

# POEMS FOR ALEXANDRIA

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# ZEINA AZZAM

Poet Laureate, 2022 – 2025

City of Alexandria





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City of Alexandria

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# POET LAUREATE PROGRAM

In 2004, then Councilman Ludwig Gaines proposed the designation of a Poet Laureate for the City of Alexandria. In response, a steering committee of citizens and City staff was established to develop a protocol for selecting a Poet Laureate. On April 25, 2006, the City Council received the proposal submitted by the steering committee. Following a public hearing on May 20, 2006, the City Council unanimously approved the establishment of the Poet Laureate program.

Past Poet Laureates:

- KaNikki Jakarta, 2019-2022
- Wendi R. Kaplan, 2016-2019
- Ryan Wojtanowski, 2016
- Tori Lane Kovarik, 2013-2016
- Amy Young, 2010-2013
- Mary McElveen, 2007-2010
- Jean Elliot, 1979-1999

For additional information about the Poet Laureate and other literary programs:  
email the Poet Laureate at [poet@alexandriava.gov](mailto:poet@alexandriava.gov) • call Cheryl Anne Colton at 703.746.5565  
or email [cherylanne.colton@alexandriava.gov](mailto:cherylanne.colton@alexandriava.gov)

The Office of the Arts offers a diverse array of arts programs, activities including Literary Programs. The Literary Programs are created to inspire creativity and celebrate the written word. These include writing workshops, events such as literary readings, and community gatherings to work with established and emerging writers.

A centerpiece of these offerings is the city's Poet Laureate program, which recognizes an exceptional local poet to promote the arts and engage the community through poetry. Re-established in 2004, the Poet Laureate serves a three-year term and hosts public readings, workshops, and events that highlight poetry's ability to inspire and unite. The Poet Laureate has also written original poems for significant city milestones, such as the celebration of Alexandria's 275th anniversary; installation ceremony for the Mayor and City Council members; 10th anniversary celebration of the Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial; 50th Anniversary of the Torpedo Factory Art Center; remembrances of the lynchings of Benjamin Thomas and Joseph McCoy showcasing the role of poetry in commemorating current occurrences in the city along with preserving local history.

Another notable initiative is the annual DASHing Words in Motion poetry contest, held in collaboration with Alexandria Transit Company (DASH). This contest invites local poets to submit their work, with selected poems displayed on DASH buses and trolleys, bringing poetry into the everyday lives of residents and visitors. Through these initiatives, the Office of the Arts fosters creative expression and underscores the importance of literature in enriching the community.

We are grateful that Zeina Azzam, and the past poet laureates have given of their time by providing inspiration, healing and a sense of belonging through the poetry they have created during their tenure.

Diane Ruggiero, Director  
Office of the Arts

Gretchen Bulova, Director  
Office of Historic Alexandria

**I**t has been an honor for me to serve as the City of Alexandria's poet laureate for the last three years. I learned a great deal about the history and diverse cultures of Alexandria and welcomed the experience of writing poems for city events and commemorations. I feel immense pride that Alexandria places a high priority on poetry and all the arts. What a privilege it has been to get to know so many people and organizations while leading poetry workshops, facilitating community readings, judging contests, engaging with youth in the schools, and generally encouraging the reading and writing of poetry throughout Alexandria.

I have grown as a poet, especially as I created verse for a variety of occasions. I discovered a poetic voice within me that emerged after doing research and finding inspiration to write these original poems. This is a distinct and at times more challenging style of poetry, one that is also rich and meaningful. I hope readers will enjoy the 24 poems in this collection and connect them to the important events and celebrations our city marks and cherishes.

My gratitude goes to the Alexandria Office of the Arts and the Office of Historic Alexandria for conceiving the idea of this booklet and making it a reality. Both entities have been most supportive of my work as poet laureate and I offer Gretchen Bulova and Diane Ruggiero immeasurable thanks. Cheryl Anne Colton has been especially helpful throughout my tenure and I am very grateful to her. It has indeed been a great privilege for me to engage in poetry with the City of Alexandria's government offices, libraries, schools, commissions, community organizations, and all the vibrant multicultural and multilingual population of our city. Thank you!

Zeina Azzam  
City of Alexandria Poet Laureate 2022-2025  
April 2025

**ZEINA AZZAM** is a Palestinian American poet, writer, editor, and community activist. She has served as the poet laureate of the City of Alexandria, Virginia, from 2022 to 2025. Her publications include the full-length collection *Some Things Never Leave You* (2023) and the chapbook *Bayna Bayna, In-Between* (2021), in addition to poems in online magazines, literary journals, and anthologies. She has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Ms. Azzam serves as poetry editor for *We Are Not Numbers*, a writing program for youth in Gaza, and volunteers for Grassroots Alexandria, advocating locally for the civil rights of vulnerable communities. She holds an M.A. in Arabic literature from Georgetown University and an M.A. in sociology from George Mason University.



Zeina Azzam, Poet Laureate, 2022-2025, City of Alexandria.

[www.zeinaazzam.com](http://www.zeinaazzam.com)

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## TO BRING JUSTICE NEAR

*On the Commemoration of the Lynching of  
Joseph McCoy in Alexandria, Virginia,  
on April 23, 1897*

A Black man was lynched in our city, here,  
where a white mob savagely had its way.  
We must face history, bring justice near.

He lived on Alfred Street, age eighteen years,  
grew up when harsh Jim Crow laws ruled the day.  
A Black man was lynched in our city, here.

Together let's say his name, bare our tears.  
We lift up Joseph McCoy, and we pray:  
We must face history, bring justice near.

The trauma from racial hate is severe,  
remains till now, unless we change our ways.  
A Black man was lynched in our city, here.

No one was tried for his murder; it's clear  
that this son of our city was betrayed.  
We must face history, bring justice near.

Let's educate our youth, open eyes, ears,  
so inhumanity is not replayed.  
A Black man was lynched in our city, here.  
We must face history, bring justice near.

## ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT

### JOSEPH MCCOY REMEMBRANCE

Market Square, Alexandria  
April 23, 2022

*I offer a poem to commemorate the lynching  
of Joseph McCoy and to lift up his name.  
It is stunning to know that it took the US  
Congress over 122 years and 200 attempts  
before it passed legislation to make lynching  
a hate crime, a federal felony. This is but one  
of many manifestations of systemic prejudice,  
discrimination, and racism that continue  
throughout our society. It is incumbent on us  
to understand and face such injustice, every  
day, and to work to make change. Alexandria  
has taken a powerful step by choosing to  
acknowledge our difficult history in a  
proactive and meaningful way.*

*For my poem, I chose to write a villanelle,  
which is a highly structured poetic form that  
features repeated lines. These refrains reinforce  
the words of our remembrance and affirm our  
need to face history and seek justice.*



## 44TH ANNUAL ALEXANDRIA JAZZ FEST

Waterfront Park, Alexandria | June 17, 2022

*Duke Ellington (1899-1974) is one of the titans of jazz. He hailed from Washington, DC, and would often come across the river to play at Virginia society balls. Ellington had an intriguing condition called Synesthesia, which some people describe as almost a sixth sense. Synesthesia is when you experience one of your senses through another. For some people, certain words cause them to taste something in their mouths, or certain sounds cause them to see colors. For Ellington, it was the latter — he would see colors when he heard sounds.*

*Note: I also read this poem at the ALX Very Merry Jazz Fest on December 16, 2023 held at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria.*

## DUKE ELLINGTON'S SYNESTHESIA

*"Ellington could hear sounds as colors and could see colors as sound." — Matt Micucci*

You heard notes as colors,  
ears and eyes coupled  
like thunder with lightning,  
a bird's song together  
with its vibrant plumage.  
The band was your artist's palette:  
you painted sounds and found  
harmonies in an azure mood,  
singing about your solitude.

When DC erupted  
with white-on-black attacks  
in the Red Summer of 1919,  
did you turn to the ivories  
for solace? Did your fingers  
touch and see the bluest of blues?  
Were you starting to understand  
the hues in Black history—  
from black to brown to beige?  
Were these bold words  
you wrote decades later  
beginning to tint your mind:

*Lord, dear Lord I've loved,  
God almighty, God of love,*

*please look down  
and see my people through*

A colorful school of the arts  
and a bridge in Washington, DC  
were named after you.  
But it was 25 years after you died  
that they gave you the Pulitzer Prize,  
setting aside the Satin Doll  
and the A-Train to Harlem,  
your indigo mood,  
and all those things  
that don't mean a thing  
if they ain't got that swing.

I imagine you somewhere in the stars  
with Billy Strayhorn and Johnny Hodges,  
Mahalia Jackson and Ella Fitzgerald,  
making music like old times,  
you composing in the violet rays  
of the galaxy,  
hearing the shimmering  
caravans of comets  
and fashioning their iridescence  
into vivid ballads,  
syncopated light.

# CHARTING LIBERATION: A POEM FOR JUNETEENTH

*It is the observance of a victory delayed, of foot-dragging and desperate resistance by white supremacy against the tide of human rights. — Vann R. Newkirk II, The Atlantic*

They beseeched the chariot  
to swing low, the sweet heavenly  
carriage that would carry them home.  
They advised each other  
to wade in the water  
to halt the human scent on the trail,  
elude the dogs of the enslavers.  
Would God trouble the waters?  
Would His hand take away the whips  
and chains, stop the forced cleaving  
of husband from wife,  
of children from their mothers?

Juneteenth arrives in our city  
and we continue to sing our spirituals  
like incantations of perseverance,  
seeking salvation at the river's edge.  
The songs nurture us in holy places,  
at commemorations of lynchings,  
remembrances of ancestors.  
Juneteenth represents an endurance  
and a hope coming from our essence,  
a low murmur climbing up slowly  
from the deepest visceral cry  
of our collective unconscious.

This day is a reminder of oppression,  
of justice undermined and delayed,  
of four million enslaved people and  
their descendants among us  
fighting for justice to come down  
like a cleansing rain.  
Each of the hours and days  
and months of the 250 years of slavery  
is a thread in the warp and weft  
of a dark cloth weighing down their backs:  
the unforgivable exploitation  
woven by one race dominating another.

Juneteenth celebrates the steadfastness  
of a people living, loving, resisting,  
charting liberation, resolute in their vision.  
Freedom was always part  
of their radical imagination,  
the caged bird intoning secret songs  
about a hearth, a home, a plot  
of land to grow okra and corn,  
dreaming of a better life for the unborn.  
We honor them for their tenacity and fortitude,  
for keeping their eyes on the prize.  
They held on, they held on.

## FREEDOM HOUSE MUSEUM AT 1315 DUKE STREET REOPENING AND JUNETEENTH CELEBRATION

Shiloh Baptist Worship Center, Alexandria  
June 20, 2022

*It is my profound honor to add my voice in celebrating the grand reopening of Freedom House and marking Juneteenth. I respectfully offer a poem to honor all the enslaved people and their quest for emancipation and freedom.*







## LIKE THE TREES IN ALEXANDRIA

The soil we stand on is packed  
with the history of growth, the biology  
of perseverance—as fertile and deep  
as our affinities to each other.  
This is where we start.

It took us thousands of years  
to understand the community of trees  
in a forest, to listen to the way roots intertwine,  
communicate in safety underground.  
This is our language, too—

of carbon and nitrogen and phosphorus  
as we construct infinite, unseen pathways  
to share nutrients and water, stories  
and poetry and songs.  
These are our common roots.

We are the trees of the forest, leafy  
and floral, coniferous, with flashy crowns  
or simple beauty. So many shades  
of green and brown. Hues of loveliness.  
This diversity is our touchstone.

Cypress, juniper, and palm, jasmine  
and jacaranda, many have traveled the world  
as flying seeds to land and re-gather  
and celebrate our homecoming.  
This is who we are.

Our root systems teach us to behave as a single  
organism, to uplift all branches, young and old,  
she and he and they, watering and nourishing  
each other, safeguarding saplings against injustice.  
This is our present and our legacy.

We are the trees in Alexandria's forest.

### THE ALEXANDRIA AND USA BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS, 2022

Oronoco Bay Park  
July 10, 2022

*In this poem, I liken our relationships with  
each other to the community of trees and  
their nurturing root systems. Here, I imagine  
our community as trees standing tall next to  
each other, all different and all beautiful, all  
working together to uplift justice and equality.*

*Note: I also read this poem at the Alexandria  
Beautification Commission 2024 Awards  
Ceremony on October 17, 2024 at The  
Garden in Alexandria.*

# IN MEMORY OF BENJAMIN THOMAS, 1883-1899

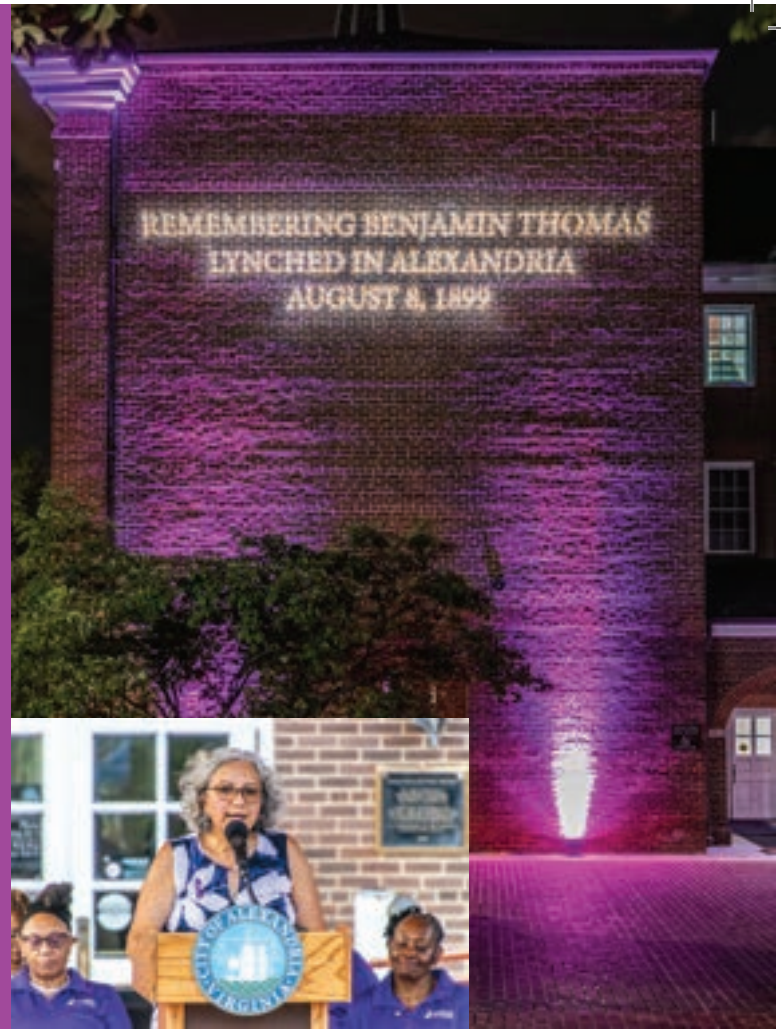
A sense of foreboding spread through Alexandria's streets the night before the lynching. The crescent moon, as it set in the western sky, illumined scores of Black men who gathered to protect Benjamin Thomas as he languished in his jail cell.

But the mayor and police halted the community's heroic efforts like a raging fire can silence a town. Alone and vulnerable, Thomas would later emit a scream from the depth of his being, the primal cry to his mother for succor in his final moments.

Let us honor this voice and this bright life beyond his gruesome death, this once vibrant body full of promise now tortured and maimed and hanged until lifeless. With his lynching a piece of us was killed, too: We wear the same shroud.

How do we make sense of Benjamin Thomas's short life? If we callously allow simple hemp fibers to become a noose, a poplar tree or a lamppost to become a gallows, what will we fashion of our history books?

His life breath, usurped violently, is like ours, fragile and full of human spirit, innocent and vital. One with our mother breath. May our grief over his cruel loss impel us to action. May his memory nourish our resolve.



## ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT

### BENJAMIN THOMAS REMEMBRANCE

Market Square, Alexandria  
August 8, 2022

*Today we commemorate the life and death of Benjamin Thomas and the loving community from which he hailed. As I read about, and reflected on, the events of those tragic days in 1899, I was especially struck by the fact that Benjamin Thomas called out for his mother in his final moments. This reminded me of George Floyd calling out for his mother, 121 years later, as he was being suffocated by a police officer. Such parallel events should remind us all that these acts of violence against Black people are not only part of our history, but they persist to the present day. We must continue to be aware of such injustice and to fight it.*



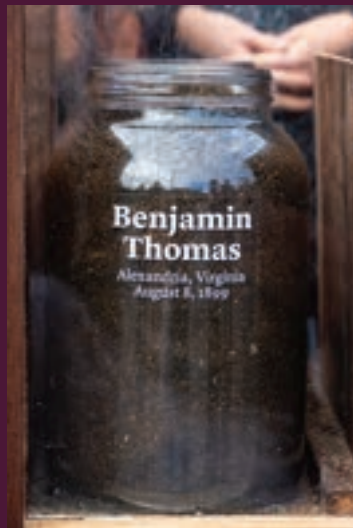
## Remembering Alexandria's Lynching Victims

# JOSEPH MCCOY *and* BENJAMIN THOMAS

April 23, 1897

August 8, 1899

Alexandria Community Remembrance Project // Learn more at [Alexandriava.gov/Historic](http://Alexandriava.gov/Historic)



# THE EARTH SPEAKS: HONORING THE LIVES OF JOSEPH MCCOY AND BENJAMIN THOMAS

The earth speaks.  
Listen to the stories  
from beneath our feet.  
Gather the soil, touch it, smell it,  
reply with your breath  
and heart.

This hallowed ground  
witnessed despicable deeds.  
It cries in pain.  
Let us open our ears to hear  
the mobs, fists, whips, guns, and chains.  
Let us comprehend the horror  
of the noose on the lamppost.  
We must look back  
to sense the wounds and grief,  
the wrongs inflicted  
on the agonized and the aggrieved.

At the same time  
we ask this soil to teach us  
about where our ancestors  
walked and worked and loved,  
the places they learned and played,  
slept and ate and prayed,  
held weddings and baptisms  
and communal celebrations.  
They honored the living and the dead,  
protected and uplifted each other  
with love and kindness.

This earth tells vital stories.  
We feel the deep foundation  
gripping the stones we walk on,  
the roots of the struggle for freedom  
that keep trying to reach upward  
to emerge and grow, until today.  
We are still learning to make way  
for rays of light  
to nourish them.

As we cup this sacred soil in our hands,  
we become grounded in history,  
surrounded by messages from the earth  
and blessings from the sky  
to keep listening—  
like rain on an autumn day  
as it touches everything:  
our schools, homes, neighborhoods,  
the river and the trees,  
these tangible memories of Joseph and Benjamin,  
and the earth  
that continues  
to speak.

## ALEXANDRIA COMMUNITY REMEMBRANCE PROJECT

### SOIL COLLECTION CEREMONY HONORING THE LIVES OF JOSEPH MCCOY AND BENJAMIN THOMAS

Market Square, Alexandria  
September 24, 2022

*I was inspired to write my poem by an interview I watched on the Equal Justice Initiative website. It was of former U.S. Magistrate Judge Vanzetta Penn McPherson. She was asking, what if the soil that we have collected could talk? She said, "I thought that digging on that soil was a poignant way to connect with the time, the event, and most importantly, the man."*

*So I offer this poem as a voice among us to make such connections. We find meaning in the soil we are touching and beholding today, and this helps us commemorate the lives of our Alexandria compatriots Joseph McCoy and Benjamin Thomas.*





# YOU BIRTH THE SEEDS

*To our daughters*

Do not mistake our white hair for weariness.  
We've earned and love  
each snowy strand and coil.

Look up to see the ample rainclouds  
greening open fields, and think of us.  
We birthed the seeds and roused the reeds to sing.

We trust the luminous scales of justice,  
gripped and safe in our hands.  
Behold and cherish them as gleaming guiding stars.

Honor the dark days—they remind us  
there is no morning without night.  
You have the choice: resist, persist, stand tall, find worth.

Now, you're the wafting silk in golden stalks of corn.  
You birth the seeds and rouse the reeds to sing.  
You birth the seeds and rouse the reeds to sing.

We summon you to safeguard the field and home  
we fought so hard to build.  
They are your rightful breath, dignity, sun, and, joy.

# YOU BIRTH THE SEEDS POEM AND CHORAL PREMIER

ALEXANDRIA  
CHORAL SOCIETY

Westminster Presbyterian  
Church, Alexandria  
May 6, 2023

Patrick Henry Recreation  
Center, Alexandria  
May 7, 2023

*The Alexandria Choral Society  
commissioned me to write this poem  
for their program, "On the Other  
Side of Change," which celebrated  
the achievements of women and  
featured women composers from the  
United States and other parts of the  
world. The poem was then arranged  
into four-part harmony by renowned  
composer Melissa Dunphy.*

*Note: I also read this poem at  
the Alexandria Commission for  
Women's 50th birthday celebration  
at Alexandria's City Hall on  
September 24, 2024.*



## MOMS DEMAND ACTION WEAR ORANGE RALLY

Market Square  
June 2, 2023

*I was horrified to learn last year that the number of guns owned by US citizens is higher than the actual number of people who live our country. It is unconscionable. I know that the scourge of gun violence goes beyond the horrendous mass shootings we hear about all too often, but the poem I wrote for today focuses on these shootings.*

## MORE GUNS THAN PEOPLE

There are more guns than people  
in the United States,  
as if a population of firearms  
is vying with humankind.  
Pistols, shotguns,  
assault rifles, machine guns  
flourish at expos and stores,  
convention centers and online.  
They occupy homes,  
closets and drawers,  
safes and strongboxes  
like an evil army  
slowly taking over.

What drives certain people in our midst  
to become so soulless,  
with guns stuck to their legs,  
held against waists,  
hoisted over shoulders,  
creeping through fingers  
and pushing them to aim and fire  
and kill?

Fearful children wonder  
why the right to carry any gun  
is more important than  
their safety at school.  
What do we answer when they ask us  
about Parkland, Virginia Tech,  
Sandy Hook, Uvalde, Columbine?

These mass shootings cannot become news  
that accompanies morning coffee each day.  
The fallen become heroes,  
but they should never have fallen.  
No one should have to face  
an AR-15 at school, university,  
shopping center, supermarket,  
anywhere.  
Ever.

Our solace is that we have each other  
to depend on, work together  
to halt this army of guns.

Praise those who appeal for gun safety,  
background checks, assault weapons bans.

Praise the elected representatives  
who join in these demands.

Praise everyone who is guided  
by the north star of nonviolence.

We sing songs to honor survivors,  
hold hands with grieving families and friends,  
light candles to remember the injured and fallen,  
struggle together to end gun violence,  
write poems to draw each other near.



## 45TH ANNUAL ALEXANDRIA JAZZ FEST

Waterfront Park, Alexandria  
June 16, 2023

*Note: I also read this poem at the ALX Very Merry Jazz Fest on December 16, 2023 at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria.*

## LISTENING TO JAZZ

*The human voice is the most wonderful instrument*

You might admire how the piano keys fan out  
like nights and days juxtaposed, a black and white pattern  
of delicate hammers that span a spectrum of sound,  
nimble fingers tapping tunes that make a body swoon

You could enjoy the muted tones of the saxophone solo  
in the way your own body luxuriates on silk sheets,  
elegant but willful melodies rippling and trilling, brushing  
against your face, eyes, ears

You will wish to revel in the deep voice of the double bass,  
the grandest and lowest instrument of the strings,  
reliable and true, playfully picked or tenderly bowed,  
rousing feet to rap in rhythm

You would definitely delight in the congregation of drums  
that together uphold the band—beams of a house,  
strong and clear—with cymbals abuzz and congas a-cookin'  
to fuse Latin rhythms with syncopated beats

But one sound is astonishingly rich and singular:  
the human voice, without the help of fingers or hands coaxing notes  
from wood, brass, strings, or animal skins—a bountiful breath  
then vocal vibrations surprise, inspire, amaze, astound you—

You who derive pleasure from blues, bebop, samba, and swing,  
you love to listen to the singer scatting and improvising,  
birthing soulful sounds and musical phrases never heard before  
—truly, the most complex and beautiful instrument of all





## FOR THE RIVER, FOR OUR CITY

Gratitude for the city by the Potomac, for a history long flowing  
Like this river that meanders for miles far from our sight

Gratitude for offering clear, still water, mirror to the sky  
And for churning muddy waves that pull deep earth to light

For shores and sand beds, wildflowers, smooth stones  
For blue herons preening, turtles sunning, ducks dabbling, frogs croaking at night

For clouds embracing sun rays, releasing splendid colors at dusk  
For moon rays dancing on ripples, shimmering bright

Gratitude for manifold fish, bountiful and silvery fine  
For twigs and logs and driftwood gliding in gentleness and might

For families picnicking, children frolicking, runners on a path  
Dog walkers and lovers strolling, boaters with sails so white

For early risers seeking solace at sunrise, lost in thought  
Pondering the state of the world—united, we'll make it right

Gratitude for our port city, Alexandria, that brings us together  
We celebrate our joys by the river, we sing a song of thanks tonight

### THE ALEXANDRIA AND USA BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

Oronoco Bay Park | July 8, 2023

*For centuries, the Potomac River has defined Alexandria as a port city, and the waterfront continues to be a big part of our identity. It is also the place where we come face to face with the injustices of our history as we think of the boats of enslaved people landing at our port. In modern times, the riverfront is where we get close to nature, sail and ride on boats, cast our fishing rods, welcome tourists, uplift the arts, break bread together, hold our celebrations and celebrate our milestones, and so much more. My poem focuses on the river and its vital and lovely role in our lives in Alexandria today.*



# SPEAK!

*"I NEED TO SPEAK." – Jasmin's Voice, The Survivors Trust*

To your sisters, to the mourning doves,  
to the river stilled by an absent wind.

Speak with a soft voice today, a hoarse one tomorrow,  
to all who open their ears to your story.

Your words are like a fervent prayer,  
eager and cleansing as a rainstorm.

Choose to remember or not to remember,  
forgive or not to forgive

the ones who hurt you. Each time you speak  
the prick of a memory fades, a thorn withers to dullness.

You, however, are now in a lush, verdant field.  
Birds lift up your song with theirs,

the river offers sturdy stones.  
You will always be beautiful.



## SILENT WITNESS REMEMBRANCE, CANDLELIGHT VIGIL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROJECT, ALEXANDRIA

Market Square  
October 12, 2023

*I came across a website called The Survivor's Trust and read many accounts there about domestic abuse. One in particular went to my heart and inspired me to write this poem. Here is a short quotation from one of the people who wrote about their experiences. Her name is Jasmin:*

*"I still experience dread when it comes to speaking up.... I recently realized [that] going back to the source of when I lost my voice in the first place is a huge step in reclaiming who I am. This passion to finally speak up, letting my truth be known so I can heal. I've been silenced for so long in fear but now, I NEED TO SPEAK."  
– Jasmin's Voice, The Survivor's Trust*



## 51ST ANNUAL MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MEMORIAL PROGRAM

George Washington Masonic  
National Memorial, Alexandria  
January 15, 2024

*As I consider the theme of our program, “Shifting the Cultural Climate: Violence Ceases, Love Prevails,” my thoughts turn immediately to the many wars raging on our planet today—in Sudan, Somalia, Ukraine, Gaza, Myanmar, and others. It is indeed urgent that violence ceases and peace, with justice, finds its way throughout our world, so that love can prevail. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us in his autobiography that “Power, at its best, is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice, at its best, is love correcting everything that stands against love.”*

*As the Vietnam War raged during his time, Dr. King was vocal as a strong opponent of the war. He was criticized because he linked the war and militarism to racism and to diminished civil rights at home. In a 1967 speech titled, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” Dr. King courageously offered empathy to those suffering in Vietnam when he said:*

*“I speak as a child of God and brother to the suffering poor of Vietnam. I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak ... for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world....”*

*Dr. King urged us to be citizens of the world. He preached nonviolence and compassion as principles to practice at home and globally. He admonished us not to stay silent, and to be vocal about opposing war, as a moral imperative. Ultimately, it’s nonviolence and compassion that are the harbingers of love and hope. And in that spirit, I offer a poem that looks for life and love and hope during and after war.*

## DEATH IN WAR

---

After the headlines,  
the photographs of still bodies  
in utter surrender

the stacking and burying  
in unmarked graves

don’t turn away.

Say a prayer for each farmer,  
teacher, bearded grandfather  
on a cane,

mother whose scarf flies in the air,  
father staring at the ground.

Think of the empty chairs  
at the dinner table,  
the shirt and socks missing  
from the clothesline.

Remember each pair of hands  
that opened and closed,  
held a pencil,  
clapped with joy. . .

and when  
the wheat and flowers they sowed  
reach toward the sun

bring water  
to these tenacious  
flags of presence  
on the land.

---

First published in *The Knot Magazine*, Fall 2022, which nominated “Death in War” for a Pushcart Prize. This poem is included in Zeina Azzam’s 2023 poetry collection, *Some Things Never Leave You*.



# A HEALING CIRCLE

*A poem to mark Domestic Abuse Awareness Month*

We have lost so many.  
Countless are scarred.

If we all held hands in a circle  
it would be so large,  
the round space in the middle  
like a searing sun  
radiating beyond our arms.

This is a community wound  
we are encircling, united  
in the embrace.  
We are a halo of friends  
around a hospital bed,  
our ardent wishes coalescing  
as a warm salve,  
cradling the yet unhealed.

We continue to hold onto each other,  
shoulder to shoulder, arm to arm,  
hand in hand, fingers counting  
the ebbs and swellings,  
the memories of wounds among us

and the ways we will  
acknowledge, understand,  
touch  
or let go.

EMBRACE YOUR VOICE POETRY SHARE  
SEXUAL ASSAULT AWARENESS  
AND PREVENTION MONTH

Nannie J. Lee Memorial Recreation Center,  
Alexandria  
April 11, 2024



## 46TH ANNUAL ALEXANDRIA JAZZ FEST

Waterfront Park, Alexandria  
June 21, 2024

*Ella Fitzgerald is one of the most notable and amazing jazz vocalists of all time. The epigraph quotes Jimmy Rowles, the jazz pianist who accompanied Fitzgerald for three years during her career.*

*Note: I also read this poem at the ALX Very Merry Jazz Fest on December 13, 2024 held at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria.*



## ELLA FITZGERALD: LET ME SING FOREVERMORE

*"Music comes out of her. When she walks down the street, she leaves notes." — Jimmy Rowles*

How the syllables rolled off  
her tongue, lucid, limpid,  
a stream flowing in always  
new directions.

And how she sang so low  
and so high—three octaves!—  
the bottom notes deep  
just like a chasm, they  
brought you down, down,  
and then back to the trills  
and thrills up high, all filling  
the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem.

It was bebop that inspired  
her scat singing, those solos and  
fast tempos and borrowed sounds,  
her voice a true instrument of jazz.  
Sometimes she was the trumpet,  
other times a clarinet or sax:  
doo bah dee, dat-n-dat,  
shoo bah dee dat, doo wheee...

The scat queen would later say,  
*I stole everything I ever heard,  
but mostly I stole from the horns.*  
But really Ella stole nothing,  
she crafted her own style  
of vocables improvised with a smile.

Singing through the Great Depression,  
World War II, racial segregation,  
the Vietnam War and so much more,  
she charmed us with duets with  
Satchmo, worked with the greats  
like Dizzy and Duke, Count Basie  
and Joe Pass, gave us the definitive  
American songbook, recording  
2,000 songs!

Beyond Summertime,  
A-Tisket, A-Tasket,  
I Got Rhythm, and Misty,  
Ella would croon  
about the moon, songs that conjure love  
and loneliness, dreams and yearning:  
*Fly me to the moon,  
let me play among the stars,  
fill my heart with song  
and let me sing forevermore,  
let me sing forevermore.*



# WE ARE ALEXANDRIA: THE PEOPLE'S POEM

## REFLECTIONS ON THE CITY'S 275TH BIRTHDAY

We are the sun, the clouds, the trees, and the river  
We are the air and the currents that swirl all around  
We are the history remembered, now faced, always felt  
We fight for our rights, we stand our ground

Our river's waters run deep, full of languages and stories  
We are the hulls of slave ships, some sunken, some buried in earth  
We are the human cargo in chains that built this historic city  
We embody 275 years of both struggle and rebirth

We are the indigenous peoples, the Dogue and Algonquian-speaking Indians  
We've seen colonial times, Civil War and Jim Crow, lynchings, the Movement for Black Lives, and more  
We were once a port for commerce, transporting tobacco on the Potomac  
A railroad center for the Union, a torpedo factory in the Second World War

Now, we're the West End and the waterfront, Old Town, Chirilagua and Del Ray  
Northridge, Rosemont and Potomac Yard, Carlyle, Eisenhower, and Parker Gray  
We look up to the Masonic Memorial, we walk streets with royal names  
These 15.75 square miles are where we live, work, study, dream, and play

We question and probe, we stand up and raise our fists  
Against discrimination and oppression in the world and in our midst  
We understand the connections among all struggles and just causes...  
To end wars and protect the vulnerable — we persist, we persist

### THE ALEXANDRIA AND USA BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS/ ALEXANDRIA'S 275 BIRTHDAY

**Oronoco Bay Park  
July 13, 2024**

*I have tried to bring ALL of us into this poem.  
I hope everyone will feel that it reflects our  
shared history and community, and that it  
celebrates many of our diverse identities,  
sentiments, and experiences.*



We are the L and the G and B and T and Q in LGBTQ+  
We celebrate children and seniors, men and women, trans folks, all  
We are citizens, green card holders, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers  
We've found our home as a community, we pick each other up if one of us falls

We are the interstellar influencer, the 35-million-year-old asteroid that birthed the Chesapeake Bay  
We've been known to declare our love with a towering hot pink neon sign  
Heavy rains visit us each year, flooding pipes to push sewage into the river  
So we brought a massive drill and called it Hazel to dig tunnels and make the water fine

We love pupusas, potato latkes, sushi, biryani, steamed momos, kimchi, and kabab  
We use pita, injera, and chopsticks to savor our national foods  
We play keberos, djembes, rubabs, and congas, sing gospel, spirituals, and sambas  
We bagpipe, dance cumbia and dabkeh, swing to jazz, move to rock, punk, and blues

We're people on boats, bridges, parkways, paved and cobblestone streets  
Find us in wheelchairs and cars, on buses, bikes, metro, and trains  
Our diverse city is a rock with striations, a rainbow, a fabric of many colors  
We're united by living and giving, a search for meaning that never wanes

We are guided by compassion, we insist on truth and equity  
These fundamental principles in our city are everyone's birthright  
We rise in the east with the sun and moon, continue on their journey  
On the arc that bends across the sky toward justice, wisdom, and light





# CROSSING TO SANCTUARY: ALEXANDRIA'S CONTRABANDS AND FREEDMEN'S CEMETERY

On this hallowed ground  
grieving families and friends  
marked resting places for their beloveds  
with wooden grave markers.  
They adorned the graves with oyster shells  
that spoke of the sea and eternal life.

So many coffins held children.  
They lay in wooden boxes,  
elongated hexagons that reminded  
where the small heads and shoulders reposed,  
the funerary crate tapering  
at legs and feet.

The earth mother around them  
continues to offer hidden and untold stories  
about simple buttons and nails  
and Civil War bullets,  
to reveal shards of everyday life,  
even old stone tools.

We stand on this earth knowing that although  
our ancestors' remains now lie undisturbed,  
their lives suffered a dark history.  
It was a time when shackling Black bodies  
was the law of the land, when  
segregation and racial discrimination,  
poll taxes and literacy tests,  
Jim Crow and white supremacy  
were everywhere,  
the air everyone breathed.

But despite the hundreds of years  
that enslaved flesh and bones and minds,  
these ancestors, willful and bold,  
could finally cross to sanctuary.  
Exhausted and weak and thin  
they crossed to sanctuary  
even if many took their last breaths  
after the passage to freedom.

We ask for their forgiveness—  
for the villainy of generations past,  
for those who desecrated their graves,  
for the unfathomable sorrow of their descendants,  
for the continuing injustices,  
for all who suffer  
because the powerful persist in pushing them  
to the powerless margins.

We now come to them  
in reverence and awe.

Rest in peace, our ancestors.  
Rest knowing that you were  
an early light  
navigating a path of thorns to roses  
through this archway in today's Alexandria.  
Our city mourns and grieves,  
remembers, re-consecrates,  
and lifts up your lives.  
Rest in peace, our ancestors.  
Rest in power.  
Rest in justice.  
Rest in dignity.  
Rest in truth.  
Rest in freedom.

## CONTRABANDS AND FREEDMEN CEMETERY MEMORIAL 10TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery  
Memorial, Alexandria  
September 7, 2024

*We mark one of the milestones of our community's  
collective efforts as we continue to elevate the  
experiences of our ancestors and ensure that  
they are resting in peace and dignity in this  
beautiful and sacred space.*



## SEPTEMBER 11, 2001 REMEMBRANCE CEREMONY

Market Square, Alexandria  
September 11, 2024

*The acclaimed African American poet Lucille Clifton wrote a poem after 9/11 titled "September's Song." The first lines were:*

*"Tuesday 9/11/01  
thunder and lightning and our world  
is another place no day  
will ever be the same no blood  
untouched"*

*Indeed, nothing has been the same since that tragic day. As a community we remember and honor the people who were killed, their families, the first responders, and so many others who helped, healed, gave blood, rebuilt, and took care of each other.*

*Allow me to add a personal note here. Because the terrorists hailed from Arab countries, many in the Arab American community, which is my own community here in Alexandria, became suspect after 9/11 and were singled out for discrimination, and sometimes violence and hate crimes. This community includes both Muslims and Christians, and many have been in the United States for generations. It was an awful time for so many of us to navigate this type of prejudice, and sadly, it continues to this day.*

*Another renowned poet, the Polish Adam Zagajewski, also wrote a famous poem that was published shortly after 9/11. It was titled "Try to Praise the Mutilated World." This poem resonated with everyone at the time because it tried to find some hope in our imperfect world, what Zagajewski called our "mutilated world."*

*The poet talks about difficult issues, like those of refugees and exiles, and he even mentions the word "executioners." And then he juxtaposes these with lovely aspects of our everyday lives, like strawberries, a music concert, a park in autumn. I thought of reading this poem to you today, but I felt that it didn't go far enough. What I wanted to hear the poet say was that we should NOT ACCEPT all the flaws in our world. I wanted him to say that we should try to CHANGE the world instead.*

*So I wrote a poem of my own as an answer to Zagajewski's words, addressing him. In the world of poetry, poets often have conversations with each other through their poems. So in that spirit I humbly offer my poem to you today, in memory of the victims of 9/11, and in deference to the sacrifices so many made. I read it with gratitude to the wise words of the late poet Adam Zagajewski.*



# ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11: PRAISING OUR MUTILATED WORLD

— after Adam Zagajewski

How can we try to praise this mutilated world?  
Yes, September's days bring leaves that turn  
a lovely amber and red. But in them we also see  
flames of planes and embers of buildings  
that collapsed not so long ago. This is a month  
marred. Even the Second World War started  
and ended during other Septembers.

Must we praise the mutilated world?  
Why laud the storms on the seas, the exiles  
and refugees, as if their fleeing in ragged boats  
in nighttime isn't pierced by the tyrants'  
searing suns?

Should we praise our mutilated world?  
Our time together is filled with thoughts  
of starving, orphaned children,  
it brims with attempts to beseech  
the ones in power who refuse to stop  
war and genocide. A square of white cloth  
held on a stick means little now,  
a peaceful lullaby is hushed.

Praise the mutilated world, you write.  
Please give us faith that the gentle light  
and the gray feather will return. Make us believe  
that to praise the world we must stop the killing  
and not accept it, we must not have to hide  
our books and icons, our foods and histories.

We will then praise a mutilated world that works  
to make a change, to make peace.



# THIS IS OUR ARTFUL HOME

— In honor of the Torpedo Factory Art Center's 50th anniversary,  
September 14, 2024

Artists and visionaries built this welcoming space.  
On their shoulders we stand.  
There is a spirit here, collaborative, innovative,  
inspired, diverse—  
a living monument to imagination.

Beyond these big windows are a marina,  
boats in mid-sail.  
Gone are ships hauling torpedoes away and  
bringing the machinery of war to our shore.  
Implements to destroy have been replaced  
by tools to create.  
In this building we've fashioned plowshares  
from clay, paint, metal, and so much more.

The three-year experiment to transform this edifice  
has pressed on for a half century.  
Those who produce art and those who appreciate it  
have become a community,  
together forging a home,  
making a place:

Three floors, ten galleries,  
a spiral staircase bordered by elegant human forms.  
Dozens of artists, administrators, interns, volunteers.  
In action are the working sculptors  
jewelers potters painters  
printmakers photographers  
artists in mixed media, fiber, collage, and glass.

Watch them create  
in their artful home.  
And listen to the words one imagines they say:

We are the muses, the creative souls, the wide-eyed children.  
We dream a little dream each time we build with our hands.  
We imagine colors, shapes, and lines beyond dimensions and rules.  
Our art grows like a nourishing spring from the depths of our hearts  
to yours.



## TORPEDO FACTORY ART CENTER'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Torpedo Factory Art  
Center, Alexandria  
September 14, 2024

*The Torpedo Factory Art Center is a perfect example of "placemaking," a concept that I just learned as I read about the development of this important place of art in Alexandria.. It's when you take something old and abandoned and make it something new, for the benefit of the community. At the end of my poem, I'll ask you to indulge me briefly as I take the liberty of speaking in the voice of the artists and imagining what they say to us each day.*

## ALEXANDRIA CITY COUNCIL INSTALLATION CEREMONY

Rachel M. Schlesinger Concert Hall  
& Arts Center, Alexandria  
January 2, 2025

*As I considered what to focus on in this poem,  
I thought of the two important parties here:  
the people — that's all of us — who voted  
and made a choice, and the office holders  
themselves, who take a solemn oath that  
affirms their responsibility to work for  
what is best for the people and for the  
City of Alexandria.*



## OUR CITY RENEWED

*For Alexandria's City Council installation and mayoral  
inauguration, January 2, 2025*

There is a newness—  
like the first wondrous snowflake of the season  
falling on a tongue, an acorn  
holding promise in a single seed.

Remember that something always opens  
after leaves have fallen  
and mud covers the earth.  
We wait for what we planted.

Now the people gather  
to speak, to listen, to hope.  
They declare: We believe in change,  
we believe in our vision for this city.

The river wants to carry them,  
to lift up their dreams and say:  
There is reason to remember  
that all waves eventually come to shore.

And they do: the waves, the stories  
about injustice, the work toward equality,  
the ways to convey togetherness  
in all the languages the city speaks.

The leaders open their hearts  
to receive blessings from the people.  
They repeat: We hear you. We affirm that  
we are all responsible for each other.

A wise woman in their midst opens  
a long-closed door with the confidence  
only her hard work, and this caring community,  
could give her. She is grateful, determined.

Above, the waxing crescent moon  
illuminates history and possibilities,  
rises to imbue the city with courage  
to work for a just world, toward light.





## 52ND ANNUAL MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MEMORIAL PROGRAM

George Washington Masonic National  
Memorial, Alexandria  
January 15, 2025

*The themes we are highlighting this year — freedom, justice, and democracy — are found throughout Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches and writings. He enjoins us to keep struggling for these ideals and not to rest. His "I Have a Dream" speech includes the following words, which invoke the Old Testament. He said:*

*"No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."*

*Dr. King then goes on to affirm the dreams that he has. This monumental speech has become part of our history and culture and our moral compass as caring human beings.*

*The amazing and globally minded poet June Jordan, who also wrote with such humanity and principle, said: "To tell the truth is to become beautiful, to begin to love yourself, value yourself. And that's political, in its most profound way."*

*I have been thinking about these words by June Jordan and Dr. King, and the personal and political idea of dreaming a better future. Of course what is important is not only dreaming and imagining a free, just, and democratic society, but also working toward making this dream a reality.*

*Among us are dreamers who are abolitionists, union organizers, antiwar and pro-ceasefire activists; those who demand an end to discrimination based on race, gender, age, disability, socioeconomic status, and national and religious identity; and activists who call for immigrant rights, climate justice, ethical investing of our resources, and the implementation of civil rights laws at home, and human rights laws internationally. I salute them all.*



## WE ALL CAN DREAM

*No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. —Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Those who dream have been among us for millennia.  
Their visions are the halo around the moon,  
the green buds in springtime, the truth in water,  
the cleansing power of rain.

The dreamers understand the risks and sacrifices  
they may have to make. Their special souls  
probe the scourges of poverty and war and racism.  
Their voices amplify the rights every single person deserves.

We don't always know the dreamers or see their fists  
raised high. We may not hear about them until  
one is tortured or assassinated or taken to prison  
for years. But their dreams persist in the air we breathe.

Langston Hughes asks, "What happens to a dream deferred?"  
Does it dry up, fester, crust over, sag, or explode?  
How do we support and embolden new generations  
to imagine, lift up, and attain a better world?

Even if our own gardens wither because of drought,  
we know there are others thriving under a generous sky.  
We cannot let mountains and borders, walls and fences,  
separate us from growing our dreams together.

Dr. King's immortal dream, an embrace across the globe,  
lives in all of us. It teaches us that real love is a radical act.  
We engage with life, we advocate; we stand against apartheid  
and war and genocide, we believe that no one person

is better than another, and that power comes from how much  
we want freedom for ourselves and each other — and not  
what we wield over others. That with true acknowledgment,  
reparations, and hard work, freedom, democracy, and justice  
will "[roll] down like waters, and righteousness a mighty stream."

I Have A Dream

# DASHING WORDS IN MOTION

*Since 2014, the City of Alexandria's Office of the Arts and the Alexandria Transit Company have collaborated to present the "DASHing Words in Motion" poetry contest. Winning poems are placed on the DASH (Driving Alexandria Safely Home) buses and trolleys during April for National Poetry Month. The poems must be 30 words or less. Each year, the poet laureate also submits a poem for the contest, and here are the poems I wrote.*

APRIL 2022:

## O DASH BUS DRIVER!

We're grateful you  
carry us where  
road meets river

waters lap near children  
playing at the pier

a sailboat floats  
now close, now remote

birds glide  
now far, now near





# ANNUAL POETRY CONTEST



APRIL 2023:

## WHAT WE HOLD DEAR

People mover,  
circulator

Wheelchair and  
bicycle carrier

The bus holds near  
what we hold dear

It uplifts words  
of community—

reading, writing,  
admiring poetry

is so inspiring!



# DASHING WORDS IN MOTION

APRIL 2024:

## DASHING WORDS IN MOTION BIRTHDAY

For ten years  
We've written verse  
About riding and moving  
Dashing and grooving

The bus circulates  
As we celebrate  
Our community spirit—

Conclude with gratitude  
That what's reflected  
Is how much we're  
connected





# ANNUAL POETRY CONTEST



APRIL 2025:

## **A COMMUNITY AS WE RIDE**

The bus gathers us,  
a living room  
for strangers.  
Our eyes meet.  
Your face, hardened.

A mother and child enter.  
The baby coos  
and you smile.  
This tenderness,  
a surprise.







