Volume 4 Issue 1

Amaranth

a journal of food writing, art & design

featuring:

Odbayar Dorj

Saima Afreen

Vivienne E. Bretherick

www.amaranthjournal.com

SUMMER

2025

Description

Amaranth Journal of Food Writing, Art, and Design is a digital journal that aims to connect a global community of food writers, artists, design thinkers, and culinary storytellers through sensitive storytelling. It publishes a wide range of creative endeavors and assemblages on food such as food stories, memoirs, vignettes, poems, photo essays, drawings, and other illustrative arts.

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SWEET FINALE

EDITOR'S LETTER

Summer 2025 [Volume 4, Issue 1]

Dear readers,

Welcome to the **Summer 2025 Issue** of **Amaranth Journal of Food Writing, Art, and Design**!

As the temperature shoots up and my sun-toasted vegetable patch sighs at the long rainless days in the tropical hotland I call home, I sometimes think that I can taste the moment. Memories of the frugal summer table deepen that taste evermore, into something less fleeting and more amenable to the flawed alchemy of words. By the time I finish writing this letter, the parched earth will have received the first monsoon showers, the sparing summer table will have been blessed by nature's abundance, and the intricate tapestry of tastes will have acquired a richer texture.

In this issue, we lean into much more than just edible food. From the salad's intriguing narrative to the gustatory nostalgia of heirloom recipes; from the dreary cornucopia of supermarkets to the quiet comfort of a simple meal; from intimations of kitchen politics to magical epiphanies—this issue offers a broad spread of tastes and experiences.

From this eclectic assemblage of creative endeavors woven around the theme of food, we have chosen the following compositions as featured pieces for our Summer edition: Odbayar Dorj's memoir, "Between Plates and Memories: A Story of Us," for its earnest portrayal of the delicate flavors of memory; Saima Afreen's poems, "Beetroot," "Darkling Things," and "Un-forgetting," for their uncanny insights into the subtle, everyday transactions between humans and the food they consume; and Vivienne Bretherick's watercolor paintings, "Apples" and "Aronia Berries," for their sparkling eloquence.

We hope that you enjoy reading this edition as much as we did putting it together for you.

Thank you for being part of our journey.

Bon Appétit!

Satarupa Sinha Roy

Founder & Managing Editor
Amaranth Journal of Food Writing, Art, and Design

Amaranth

In Kigali

Suzanne Kamata

Nile perch and plantains—
the Rwandan waiter laughs
when we ask for forks.

Suzanne Kamata is an American permanent resident of Japan, and the author of several books including, most recently, the novel *Cinnamon Beach* (Wyatt-Mackenzie, 2024) and the short story collection *River of Dolls and Other Stories* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2025). She likes eating and writing about food. Her essay "Mystery Dinner" appeared in the anthology *Telltale Food: Writings from the Fay Khoo Award 2017-2019* (Hikayat, 2020). When she is not eating or writing, she works as an associate professor at Naruto University of Education in Japan.

Low Man's Meal

Rebecca Surmont

Hutsepot
It's a what?
Hutse—looky here—in the pot
  nine hours old, simmering
  it's what for dinnering
  mashed and flat with a side of fat
  pork
Put it on a plate and eat it
  with a fork.

You wouldn't carrot all to
turnip your lips to this
potato-y cuisine peppered and
salted to poorest perfection,
rooty connection to the Motherland-
  De Nederland
and Flemish farms to modern tables
fattening babies and filling ladles.

Hutsepot now served piping hot
from grandmother's kitchen
in this old grey pot.

Ode to Cheese

How gouda you to come—
allow yourself to be creamed, crumbled, smeared, and spread.
I can never be feta-upped of you, your exotic, savory beige
oasis of flavor.

Even a gorgon would lose her head over you, I'm sure,
if she inhaled the tangy bleu of your center, have the arti
of your wheel spinning like a serpent, swishing like a
Swiss down a mountain, gruyering all the way.

Who would brie-lieve that some hate you
down to the cheddar? The melt magic of you cashewing away,
while they eschew all parm and asiago shaves?

Oh, cheese, with your firm finish, I'd goat to extremes
for your nutty cream toasty verve. I cheer the sheep
out in the fields, the cows in their dairy dressing—
raw to finished, no curd diminished.

Rebecca Surmont lives in Minnesota, USA, with her husband and dog. She has worked as a physical theater actor, teacher, Mime, and resident teaching artist. Her written work has been featured in places such as *Nature of our Times, MacQueen's Quinterly, Crowstep Poetry Journal*, *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *Trouvaille Review, Ekphrastic Review*, *Topical Poetry,* and others. She currently works as a leadership consultant and coach.

Pure Love

Pam Martin-Lawrence

Gooseberry Jam, for after I'm gone

2lb tart green gooseberries—don't wait until they change colour and start softening. You want 'em when they're beginning to get juicy, but still so hard and sour that when you crunch them, your eyes scrunch up and your mouth dries out. Best to make sure you go out and check every day and in no time you'll develop a good eye and sound judgement.

2lb granulated sugar—not that fancy jam sugar, or it won't cook long enough to begin turning that pretty pinky-red, and it won't taste as good. (plus it costs twice as much, and what have I told you about looking after the pennies, my girl?)

1. Hull the fruit—you know what that means, but it's easier with scissors than a knife, and don't think you can skip it. If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing right.

2. Tip them into the big stew pot with plenty of lemon juice, but fish any pips out. You can add the zest too if you like. I've always preferred it without, but perhaps it's time you get to choose your own way—how else will you learn what works best for you?

3. Cook on medium until the juices run and the fruit is softened, but keep a good eye on it, or the skin'll start sticking, and it'll make the jam bitter. If it should happen, you can still make pies with the skin though—waste not, want not, remember.

4. Add the sugar—all in a lump, straight from the bag, no faffing around warming it in the oven first—then bring it up to a fast boil and cook until it reaches setting point (don't forget to put the saucers in the fridge beforehand). Don't be your usual impatient self—good things come to those who wait, and good things are worth that wait.

5. Sterilise the jars like I showed you, push the little circles of greaseproof paper down on to top so it's touching all over, then cover them with dampened cellophane secured with elastic bands. When they're cold and you've wiped the jars clean, you can do your favourite part and pretty them up. You know where I keep my rag-bag. It's yours now, and DON'T let your mother throw it out—you never know when things will come in handy.

My nan's hand-written recipe, the last of her many gifts to me, her favourite grandchild. Her mini-me. As a little girl I loved nothing better than joining her and her cronies for a good gossip, clutching my huge, old-lady handbag, and listening, wide-eyed and deliciously scandalised, as they maligned 'her at number 37'.

We'd make all kinds of pickles and jams together every year, using the contents of her long, narrow garden. But gooseberry jam—the first preserve of the year—was always our favourite, made the very moment the fruits achieved perfect ripeness for our purpose.

All these years later, and a grandmother myself now, I still make this jam every year, with my own granddaughter as my apprentice. We pick the gooseberries together, and follow

the recipe to the letter. When the jam is barely cool, I cut us each a thick slice of homemade bread, and slather it with the tart preserve, and—unable to wait another second—we devour the first fruits of this year's labour greedily, grinning at each other with sheer joy.

To me, homemade gooseberry jam tastes of pure love.

Pam Martin-Lawrence lives on a small island with collections of emotional support plants, 'book boyfriends,' and a long-suffering partner. While writing her second novel she writes poetry and short fiction for relaxation, some of which have appeared in publications including *Passionfruit Review*, *Southern Gothic Creations*, *Macrame Literary Journal*, *Flights e-Journal*, *Micromance Magazine*, and *Bunker Squirrel Magazine*. Her novella *The Tale of a Dragon* was published by Alien Buddha Press in September 2024.

Coffee Pushers Anonymous

Diana Raab

Every morning across America, in cities large and small, waitresses push coffee. They greet you at restaurant entrances, caressing menus to their chests—as one would a newborn baby—and ask if you want coffee. For addicts like me, only cappuccino will do and when you ask for one, they click their heels and walk away to return with their manager to report a broken machine, born in a small Italian village. You settle for regular coffee and then meander to the buffet bar, lift the tin covers of dry scrambled eggs, and grab the last remaining crispy bacon. You return to your vinyl booth with your once-hot coffee, as the waitress pours a 'warmer' of brown water filled to the rim. Who are these coffee pushers and who told them to top off my already full cup? All I want is my espresso: it opens my eyes to face the day's surprises. Maybe another visitation, or birth as I await the next served cup: four o'clock in my home where breast milk nursed my young, in some other city in America.

Diana Raab, MFA, PhD, is a poet, memoirist, workshop leader, thought-leader and award-winning author of fourteen books and editor of three anthologies. Her work has been widely published and anthologized. Her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and The Best of the Net. She frequently speaks and writes on writing for healing and transformation.

Her latest book is an anthology, *Women in A Golden State: California Poets at 60 and Beyond* (Gunpowder Press, May 2025).

Raab writes for *Psychology Today, The Good Men Project, Sixty and Me*, *Medium,* and is a guest writer for many others. To know more about her, visit: https:/www.dianaraab.com.

Mooncake

Huina Zheng

We're making mooncakes in the kitchen, and the air is filled with the sweet scent of flour and sugar, with a hint of cinnamon. Mooncakes were originally offerings to the Moon Goddess, symbolizing reunion and happiness. This tradition dates back to the Yin and Zhou dynasties (1600 BC–256 BC). My 8-year-old daughter, Lan, is poking around in the flour, her hands all white and powdery. Her eyes are sparkling, as if stars have fallen into them. The mooncake molds, passed down from my mother, have worn edges. Each time we use them, flour seeps into the tiny cracks, leaving irregular patterns on the surface of the mooncakes, like poorly fermented steamed buns with pockmarks. But they look round and full, with traditional patterns on the surface and gently undulating edges—we call them the "bare-faced moon." Looking up at the night sky, the moon is a smooth orb, but the real moon is pitted and textured, like the trunk of a ginkgo tree: steady and golden-brown from a distance, but up close, etched with timeworn lines.

Lan keeps asking me to tell her mooncake stories. In the late Yuan Dynasty, heavy taxes left the people struggling. Zhu Yuanzhang, who was leading the resistance, plotted an uprising. To communicate the rebellion, his strategist Liu Bowen came up with a plan: hide a note reading "Rebel on the fifteenth night of the eighth month" inside mooncakes, using them to pass the message. On Mid-Autumn Festival night, rebels rose in unison, ultimately overthrowing the Yuan Dynasty. Lan loves this story because mooncakes also symbolize resistance and freedom.

Inspired by this, we put peanuts into the mooncakes, symbolizing longevity; lotus seeds, wishing for noble character; red dates, representing a happy family; walnuts, hoping for success in studies and career; and red beans, symbolizing love and longing. Over time, mooncakes have turned from basic food into symbols of emotion and hope. We place the mooncakes on the baking pan, like placing little stories into the oven of time, waiting for them to develop into a flavor that is distinctively ours.

Huina Zheng holds an M.A. with Distinction in English Studies and works as a college essay coach. Her stories have been published in *Baltimore Review, Variant Literature, Midway Journal,* and other reputed publications. Her work has been nominated thrice for both the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net.

She resides in Guangzhou, China with her family.

Mornings with Lavender

Oormila Vijayakrishnan Prahlad

A Kiss of Sweet Neem

Oormila Vijayakrishnan Prahlad is a widely published Australian artist, poet, and improv pianist of South Indian heritage. Her work has been featured on the covers and within the pages of several literary journals and anthologies including *Stonecoast Review*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Two Thirds North*, and *Pithead Chapel*. She lives and works in Sydney, on traditional Gameragal land.

Find her @oormilaprahlad and www.instagram.com/oormila_paintings

No Ideas but in Calories

Kirby Olson

Power is the nature of the Cuban.
The pretzel does calisthenics.
Radiators hush cheesecakes.
Fortunes roll like Oreos
in nurseries for giant clams.
Passions flower through candy kisses.
Atoms congregate in Sno-cones.
Pincushions dynamite licorice.
Fingers flex around Twixts.
Pinatas explode like salsa.
Proud Marys purchase steaks.
Princesses are the noons of moose claws.
Player pianos are as silent as cheese.
Mice circulate in harems of pistachios.
Mediocrities excel at cream puffs.
Parentheses skip with caramel chips.
Friends all go home madly in love
with absent Valentines.
Gargantuan oranges roll
through the melancholy of horse chestnuts.

Kirby Olson is a professor at SUNY Delhi in the western Catskills. His books include a study of Gregory Corso and another of Andrei Codrescu, as well as a book of poetry entitled *Christmas at Rockefeller Center* (WordTech 2015). His poetry has appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Poetry East*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and several other journals.

Choc-ripple Blancmange—No Stranger to Strange

Margaret Owen Ruckert

Inside a blancmange, you're surrounded
by history's pageant, the festive molecules
of countless proteins and fats that once
found flavour in crowded squares.

A food that began with squawking chickens
for the teasing of breast-meat, village stalls
selling milk of goat, rosewater, almonds.
The Medieval East to West of a 'white eat'.

A chameleon food of sweet or savoury
shivering in arrowroot, gelatin or agar.
Now rediscovered like a fossil kitchen,
blancmange is on the menu for intrepids like you.

While nostalgia flaunts her pure white credentials
you've chosen a choc-ripple to be different
dangerous, eating your way blindfolded
with no back narrative. Your first blancmange.

You drift though cloud-soft slippers of milk
sweet as evensong, arrive at the chocolate-ripple
stream of continual intrigue. Advanced confection.
You swim on, swallowing waves. Pause to breathe.

One more mouthful and you've travelled
from Chaucer's tale of suspicious food
through Platina's comforting capon dish
with 15th century almond milk to today's dessert.

Liquid to solid kitchen alchemy.
History's pick—slippery as a recollected recipe.
Forgiving new flavours. Hundreds of them.
Breaking through the mould that was then.

Salad Faze

We're stuck in a destructive loop about the salad's menu
that recycles lettuce and tomato; what we need is
a new story that possibly begins on a back-country farm
with young strapping greens and passion-throb purples
growing courageously. Not even knowing their names
they hitchhike to a local village square, where they're
discovered as brilliant new talent on the DNA circuit by a
down'n'out scientist, who secures their lifetime rights.

This is the rags to early riches story. Alternatively,
they're hopefully pushed at a city farmers' market,
work for years as good-looking unknowns till finally
lauded as asides on executive menus. Who can
afford either fairy-tale food? But the city is a salad
of fresh ideas and there, hopefully, I will scrounge
a teaspoon or two of the latest evocations, and write up
recipes that still say expensive—with substitute vegetables.

Standing in front of a refrigerated window
I'm blasted with onion from a tall counter hand
too young to believe in relaxed window-shopping.
I feign a decision between Caesar and lifestyle pasta
two post-modern mixes of the Mediterranean
both studded with sunshine and gut-firing fibre
like lettuce apropos, tomato revisited, onion ubiquitous,
eggplant raunch and shining spears of asparagus.

Of course, asparagus never tinned in penthouse stories
but what an inspired, plot-driven substitute
for when a feisty red pepper rings in off colour
and a young aphrodisiac offers up its body.
And they call this their cold salads counter.
But I can't stay here longer. Uniformed staff hover
like ravenous bats with claws for my order
but I'm not here to buy, just to take away titles

and lists of ingredients. Here I have saladly failed;
some vegetables are mangled beyond my recognition
and spices and herbs hide like most-wanted spies
except basil, that rascal, who's well known to boast
of gregarious dealings and curry, the cousin of anyone
who asks. What I need is a chemistry lab on my tongue
and free samples of everything but staff aren't as party
as the legends they sell. I walk away hungry

for detailed description; those savoury moments
in a salad story's life. Is this food copyright?
For my home kitchen trial, I'll need vegetables
checked against country of origin, region, producer,
ensuring my work has molecular truth. Will my bowl

of Thai lime seek the tree of its childhood and laugh
at my pseudo-clone, ambush my guests? One thing is true:
for success as a salad's voyeur—mix with a crowd.

Chicken Pie—A Short Heated History

From the beginning of our fast food lives there were vending machines laying down chicken pies, round as freshly-formed eggs, squat and hot, lined up like battery hens, one per slot. Caged for consumption. Puffed up with pride at being side by side, yet afraid; sweating in pastry pants at the thought of dismemberment—fanged in foul actions of teeth and tongue. Staged by age to be caught by the next party of ravenous pie hunters and hung over the dripping cave of their open mouths.

As chicken pies brood, ready for their cue, they consider death by incisors or machine malfunction. Death by sausage rolls and gourmet hamburgers. Death by designer meat pies with wine and mushrooms. We, on the other side of the glass, never think of their identity crisis in a public space, vacuum-racked, with only like-minded pies for company; the pie's anxiety, their inevitable end; an object of food critics, subject of daily surveillance.

But this is fantasy and denial. Vending pies watch us like hawks, predators perched, singing of their relative freedom from metal tongs and kitchen politics. They value our free-range stomachs, our Pavlov responses. Pies swoop down, claim us, their intended, and we become them in the act of digestion. Humans turning chicken. Humans burning chicken.

But think of the saving in moral distress, when humans use their skin as a solar panel and channel the light. Bodies, on a course of chlorophyll cells, will glow like a leaf and learn not to burn. Here is energy for life, fresh from the sun, no middle men or chickens. Meaty problems—stripped of their meat. A solution packed, cleverly as pies. Our Homo species thinking through the food puzzle. Supporting the universal good. With chickens, free as the sky.

Margaret Owen Ruckert is a prize-winning poet, including the 2023 National Poetry Competition, hosted by Women Writers NSW, Australia. Two of her books explore food and café culture. Other books employ ekphrasis, matching tanka to landscape photos. She has over three hundred tanka published worldwide. As Facilitator of a community writing group, she presents regular workshops.

The Grapefruit

Claire Poole

The doctor found a tumor the size
of a small grapefruit inside my uterus.

The same uterus I cursed whenever
my menses came, where I grew my two

daughters. I found it funny in a way, as I
preferred grapefruit over orange or apple

juice, the tartness over the sweet. Recalling
the box of Ruby Reds Uncle Bobby sent us

every Christmas from South Texas. The dozen
or so orbs mostly orange on the outside

with a few brown patches, light pink
trying to break through the skin.

When my mother sliced one open,
a darker pink burst forth with a white center

and rim. We used spoons with serrated
edges to carve out and scoop up

each triangle. When finished with all
twelve segments, my siblings and I tilted

our heads back and squeezed
the juice into our mouths,

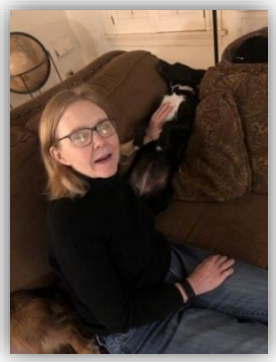
the sticky liquid dribbling down our chins.
Also remembered sipping grapefruit-flavored

soda at the lake house where we spent
every summer, ordering the juice at fancy

restaurant brunches or sipping Sea Breezes
at Friday gatherings in neighbors' driveways.

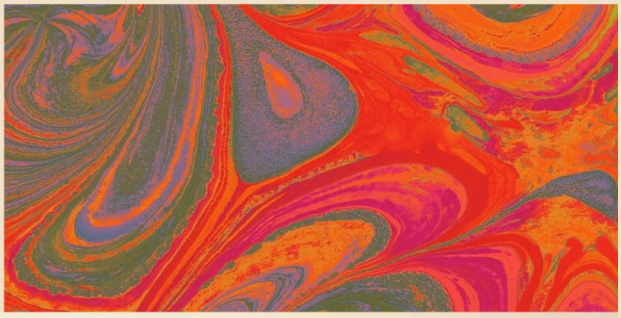
I am not allowed grapefruit anymore because
of a drug to prevent cholesterol from clogging
up my arteries, which could lead blood clots
to form, which could lead to yet another stroke,

which the doctors think was related to a tumor
the size of a small grapefruit inside my uterus.



Claire Poole lives in Houston. In 2023 she won the Writers' League of Texas Manuscript Contest in the historical fiction category with her novella, *Piano Girl*. Her poetry has been published by *Pulse*, *The Write Launch*, *The Bayou Review* and *Equinox*. She is currently working on a memoir.

Amaranth



Creamy Cajun Chicken

Marianne L. Berghuis

It wasn't the fact that the food smelt so delicious that made me melt inside. It was the way he prepared it. He sliced the peppers and onions so finely, so carefully. He had real skill, accentuated with his recently sharpened professional chef's knives. The ones I'd worried so much about. The ones my husband bought for him, alongside a traditional whetstone sharpener block, at Christmas.

Sliced fingers served with tea,
bloodstained sauces and
out-of-hours trips to A & E.

As I watched him from a distance, no such dramas occurred. He was so skillful, so proficient. At fifteen years old, he relished the trust his dad had shown him. As I laid the table at my son's request, I uttered my approval by stating that Tom Kitchin, Andrew Fairlie, and Dean Banks should all be worried. There was a new kid at the chopping block. As I clanged past him in the kitchen with my hands full of cutlery, I savoured every moment of his interaction with the tools of his trade.

Clattering pots & pans,
click, click, click; a hob igniting,
and a whirring extractor fan.

Sauces bubbling, spatulas stirring to perfection, not a lump noted. Potatoes boiled, strained, then measures of butter and cream scooped into the pan. As I placed the good-glasses on the table and broke open a bottle of Belvoir Sparkling Elderflower Pressè, he gave me the nod to indicate it was time to call in the troops. Chairs scuffed across the wooden floor as the cavalry was seated. An order came to sit with our eyes closed. Then as we listened to the final scrapes of metal spoons and clinks of crockery chiming from the kitchen, our nostrils filled with the mouth-watering aroma of warmed spices.

'Okay, all good,' said my son as we all opened our eyes to a perfectly presented plate.

Creamy Cajun chicken,
smooth mashed potato, parsley garnish.
'There you go, grubs up. Dig in.'

Marianne L. Berghuis is a writer and ex-nurse who now works as a visitor service assistant in a museum. She completed an M.Litt. in Creative Writing at Stirling University in 2022 and is currently the chairperson of the charity 'Fife Writes'. Her role involves leading writing workshops, running support groups and encouraging others to write their stories in creative ways. She's also facilitated the lunchtime writing hours at the StAnza Scottish International Poetry Festival as well as facilitating author events for Book Week Scotland. She lives in a small town in Fife, Scotland with her husband and two teenage sons. You can often find her roaming the countryside or coastal paths with her dog, hoping the solace of nature will nurture and inspire her imaginative spark.

To know more about Marianne, you can visit:

https://mlberghuis.co.uk/

or,

https://www.fifewrites.org.uk/

Beetroot

Saima Afreen

This flushing queen
proud, a bride unwed

sleeping in the deep
earth: its bed unmade
but there's always room in there

for the world to spread

colour of weddings on kitchen
tables, palms, lips, and fingertips

to offer this extra blush
to the body always losing

its colour
to fire, air, water, and sometimes earth.

D**arkling Things**

Look at the rabbit on the grass. Its thin
ears backlit with the raspberry sun as if it were
listening to the gurgling of my nephew Rabiul
in the balcony of his Picnic Garden home
who is gently pulling the edges of the sky
with his infant fingers, releasing its balm-like
gloss on all that was hurt,
hurts on this crumbling planet.

U**n-forgetting**

- *At Chicago Union Station*
-

I memorialize you in ice light, powdered
sugar slipping through a Corinthian pillar
that pierces the belly of this planet. The earth
summons me to its symposium of
glass-eyed birds to protect my ignorance of all that

I can never know. All those secret waterways
underneath the printing machines sacredly
bringing out prayer books to protect my heart
to save its gargoyles bleeding at the edges
ever since your infidel heart taught me to pray
to myself, to all those faces I brought on this
dying star. I search in its flames your glass

vein, mending its mouth of prophecies. Feeding
its pit with all the cardinals I have ever known
all the skies, all the blue I have ever known
all that I have never known. This 'unknown'
is tempting like citrus fruits glowing in dark

for children lost in a forest circumnavigating the star
shape of a pandoro cake that I have never eaten. Yet
touch its phantom crumbs following a golden trail
that promises fairies the size of thumbs playing cards
deep in the woods. With their blinks seasons change
a thousand times. I find myself light years away
from home, too absorbed in this game, too cold

in this frost, too frozen from the knowledge
that I was merely passing through and wasn't
supposed to stop and merge with all that
it isn't.

Saima Afreen is a poet, teaching-artist, journalist, essayist, and abstract expressionist. Her works have appeared in *The Kenyon Review, Indian Literature, The Bellevue Literary Review, HCE Review, Barely South Review, The Bellingham Review, The Roanoke Review, The Stillwater Review, The McNeese Review, The Nassau Review, The Oklahoma Review, Staghill Literary Journal, The Notre Dame Review, Summerset Review, Honest Ulsterman, Watershed Review, Dreich Magazine,* and *Existere* among others. She is pursuing a Ph.D.

with concentration in Creative Writing from Illinois State University (ISU), the USA. She is the author of a poetry collection *Sin of Semantics* (Copper Coin) and a poetry chapbook titled *Winter Biomythography* (Press 254). She was a Sutherland Fellow at the Publications Unit of ISU where she worked as an editorial support for various in-house publications for one academic year. She was awarded the Charles Wallace Creative Writing Fellowship at the University of Kent, the UK. She was the writer-in-residence for Fall at Villa Sarkia Writers' Residency, Finland.

The Sichuan Sensation

Christian Emecheta

I am numbing peppercorns pop on my tongue,
like tiny firecrackers, one by one.
Through the misty streets of Chengdu, I roam,
where mapo tofu finds its early home.
Red chilies float in bubbling broths,
while steam rises like silk-spun cloths.
Each spoonful tells stories boldly,
of dynasties and secrets old.
My lips may tingle, and tears may flow,
but this is bliss that few souls know.

A Mediterranean Midnight

In Athens' hidden tavernas deep,
where octopi in barrels sleep,
the old men play backgammon late,
while olive oil drips from my plate.
Feta crumbles, white as the moon,
to rhythms of a rebetiko tune.
Each grape leaf holds a secret tight,
rolled with rice in the dark of night.
The ouzo clouds my coffee cup,
as stars and stories bubble up.

A Proper Mexican Street

Tortillas clap their ancient beat,
as comal smoke drifts down the street.
Al pastor spins its sunset glow,
while lime juice sparkles down below.
The elote man rings his bell,
mayo cream and chili spell
mingle with tamale steam,
in this metropolis supreme.
Each taco tells a different tale,
where past and future flavors sail.

Christian Emecheta is a multifaceted creator, who blends writing, illustration, and computer science. His fiction and poetry has appeared in prestigious publications including *Arts Lounge Magazine*, *Step Away Magazine*, and The *Decolonial Passage*. He has also published with Cranked Anvil Press, Walden's Poetry and Reviews, and Mocking Owl Roost, among others. Christian finds inspiration through books, films, and the boundless landscapes of his imagination.

Adam and Eve

Aliaksandra Markava

Bunches of Grapes

Artist's Statement

Aliaksandra Markava

I believe (by my own example) that creativity and art can gently heal, calm, relieve stress, teach deep thinking, and instill deeper feeling. Creativity is one of the most sublime manifestations of love.

Aliaksandra Markava has a bachelor's degree in Screen Arts, majoring in Film and Television Direction. She has worked in television and film production and is the author of several documentaries. At present, Aliaksandra works as an independent cinematographer. She is fond of fine art and photography and participates in international exhibitions to showcase her artworks.

Amaranth

Sweet Finale

Between Plates and Memories: A Story of Us

Odbayar Dorj

The first pasta I had after returning to Japan tasted different. It wasn't bad—just different. The sauce was lighter, the seasoning subtle, and yet it stirred something inside me: a memory of a meal in a small restaurant tucked away in the mountains of Anan. A memory of Yuto.

Before I left Japan to return to Mongolia, Yuto and I made a list of things we wanted to do together—a way of holding on before we had to let go. At the top of that list was visiting the Hina doll exhibition in Anan for Hinamatsuri. I had always wanted to see the dolls, and although Yuto had already been there earlier, he agreed to go again without hesitation. That was the kind of person he was—quietly kind, unselfish.

We set off in his dark blue Jimny on a spring morning, the sky soft with early light. The Hinamatsuri display was stunning. Thousands of dolls were arranged in grand pyramid-like structures—some antique, some handmade, each with its own charm. On the second floor of the exhibition hall, a global collection of dolls caught my eye—and among them, to my delight, was a Mongolian doll. That little figure, so far from home, made me feel seen.

Downstairs, we took a seat to watch a series of volunteer performances—people singing, playing traditional instruments, even dancing. Some of the songs were familiar to Yuto, and as I leaned on his shoulder, he began singing softly. I held his hand and listened, caught between the music and the man beside me. One song lingered in my heart: "Hanamizuki." Even now, whenever I hear it, I return to that moment, to his voice in my ear and the scent of spring all around us.

Hungry, we searched for a place to eat. Rural areas don't always make dining easy, but we found two options. Yuto had been to one, so we called the other—an Italian place named Okamoto. The owner said they could take us in in thirty minutes. We had time, so we stopped by a small cherry blossom grove nearby. The petals were just starting to open, soft pink against the cool blue sky. Yuto, my unofficial photographer, took photos of me as always. His pictures never need editing; he sees me the way I hope to be seen.

When we finally arrived at the restaurant, it looked like something straight out of a European fairy tale—an adorable yellow cottage nestled at the foot of a mountain, with Italian flags fluttering by the gate. The owner greeted us politely, asking us to wait a bit while the guests who came before us finished. We stood outside, taking in the charm of the place. It didn't look like any house I'd seen in Japan. It felt like something from a dream.

Inside, the husband wore a black hat and a white chef's coat, accented with a green scarf—just like an Italian chef. His wife wore a matching white coat with a red scarf. They welcomed us warmly and explained the menu. There weren't many options—only two kinds of pasta sets and a non-alcoholic wine, which they recommended. We ordered both pasta dishes and the wine.

They told us they have been running this place for forty years now. The restaurant opened only on weekends and took just three reservations on a given day: two lunches and a dinner. There were only two tables. It was so quiet, so personal, and we could see the couple cooking together in their small kitchen. Even though they had already filled their reservations that day, they still made space for us because we had come from far away.

The salad came first, fresh and colorful. The bread was soft and warm. We toasted with the wine, its elegant flavor light and unexpected. Then came the pasta—rich, smooth, and completely different from anything I'd ever had before. It felt like I was tasting pasta for the very first time. Even Yuto used his bread to soak up the last drops of sauce.

We spoke with our hosts and I told them that I was from Mongolia and that I would be leaving soon. When I told them that I was flying back on March 29, the husband smiled. "That's my wife's birthday," he said. "You're leaving on her birthday—how special!"

After dessert—a light, creamy yogurt—we were invited by our gracious hosts to choose cups from their personal collection for our coffee. They had a hobby of collecting unique cups and let the guests select their favorite. I chose a cup with soft blue swirls. Yuto picked one shaped like a small mountain. We sipped quietly, our meal drawing to a gentle close. Before leaving, we took a photo together with the couple to remember the moment.

Looking at them, working side by side in their cozy restaurant, I saw something more than just hospitality. I saw a reflection of the future Yuto and I used to dream about. I'm not very good at cooking, but Yuto always said I was good with a knife; he always encouraged me. He talked about retiring one day and opening a tiny izakaya—a place with a few signature dishes, where people could relax, eat, and talk with him as he cooked. Sometimes he'd sit down and share a drink with the guests. It was a simple dream but a beautiful one. I supported it with all my heart.

I used to imagine myself standing beside him in that izakaya, helping him prepare the vegetables, listening to the stories of customers, learning about their lives. I didn't need to be good in the kitchen to be a part of it. That shared dream was enough.

In that quiet little restaurant in Anan, I saw it come to life—if only for a moment. The couple reminded me that such a life was not only possible but worth dreaming of.

So, yes, the pasta I had today was different. But maybe that's why I missed the other one so much—not just for its taste, but for the day it belonged to. That pasta carried the flavor of memories. Of Yuto. Of spring. Of dreams I still hold close.

He lives in my memories now, and those memories are alive—because he still lives in them.

Odbayar Dorj is a Mongolian writer, educator, and graduate student currently based in Japan. With a background in English education, her work explores the themes of memory, culture, and personal transformation—often inspired by her lived experiences between Mongolia and Japan. She believes in the power of storytelling as a way to bridge cultures and evoke empathy. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in various literary platforms and she continues to write about the subtle moments that shape human connection. When she's not writing or teaching, she enjoys quiet walks among flowers, collecting beautiful details from everyday life, and practicing the Japanese philosophy of *ichigo ichie*—cherishing the unrepeatable nature of each moment.

Grandmother's Kitchen

Danny P. Barbare

Oyster crackers and tomato soup with
iced tea.
Pinwheels in the pantry.
She, peeling a peach or apple
in the porcelain sink. Her
swollen
legs with
varicose veins—
The chrome clock happily shines forever.

Danny P. Barbare loves to travel locally in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He has a deep Southern accent, having traveled little out of the American South. However, his poetry has been published widely both locally and abroad. He works as a janitor at a local school where he shares his poetry. He has been writing poetry for 44 years and has been published over 1500 times. He says his poetry is a source of therapy to him. He lives with his wife in the Upstate of the Carolinas.

Tsinoy Treats

Christine Marie Lim Magpile

Fun Family Gathering during the Mid-Autumn Festival

Growing up as a *Tsinoy* (Filipino-Chinese or Tsinong Filipino), my *gua'kong* (Hokkien for grandfather on my mother's side) told me that the Mid-Autumn Festival or *Zhongqiu Jie* (中秋節) often falls on the fifteenth day of the eighth month according to the Chinese lunar calendar. It is the second biggest celebration in China, besides the Chinese New Year. The Mid-Autumn Festival, as far as I remember, wasn't just about colorful lanterns and mooncakes.

One of my most memorable childhood experiences was that of the Chinese dice game, *Pua Tiong Chiu* (跋中秋), where the prizes came in the form of mouthwatering snacks. My sister and I always won delectable treats that would make any child's heart leap with joy.
Let me take you on a whimsical journey down memory lane, where every roll of the dice holds the promise of delicious delights.

Rice Crackers: Bigger, Bolder, and Better than Potato Chips

Tsinoy elders knew that health is wealth. Potato chips were (rightfully) considered junk food. Instead, rice puff crackers took center stage as the coveted prize. Triple the size of potato chips, these crispy delights came with a white sugar glaze that made them irresistible. If Filipino children immediately recognize the man with the mustache as the Pringles logo, *Tsinoy* kids surely know that the adorable toddler in jumpers is the logo of Want-Want Senbei, the ultimate brand of rice crackers from Taiwan and Hong Kong.

***Sachima*: The Chinese Rice Krispies**

Among our favorite prize-worthy snacks was the *sachima* (沙琪瑪). It's the Chinese version of Kellogg's rice krispies. The basic type of *sachima* is a rectangular crunchy rice krispy drenched in the sugary goodness of either brown sugar syrup or honey. On the other hand, its fancy version comes studded with nuts and raisins, so it's like a party in your mouth. Like

potato chips, the *sachima*—once unwrapped—demanded immediate consumption for its crispy goodness to be savored fully. Otherwise, its crispiness would be lost, making way for a stale taste.

Ampao and Peanut Bars: Humble yet Addictive

When the budget was tight, the dice game prizes took a tumble turn with peanut bars (square-shaped) or peanut rolls (oblong-shaped). The *ampao* (花生) peanut rolls were coated with sesame seeds. Their texture was like that of a lean and airy *sitsaron* (pork rinds or pork crackling) or a *kropek* (fish or shrimp crackers), crunchy minus the saltiness. Once the peanut rolls melted in your mouth, the bolus usually stuck to the palate. The rectangular peanut bars, on the other hand, were like a healthier version of Reese's Peanut Cup of pure crushed peanuts mixed with honey. They were savory, with just the right amount of sweetness, making them quite addictive. Some inventive *Tsinoy* adults even added roasted garlic for an extra kick, redoubling their savor in the process. These were the snacks that taught us that the simplest treats are the most satisfying.

Winning Treats

The dice game during the Mid-Autumn Festival wasn't just about chasing lucky numbers—it was a snack-fueled spectacle! Between the thrill of the toss and the triumph of a winning roll, the real prize was the irresistible spread of treats waiting to be devoured. More than winning a prize, the Chinese dice game's appeal centred around the unique flavors that made each snack a memorable part of the celebration. After a hearty meal, finger food snacks like *siopao* and *hopia* were served.

The atmosphere buzzed with excitement as the dice clattered across the table. My heart raced like a dragon boat on a thrilling sprint. My sister and I were completely immersed in the game, each roll of the dice bringing us closer to earning those irresistible *siopao* or *hopia*. These delightful treats were our golden tickets to a sumptuous snack, much to the envy of my classmates.

***Siopao*: Meow Paw or Pork Steamed Buns?**

If we examine the two Chinese characters *sio* (燒) and *pao* (包), together they come to mean hot pocket. In English, *siopao* means steamed bun. While the average Filipino breakfasted with *pandesal* (savory salted bread), my sister and I went with *siopao*. The bun of an authentic *Tsinoy siopao* is a soft, fluffy white dough filled with *hongma* (红烧肉), a braised pork, similar to the Spanish *asado* (barbequed pork) or the Filipino *adobo* (marinated pork).

One of the most frequent questions I get asked about *siopao* is whether it is made from cat meat. This rumor has been around for a long time and it persists even today. When I was in grade school, a mischievous classmate asked me if I was eating a cat when she saw me munching on an *asado siopao* during recess. She said she'd heard that some Chinese restaurants used cat meat to make their *siopao* cheaper and tastier.

I told her that *siopao* is made from pork, not cat meat. I explained that *asado siopao* is a type of *siopao* that has a sweet and savory filling of pork, sugar, soy sauce, and spices. I also added that it is one of my favorite snacks and that I eat it every day. Most of my classmates ate ham sandwiches or burgers during recess.

When I got home after school, I sought the wisdom of my *gua'kong*, who revealed that the rumor stemmed from the disappearance of the adorable, chubby feline from Ma Mon Luk, a Chinese restaurant in Manila famous for serving noodles and dimsum. He said that one day, the cat of the *tao-ke* (老闆), or the big boss, couldn't be found. The owner's cat was healthy and big. The rumor went around that the cook had butchered the missing cat because it was fed better. Coincidentally, the batch of *siopaos* tasted distinctly different on that very day, as they were filled with moist, flavorful meat instead of the usual dry, salty pork. The meat filling was also steeped in a special thick brown sauce, which was tangy and gave a spicy kick.

My *gua'kong* told me that the owner's cat had set off for an adventure in the neighborhood and came back after a few days. He said that the owner was so happy to see his beloved feline hat he gave away free *siopaos* to his customers to celebrate the cat's homecoming.

Hopia: Mung Bean Pastry

Hopia (好餅) derives from *ho*/*hao*, which means good, and *pia*/*bing*, which is equivalent to pastry or cake. If you want a delicious *Tsinoy hopia*, you should check out Eng Bee Tin Chinese Deli or Poll and Hopia with multiple outlets just like Krispy Kreme and J. Co. Donuts. Just like donuts, *hopias* also come in a variety of flavors. Besides the usual *mongo* (mung beans) and pork, *ube* (purple yam), pandan, *langka* (jackfruit), and cheese are some popular flavors, not to mention several others. Unlike donuts that can be too sweet because of the sugar glaze, cream frosting, or jelly filling, the sweetness of the *hopia* filling is just about right. Besides, the *hopia* crust is buttery and flaky, adding to the delight.

Every Mid-Autumn Festival, something called mooncake (月餅) is also served. According to my *gua'kong*, a mooncake is a special *hopia* symbolizing the bright springtime moon. The beautiful design of the mooncake also adds to its appeal. My *gua'kong* told me that the design of the mooncake was styled after a Chinese character, and that it was used during the reign of the Yuan Dynasty in the thirteenth century to spread the message of rebellion against the Mongols.

Dessert Adventures

The Chinese dice game can take the whole afternoon, especially if there are many players or if luck turns out to be disappointingly elusive, which makes it difficult for the players to get the winning combination as the dice is rolled. The sugar in the desserts boosts the energy of the players and keeps them from getting grumpy.

Here are some of the desserts that are usually served during such gatherings:

Tanghulu: The Crunchy Sugar-Coated Fruit

When the fruit basket overflowed, my grandfather would transform it into *tanghulu* (糖葫蘆), coating the fruits with a hardened sugar glaze. Strawberries and grapes were especially fun to eat off skewers, their crunchy, glazed exterior a delightful contrast to the soft flesh within. The transparent sugar glaze transformed ordinary fruits into extraordinary treats. *Tsinoy* kids who feasted on the *tanghulu* were asked to wash their hands before going back to the dice game, so that the dice would not be sticky.

Dikiam and *Kiamoy:* Preserved Delights

Leftover fruits like dates, prunes, and plums that came as gifts in fruit baskets from relatives during the Chinese New Year or as offerings to our ancestors during the *Zhōng Yuán Jié* (中元節) or the Hungry Ghost Festival were preserved in a blend of salt and sugar and then dried. Larger than the Filipino tamarind candy that resembled marbles, these preserved fruits were called *dikiam* (鹹梅) for the sweeter version and *kiamoy* (鹹梅) or *champoy* (陳皮)for the saltier version.

As a child, my sister and I often pestered our mom to buy Maltesers, creamy milk chocolate balls filled with honeycomb malt, as this was a hit among our preschool classmates. But my mom insisted that the *dikiam* and *kiamoy* were perfect substitutes, since they were healthier and even looked like dark chocolate!

Food for Thought

My *Tsinoy* childhood memories are wrapped up with the simple pleasures of a well-earned snack during the Mid-Autumn Festival. *Tsinoy* snacks are a symbol of my identity as a Filipino-Chinese. They have a special place in my heart and my belly—always craving for more. Delicious and filling as they are, the *Tsinoy* snacks remind me of my family, my heritage, and my deep, ancient roots.

Christine Marie Lim Magpile is a teacher, book editor-author, translator, and creative writer. She has a BS in Education—History (cum laude) from the University of Santo Tomas, Manila. She has completed her academic requirements for MA in Counseling at De La Salle University. Presently, she is preparing her thesis proposal for her MA in Araling Pilipino from the University of the Philippines, Diliman. She is a fellow of several national writers' workshops in the Philippines, such as the Iligan National Writers Workshop (2024), DLSU Young Screenwriters Workshop (2023), La Salle Kritika National Workshop on Art and Cultural Criticism (2019), 6th Angono Writers' Summer Workshop (2018), the UST National Writers' Workshop (2008), and the Linangan, Imahe, Retorika, at Anyo (LIRA, 2007 and 2023). Presently, Magpile is a University Researcher III and editor from the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

The Bitter and the Sweet

Suzanne Kamata

Brother, it's not easy to make German chocolate cake in Japan.

For one thing, you have to have an oven. A lot of Japanese households don't have a proper convection oven. Oh, they might have a toaster oven ("oven toaster," they say in Japanese), or a microwave, and maybe either of those would work just fine, but the people of this country, by and large, are not into baking breads and cakes and so forth. I actually do have an oven—a state-of-the art appliance that can be activated from afar with my smartphone, and that speaks, and scolds the cat for jumping on the counter. Well, maybe not that last part, but just about.

So, anyway, the oven is not the problem. It's the ingredients that are hard to get. The flour, the sugar, the baking powder—all that, I can buy at the local grocery store, the one that I can walk to near the irrigation ditch where I sometimes see ducks and egrets poking about. But if you make German chocolate cake from scratch, you need evaporated milk, which isn't sold in that store, or anywhere else I know of in Tokushima. You also need pecans for the frosting, which are quite expensive and sometimes difficult to find.

I used to bring back pecans from South Carolina every time I went home. Dad, you remember, used to gather the ones that had fallen on the golf course. He wasn't stealing or anything. The country club members were welcome to pick them up and take them home. And then he would always crack some open, sometimes with the help of a grandchild or two, pack them into plastic containers and send them back to Japan with me. But after his golf partner died, and he started having trouble with his back, he gave up his membership and stopped playing golf. No more free pecans.

For this cake, I ordered a case of evaporated milk, dried shredded coconut, and a two-kilogram bag of pecans. I put all of the ingredients on the counter. We renovated the kitchen after my mother-in-law passed away, so I don't have to bend over so much anymore. The counter is finally the right height. I line up the bowls and measuring cups and spoons, pre-heat the oven, and get to work.

The first time I made German chocolate cake in Japan, I actually used a mix that I'd brought back from South Carolina. When I plated a slice and posted a photo of it on social media, a German friend said, "That doesn't look like anything we ever ate in Frankfurt." She's right. German chocolate cake isn't really from Germany. It was developed by some lady in Dallas, Texas, back in the 1950s. She used dark chocolate developed by a guy named Sam German for

the Baker's Chocolate Company. Sam's ancestors were from England. I wonder if you knew that…Did German chocolate cake become your favorite because you thought that it was actually German? You were the one who was so interested in our roots. You did all that research into our family tree, tracing one line back to an Earl of the House of Hapsburg! And you were the one who took German as an elective, and studied abroad in Munich, and came home wearing lederhosen, for goodness's sake! I took French just to be different. Just to try to get out from under your influence.

One time when I called to wish you a happy birthday, when you and your wife were living in Atlanta, you were all distracted and jittery.

"Someone broke into our house when we were out to dinner," you said.

The cops had just been there, but there wasn't a lot that they could do. A window had been broken. The video cassette player in the living room had been unplugged and loosened from its cables, but, perhaps on second thought, it had been left behind. Your hunting rifle had been extracted from a closet, unzipped from its case and tossed on the bed. Maybe some loose change had disappeared from the top of the dresser, but you weren't sure. And then you had gone into the kitchen.

Clean plates stood on the drainboard. The silver cake server gleamed on the counter, untouched. But someone had gouged the German chocolate cake. It looked as if the culprit had grabbed a chunk with their fist, and jammed it into their mouth, leaving only a few crumbs behind. The only thing that had been stolen was that chunk of chocolate cake.

When my husband was pressuring me to move in with his mother, after his father died, I asked you what you would do if our parents had to move in with you.

"I'd move out," you joked.

But, Brother, I admit I was relieved when you and your family moved to South Carolina, closer to Mom and Dad. In Japan, as the eldest son, it would have been your duty. As the younger sibling, and a daughter, I wouldn't have had that kind of responsibility toward them. I would have been free to follow my bliss.

In America, there's that saying about sons being sons until they take wives, and daughters being daughters for life. In truth, I do feel responsible for our parents, and always have. I sent them emails every day from the time we got hooked up to the internet until Mom suddenly

stopped replying. That was strange. She'd been faking normal so well. I feel guilty about not having been there when she had her own mental health issues. But I was glad that you were close by and that one of their children was looking after them.

As you know, Mom always used mixes for our birthday cakes. But the Betty Crocker cookbook I am using right now is the same as the one that she has on her shelf. It reminds me of childhood, of happier days, of home.

While the cake is baking, I get started on the frosting. First, I chop up the pecans so that they are like pebbles. And I extract the bag of dried coconut flakes from the cupboard. I open the can of evaporated milk by hand, since we don't have an electric can opener, and pour out a cup. I drizzle it into a saucepan along with the sugar, the butter, the egg yolks, and a teaspoon of vanilla, and put it on the burner. I have to keep stirring, otherwise it'll burn. And it takes a while, so I've got a wooden spoon in one hand, and my phone in the other. I scroll through the photos that I downloaded from your Facebook page—you, dressed in a tux, about to go to a father-daughter dance; you, at the start line of a 5K race; you at a political rally, posing with a presidential candidate (who never made it past the primaries, by the way).

Although you are on my mind, I'm not baking this cake for your birthday. After my son had his first taste of German chocolate cake this past January, he decided that he liked it. A week ago, he called to say that he was bringing a girl home for the first time ever. He asked me to make the cake that his uncle liked. So here I am. Trying to impress your nephew's girlfriend.

The last time we talked, you had just lost your job. You had lost jobs before and gotten back on your feet, so I wasn't worried. In fact, I thought, well that's good, because the extra time would enable you to look after Mom and it wasn't like you were broke, anyway. You'd always been good at investing. You were the one who went on lavish vacations with your family twice a year. You were the one who had a huge house.

But then three months later, I got that phone call, and I had to fly back to South Carolina. I didn't understand it at all. Your house was full of people—neighbors, relatives, friends of your in-laws. Mom and Dad. And there were lots of food: casseroles, curries, macaroni and cheese, sandwiches. German chocolate cake. I ate nothing but that cake.

An electronic beep announces the end of baking. I slide padded mitts onto my hands and extract the cake from the oven. Heat wafts up to my face. Sweetness swirls in the air. Later, I

will slather this cake with homemade coconut-pecan frosting. I will cut pieces, put them on pretty china plates, and serve them, and we probably won't even mention your name. I anticipate a million memories, though, with every bite.

For now, I place the pan near the open window to cool. I imagine the fragrant tendrils of steam drifting out through the screen, getting caught up in the breeze. I imagine the scent of German chocolate cake being carried all the way to heaven. To you.

Suzanne Kamata is an American permanent resident of Japan, and the author of several books including, most recently, the novel *Cinnamon Beach* (Wyatt-Mackenzie, 2024) and the short story collection *River of Dolls and Other Stories* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2025). She likes eating and writing about food. Her essay "Mystery Dinner" appeared in the anthology *Telltale Food: Writings from the Fay Khoo Award 2017-2019* (Hikayat, 2020). When she is not eating or writing, she works as an associate professor at Naruto University of Education in Japan.

Apples

Vivienne E. Bretherick

Aronia Berries

Vivienne E. Bretherick is a visual artist originally from Devonshire, England. Her watercolor paintings, created from free style sketches, are inspired by photographs, observations and experiences. She lives in Eastern Ontario, Canada.