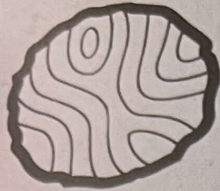




DRIFTWOOD  
2025 ANTHOLOGY



# DRIFTWOOD PRESS

2025 ANTHOLOGY

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EMILEE KINNEY

COUNTY FAIR AT NIGHT

&

INTERVIEW

# COUNTY FAIR AT NIGHT

Emilee Kinney

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Horse heads poke out stall windows  
like the deer we've mounted  
on our walls. Dusty rafters house  
a cathedral of manure sweat

and sweet feed, shake straw  
on our shoulders, fill our hat brims  
with sawdust as we stuff our bootcut  
jeans into our boot tops and click

clack down the concrete aisle toward  
a moonlit pasture. Someone's  
truck is humming with a song about  
strawberry wine and the crickets

are lowing in protest. We are an army  
marching out to the dew-soaked field,  
our skin slick, everything glowing.  
Looking back, the barn lights

are a thin sliver slicing across  
the field's crest. The men here  
smell like oil and spearmint tobacco,  
like whiskey and tree sap and they all want

to hold our bright-belted hips.  
As much as small-town folks  
can be, most of us are strangers.  
I recognize the man that's pulled

me into his mat  
from three aisles ov  
he's wearing the s  
with the left elbow

I don't know his  
for awhile: he tr  
my neck, my ch  
to the tall grass

in Queen Ann  
His arm is tig  
of my back a  
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of his camo  
river stones  
We dance  
a fire out

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me into his matchbox-frame,  
from three aisles over in church,  
he's wearing the same green flannel  
with the left elbow burned, but

I don't know his name. We dance  
for awhile: he tries to peck  
my neck, my chest, when he dips me  
to the tall grass, a baptism

in Queen Anne's lace.  
His arm is tight around the small  
of my back and I see his dark eyes  
beneath the curled brim

of his camo ballcap like two  
river stones pressed into his skull.  
We dance until someone lights  
a fire out of old napkins and their uncle's

moonshine on the front seat  
of an abandoned pickup rotting  
in the tree line. Smoke swells  
in the cab like a bruise until

someone breaks the driver's window.  
A blaze lashes out, snaps against  
the dry bark. Thorn apple branches sizzle,  
adorning the rising ash in rings.

# EMILEE KINNEY

## In Conversation

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**Sara Moore Wagner:** This poem is so atmospheric! What advice do you have for establishing setting in a poem?

**Emilee Kinney:** For establishing a setting in a poem, my advice is to think about the minute details, the things you normally overlook, things only people who aren't from there seem to notice. Make those details front and center right away, so you can ground the reader regardless of whether this is a place they have never been or a place they are familiar with.

Growing up in rural Michigan, the 4H Fair was a lifestyle, an expectation of the summer. When I moved away and started sharing stories with people who grew up in cities or simply places without this ritual, I realized how unique and strange and beautiful it was. To really capture it for someone who has no reference for the experience, I needed to engage all of my readers' senses. For example, "Dusty rafters" are something you can see and smell, you can hear the cowgirl boots "click // clack down the concrete aisle," and you can feel the contrast between "sawdust [and] the dew-soaked field."

For a truly immersive experience, even once that grounding work is done in the beginning, I think it's important to keep introducing new sensations to the reader throughout the poem. Call on active images and specific details that enhance both the story of the poem and of the place the poem inhabits.

**SMW:** This poem feels so distinctly American and rural. Can you tell me more about where you come from and the place that inspired this poem?

**EK:** I'm from Kenosha, Michigan which is a rural farm town about twenty-five minutes away from Lake Huron. It has a typical small town feel where everyone knows each other (or at least, about each other), lots of farmland hosting corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay labored over by hard working families.

I grew up just down the road from the Goodells County Park which hosts the St. Clair County 4H Fair every summer. It is easily the biggest event in the area. 4H kids work year-round, preparing and training their animals. During the fair, there are barns full of horses, cows, rabbits, chickens, and more—each of them with a sign on their stall that tells a little bit about their story and the kid who loves/raised them. Lots of families camp out with their animals

during fair week, so the  
—a small town within  
This poem, "Count  
County Park and the S  
up competing with my  
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kids would dance un  
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most beautiful.

**SMW:** This poe  
into a poem?

**EK:** "County  
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during fair week, so the fairground itself becomes a little community—a small town within a small town.

This poem, “County Fair at Night” is a blend of the Goodells County Park and the Sanilac County 4H Fair which is where I ended up competing with my horse the most. At the end of the Sanilac Fair, there was always a Teen Night when they’d play music and high school kids would dance under a pavilion. When the music ended there, the party often continued in a nearby field, away from parents and younger siblings. This was an exciting time for teenagers—fair week provided this empowering liminal space where we were responsible for ourselves and our animals. We had spent the week equally working together and competing against one another, sharing meals, tack, and tools—we felt like adults and usually ended the week trying to celebrate the way adults do.

What has always fascinated me about this space is the inherited ritual. Most of our parents had shown their animals when they were kids at the same fairgrounds, went out in the same field with their friends, caused the same mischief. One of them probably drove the now-rotting pickup and got it stuck in that tree line in the first place. Don’t get me wrong, there have been plenty of changes over time—new stadium lights around the riding arenas and more food truck options—but after a long fair week, different generations trudge through the same wildflowers to find a clearing in the field and dance in the same shadows of thorn-apple trees. Out of all the things we pass down, this cycle feels most beautiful.

**SMW:** This poem feels like a dance. What’s the best way to bring music into a poem?

**EK:** “County Fair at Night” has a physical dance within it that I wanted to be reflected in the language and pacing, so the reader could experience the dance along with the speaker—I’m glad it seems to have worked! For me, alliteration and internal rhyme make the most magic for a lyrical poem, but I was conscious of the line length for this poem as well. Visually, the lines are relatively the same, but looking at the meter, the longest lines are when energy in the poem is rising: “We are an army” and “a fire out of old napkins.” Likewise, the shortest line is when the speaker is dipped into “Queen Anne’s lace,” an action that requires a physical pause and a moment I wanted to linger with the reader. I like to imagine poems having breath and with that breath, a rhythm that I can set language and images to, something that will ultimately pace a reader’s breath in the same way a song gets stuck in their head. I don’t know if it’s the best way, but pairing alliteration and internal rhyme with the ebb and flow of breathing has been the most helpful way for me to bring music into a poem.