save.  
Our weapons were useless  
against reflections.  
The final transmission to Soil said:  
This world reacts to emotion.  
Do not let it know you are afraid.  
Silence followed—  
the most legitimate signal.  
Now telescopes show the planet glowing,  
brighter than before.  
It has learned confidence.  
Somewhere, it is smiling,  
rehearsing our arrival,  
waiting for visitors  
brave enough to lie to themselves.

Ayesha Mansoor  
3<sup>rd</sup> Place – © 2026  
*Pakistan*



## Steve Miller BSFS Annual Poetry Contest 2026 Winners

### Starlight Bathing

Bathe in the light  
of the stars.  
Wash it cool over your silvered skin.  
Know the starlight you hold in your palms, sped  
through a universe, through time,  
from a luminous sphere that faded  
tens of thousands of years before  
you first sprouted wings and looked skyward  
Into the hollows of your bones, absorb this light  
Lick its sugared dust from your fingers' tips  
Savor. Smack. Delicious. Luminous.  
And know it is to this you shall return.

Vivian McInerny  
2<sup>nd</sup> Place – © 2026  
*Portland, OR, USA*

### Faster Than Light

where impossible  
becomes improbable  
due to dreams  
millions wishing to  
make that seven minute journey  
to burst free  
earth as a marble  
a vision of exquisite beauty  
never before seen  
breath stolen away  
hopes forever lost to three letters  
FTL?  
Never.  
but still they dream  
shoes leaving grass  
plastic kissing ground for the last time  
stars forever bursting beneath  
closed eyelids  
FTL  
existing only  
beneath a human skull.

Madame Reeds-A-Lot  
Youth Award – © 2026  
*Anchorage, AK, USA*



White Hotel

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## Steve Miller BSFS Annual Poetry Contest 2026s Winners

### The River Remembers

The river has its own chronicle.  
not in days or months,  
but in the weight of silt,  
the sound of leaves lost in the fall.  
mature bones swept away in spring.

It does not hurry.  
It bears the forbearance of marble,  
the gossip of minnows,  
the prayer of reeds leaning ever forward.

Children used to row paper boats around here once.  
each vessel a secret mission--  
Others drowned, and others disappeared in the turn.  
The river does not take leave of their laughter.  
the sudden splash of a body  
dare he jump down the cliffs.

In the evening the fishermen go home empty-handed.  
but some of the water knows their names.  
On the bank they make little fires,  
smoke curling questions.  
the sky never answers.

I place my hand on the surface  
and the ancient year by year through me--  
a running line of embroideries.  
no one speaks aloud anymore.

Nevertheless, the water continues to flow,  
as forgetting is another form of prayer,  
as if memory itself  
were only a way of flowing,  
always leaving,  
always arriving.

Hashim Quraishi  
Honorable Mention – © 2026  
*Kashmir, India*

### The Witch of Dark Matter

It creeps through the wires, the screens, the airwaves,  
They said she lived in the black between galaxies—  
a seamstress of unseen threads,  
spinning gravity from her palms.  
She wove halos around dead stars,  
taught collapsing suns to hum lullabies  
so black holes might sleep without hunger.  
No one believed in her,  
though every physicist felt her fingers  
in the gaps they couldn't explain.  
Dark energy, they called it—  
as if naming could tame her.  
But I met her once.  
She brewed tea from antimatter,  
offered it in a cup made of silence.  
We spoke of entropy and childhood.  
She smelled like cinnamon and ozone.  
When I left, she stitched a thread to my ankle—  
invisible, yes,  
but I never float away from wonder again.

Kristin5689  
Honorable Mention – © 2026  
*Evansville, IN, USA*

## About the Winning Poets

**Y.M. Pang** (*First Place*)—Y.M. Pang is a two-time Aurora Award-winning author and poet. Her work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. Her debut short story collection, *All the Broken Blades*, was released in May 2025.

**Vivian McInerny** (*Second Place*)—Vivian McInerny is a daily newspaper journalist who recently refocused to write fiction and personal essays. Her short stories for adults are published in several literary anthologies, including *805 Lit+Art*, *Dunes Review*, and *Vocal 25*. An excerpt from an unpublished YA novel is used in the curriculum of Los Angeles high schools through the Locavore program. Her children's picture book, *The Whole Hole Story*, earned a BCCB starred review, a Bank Street Best Books selection, and remains an Amazon editors' pick. She also writes popular personal essays about backpacking the old Silk Road to India at age eighteen.

**Ayesha Mansoor** (*Third Place*)—My name is Ayesha Mansoor, and I am a software engineer based in Pakistan, working remotely with clients in the USA. Alongside my technical career, I have a deep passion for writing. I enjoy creating poetry, fiction and non-fiction stories, love tales, and thought-provoking articles on a wide range of topics.

**Madame Reeds-A-Lot** (*Youth Award*)—Kiana Reed is a young aspiring author who enjoys poetry and philosophy.

**Hashim Quraishi** (*Honorable Mention*)—I'm Hashim Quraishi, a writer from Kashmir currently working for the *Style and Accessibility Guide* and the magazine *The Word*.

**Kristin5689** (*Honorable Mention*)—Krystyn Maynard writes from Evansville, Indiana.

