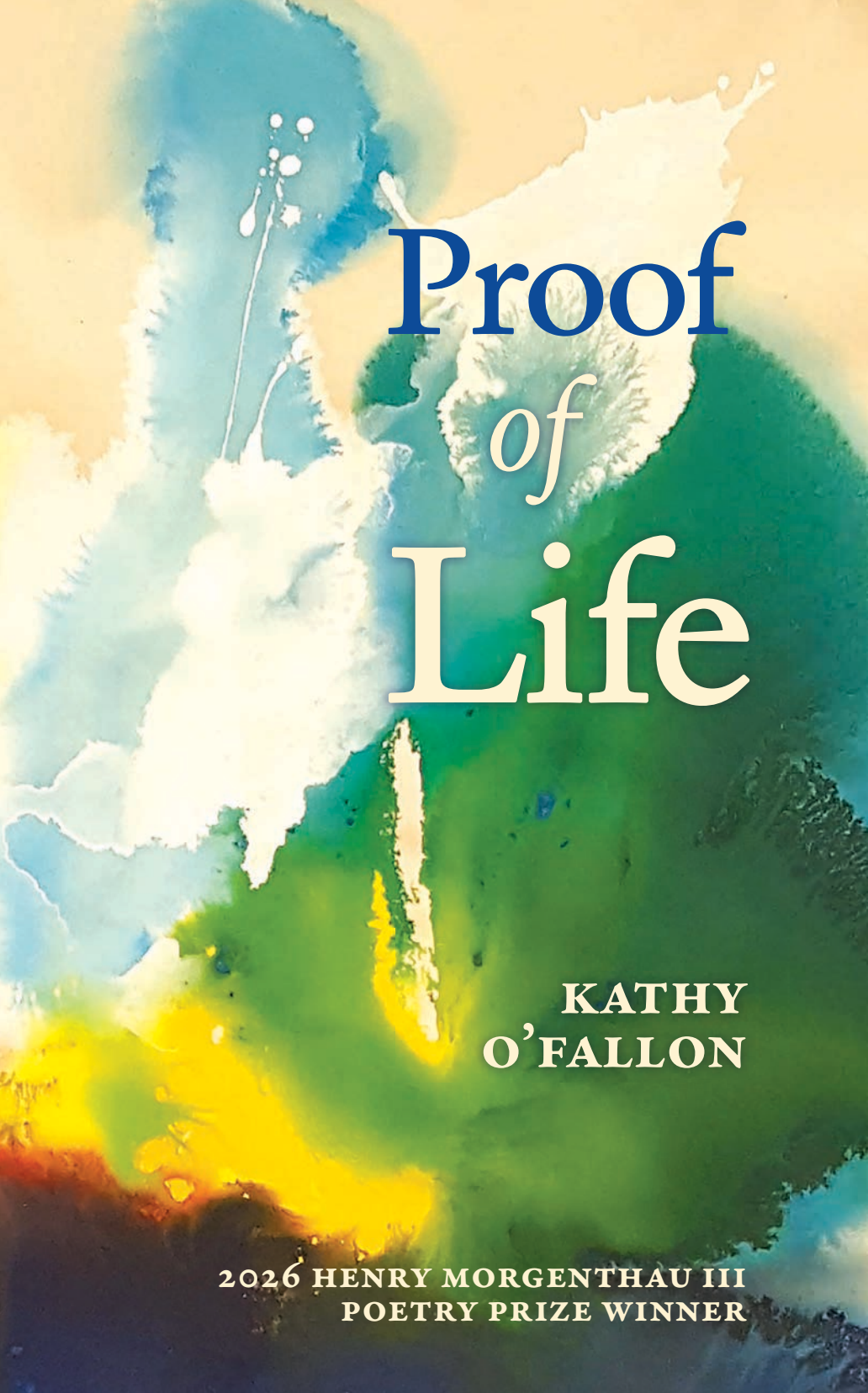




Proof *of* Life

KATHY
O'FALLON

2026 HENRY MORGENTHAU III
POETRY PRIZE WINNER

LISTENING FOR TCHAIKOVSKY

Violin Concerto Op. 35

Sometimes, when his band would get a gig, my dad
would be gone for hours—a wedding or dance
if he was lucky—his lips wet with the spit
of the trumpet's mouthpiece (and who knows what else),
valves oiled, and slides, greased pistons, pipes.
And with his instrument all polished and shiny,
the smooth sounds of Belafonte and the jazz of Louis.
My dad, dimple-chinned, long and lean—Cary Grant,
some thought—man, he could really blow a horn,

but home was where I lived, greedy for evenings
without the slingshot of his tempers, where I could rest
my head to the click of Mom's violin case opening,
the clack of the music stand unfolding, the oily smell
of resin-stroked bow-hairs, knowing what she loved
was tucked under her chin, right elbow cocked
like a wing, ready for take-off, and the sound of Heifetz
leading his flock to *Romeo and Juliet*, where music flew
to the cage of my dreams, safe as unsafe could be.

INHERITANCE

The pistol-shot of Dad's voice fires from below. I sneak down the dark hallway, crouch at the top stair, peer between the railing. Someone's under the gun.

Let's call me *look-out-girl*, who else at only nine. Dad, let's call him *horn-blower*, *bread-home-bringer*, *slap-stick-humor*, *powder keg*. Mom, she's *Peace*—

the rosebush by the back door high as the header; *tree-swing* rocking her babies to sleep; *sandbox castles* and *dug-down tunnels*; the *bow-stroked violin*.

Just so we know who's who. But am I not long-legged too, first-born to boot, my mother's daughter? It's she he throws over his lap, sitting on the couch like a suitor, sleeves pushed

up to his elbows, who yanks down her slacks, ass up—the caught tender of fish-white. Palm of his hand open above her, bulls-eyed. Her cries. My ears. His boot-kick

verse: *slap-jack*, *thunder-crack*, *yellow-jack*. I bullet down the stairs, piggy-back target his shoulders, fist-pound. Call me *chop-off-the-old-block*? Quick-crazed, I call

Grandma before he grabs the phone to sing the liar's song, as the garage door yawns open, and *Peace* tunnels free: *String-whine*, *horn-blare*, *town-crier* me.

“THAT’S THE SOUND OF THE MEN”

Just eleven when the butter of Sam Cooke’s tenor
basted my body: *all-day-long-they’re-sayin’*

moist as dark meat on a rotisserie: *uh ah, uh ah, uh ah*,
the primal beat a purple vein of heat steaming up

Darlene’s basement juke box, sound trumping words—
the *moaning-their-lives-away* lyrics—four friends

cheek-to-cheek or sliding the Stroll, wrist-kissing
for warm-ups, by twelve a quick brush on the lips.

We were daylight against the black crow of Jims,
knew nothing of suffering in this earthly world—

the thistle of whips slashing a chain gang. But
the night my mother dies into that brightness

you blink from after a *work-is-so-hard* sentence,
a large black bird, like a shadow puppet, flaps

across my dream, and I wake all grown, knowing,
fall from the soul of girlhood into the arms of the blues.

PLUM

The unassuming plum clothed in earthy
purple, festooned with gray-green velvet.
From the Neolithic—a great survival
instinct. And who can help but notice
its resemblance to a testicle, fertile vessel,
musky as honey, hanging, blemished skin—
burls and scars from the trunk's war of growth.

Not since Neruda have I tasted fruit
this juicy, sweet and spunky as a kiss
on a cliff above the surf at St. Tropez.
Mouth sucking magenta, 1812 Overture
from the waves, its finale exploding
down my lined and weathered chin,
begging to be licked—yes, violined.
No lover in my midst but my tongue.

BEFORE THE METAPHOR DIES

Someone tossed watermelon seeds
under the lemon trees. Neighbors warn
illegals live in the groves, rumor drugs.
Ungroomed, a few acres of land, between
million-dollar homes. My dog's favorite spot
to lift his leg. A wet spring, the seeds sprout
into tributaries, their fingers stretching
along the ground and up the lemon trunks
like the famous bean stalk, megaphone leaves
roaring from their plumage, over-shadowing
the tear-drop foliage, bulbs swelling overnight,
dwarfing the sun-yellow fruit. But somehow
the branches bear the watermelons' full weight,
support them until they're ripe, until free food
is offered up. The Statue of Liberty at work,
despite what people say.

BETRAYAL

When the storm had cleared
enough to bless the aftermath,

I puddled my way down
the sloping acre of mud

to the modest, mature grove of orange,
avocado. Perhaps because I'd once been

grateful, the latter had sprouted thousands
of buds for a generous crop next season,

but a larger truth had swamped
the landscape: *nothing ever belongs to you—*

a bearded wind snapping the Fuerte's trunk
in two, its magnificence limp at my feet

like a felled green dragon. I ached
to lay my body over it like a shield—

God, don't we belong to everything?
refuse the drowning downpour

due that night before wilted
leaves were blown to gutters,

raked into dumpsters
and not thought of again,

deny the rabid guttling pyre
of branches sanitized to ashes,

and the one surviving fruit
too high to grasp

now before me within reach,
half-chewed by another claimant.

BEHIND THE VEIL

One night a week, unless it can't be helped, my daughter lets her three-year-old sleep tandem in the king-sized bed for one. The sheets are damp with sweat, it's too hot to snuggle, they try and try to close their eyes, but the lids aren't having it.

*Mommy, I can see the superpowers in your room.
I can only see them in the dark.* Black-out curtains.

Superpowers?

*They're round. Like bubbles. They have all the colors.
They're the goodest things, the happy things,
the most beautiful things. I made them with God
when I was in God.*

You did? My daughter reaches for her phone, presses the voice record button.

I chose you, Mommy. With God.

What are the superpowers for?

*To help us learn and grow, and to help Mommy get
through the hard things. They help Mommy's work
doing better. It's my project, but I can only work on it
when I'm alone in my room.* She pauses. *Someone bad
broke out of jail to be bad and got rid of some. I really
need all these.* She sighs, and one of them goes to sleep.

“Philosophical,
conversational,
sharply observant,
Proof of Life surges
through a lifetime of energy,
experience, and wisdom—
everywhere a pleasure
to read.”

Alicia Ostriker

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