

“Old Love Does Not Rust”:

Explorations in Baltic-themed Poetry

Poems in Celebration of the Baltics

by M. Lee Alexander

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All photography by the author unless otherwise noted.

Dedicated to the Peoples of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

With Admiration and Appreciation

For what they Bring to the Baltics

And the World

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments (TBA)

ESTONIA:

The Ballad of Tallinn (Sa Oled Siin).....	5
Lady with a Dish.....	6
Roll, Tallinn, Roll!.....	7
Museum of Puppetry Arts.....	8
Three Tartu Tankas.....	9
Kalevipoeg.....	10

LATVIA:

Latvian Red.....	12
Unsung Treasures of Latvia.....	13
Liepaja Walking Tour.....	14
Song of Riga.....	15
Castle of Light.....	17

LITHUANIA:

Vilnius HEARTS Ukraine.....	19
Villanelle to Vilnius: Window Shopping.....	20
Jewish Heritage.....	21
Sestina to St. Jonas' Day	22
Pantoum for Palanga.....	24

PAN-BALTIC:

Honey Cakes of the Baltics.....	26
The Baltic Tigers.....	27
Jewels of the North: Pan-Baltic Diamantes.....	28
Rail Baltica Route Map (Simultaneous Poem).....	29

END MATTER:

Author Biography.....	31
Book Jacket Blurbs.....	31

POEMS: ESTONIA



ESTONIA: Capital City

The Ballad of Tallinn (Sa Oled Siin)

And all Tallinn cries Behold, I am new and I am old!
 I am Nordic, I am Baltic, I am dance and I am song
 I am classic and contemporary won't you come along.
 I am Holy I am hipster, I am high tech, I am hot
 I'm inventive, I am virtual, I am innovative, bold—
 I am castles, I am kisses, I am green and I am gold
 I am quirky cool and kindly, I am stubbly—I am strong.

And all Tallinn calls to you: I am old and I am new!
 I am crafty, I am arty, I am architectural too
 I am gardens, parks, and playgrounds
 mushroom pie and buckwheat stew;
 I am weathervanes and wallhooks,
 berry wine and house-brewed beer—
 I am windy wild and wonderful and wishing you were here!



ESTONIA: Sculptures, Fountains, & Monuments

Lady with a Dish

After the Fountain in Old Town, Tallinn (1936)

In Old Town Gardens you will find
The lovely Lady with a Dish:
waters flow down smooth around her
pooling round her ankles, flowing
and the sun reflected, glowing
while the children dance in circles
splashing in the fountains' waves

Many years have you been bending
neath the stone dish, never-ending
as the rain falls down around you
in an ever-flowing torrent, yet
the joy that you are bringing
as the bells above you ringing
to the tourists and the locals
promenading round your fount . . .

So I'm a lady with a wish
for the Lady with a Dish:
bear your burdens lightly, flowing
while the grass around you growing
and the strength that comes of knowing
you are bringing joy and laughter
with the splashing from your waters
to the people of the world!



ESTONIA: Contemporary Society

Roll, Tallinn, Roll!

Spin Tallinn

Tallinn runs on wheels

bicycle, dicycle, moped, monowheel

scooters electric and scooters powered by foot

tram wheels, truck wheels, cart wheels, bus wheels

strollers, double strollers, triple strollers, jogger-strollers!

motorcycles, rental bikes, and heavy-metal scary bikes

Futuristic Enterprise six-wheeled delivery bots

there's rickshaw wheels, velomobiles

slick skateboarders galore –

Skywheel!

(stock photo)



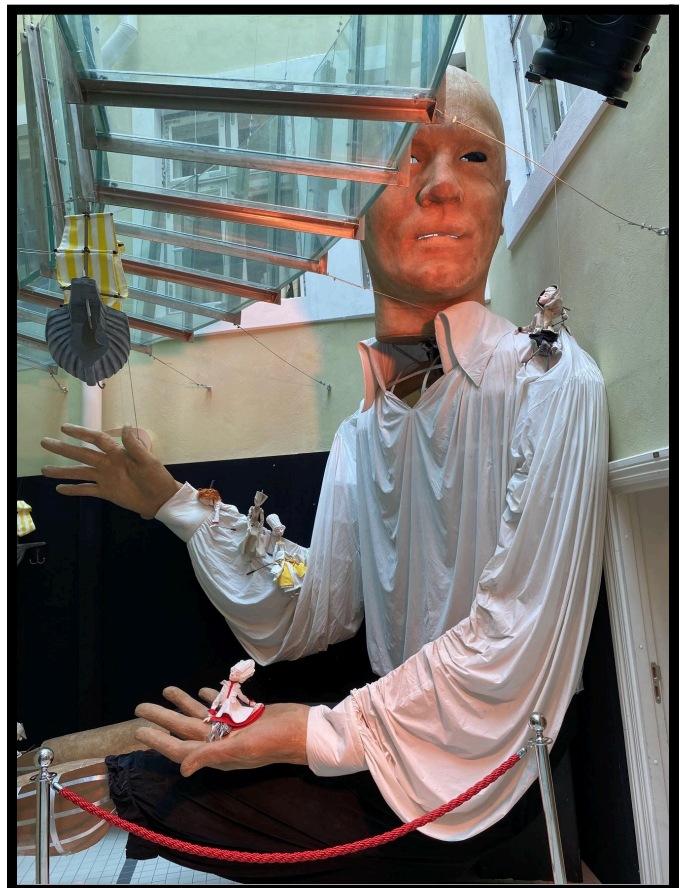
ESTONIA: Museums

Museum of Puppetry Arts (*in progress*)

Shadow, rod, marionette, tabletop, hand, flat

Ferdinand Veike, 1st artistic director

Gulliver in Land of the Giants puppet = 7 meters tall!



ESTONIA: Iconic City

Three Tartu Tankas (*in progress*)

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7 The City Center (Kesklinn)

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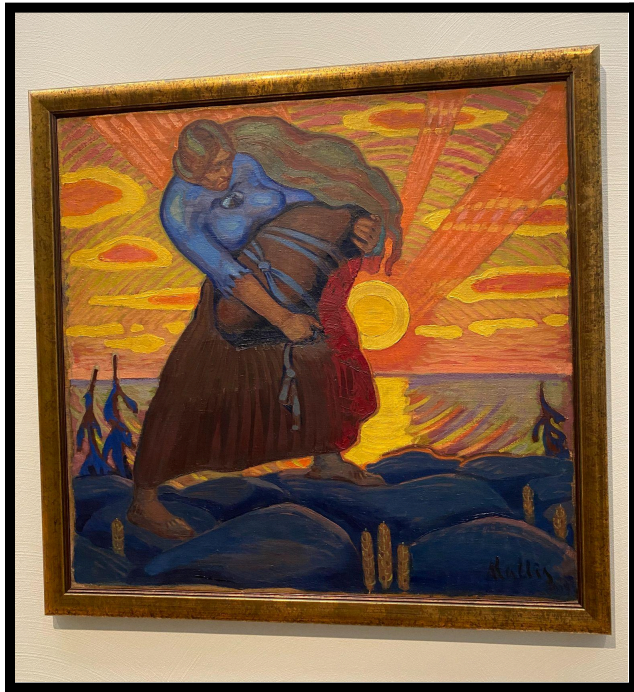
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ESTONIA: Traditional Culture and Art



(*Linda Carrying a Rock*, Oskar Kallis 1917)

Kalevipoeg

Father of the Sea
(The Baltic Sea shifts grey to
blue to green to black)

Linda carries her
grief like a stone burden to
mark her husband's grave

Kalevipoeg's
fine ship *Lennuk* braves the waves—
its red sail flies wide!



(*Lennuk*, Nikolai Triik, 1910)

POEMS: LATVIA

LATVIA: The Flag and Art

Latvian Red

In the Rothko Room at The Phillips Collection in Washington, DC they only let in eight visitors at a time so the colors can saturate your very being in their loud stillness—so I sit with a few random strangers and we open our souls to the vibrant hues until we feel them full inside as well as all around and echoing from each wall

Then later when I live in Liepāja during the 100th anniversary of Latvia's Independence and I see the flags fly high on every corner and am nearly crushed by the crowd in Riga's Old Town as proud citizens rejoice in song for their country's hard-won Centenary—I finally fully understand the rich deep intensity of Latvian Red.



LATVIA: Culture & Identity

Unsung Treasures of Latvia

It's the little things that drew me in
that delighted my colleagues and neighbors and friends
as much as the soaring steeples and towers
it was chocolate and candles and dill and flowers!

They are treasures though not in museums found
but in markets and homes and cafes they abound—
the secret appeal of these pleasing deceits,
of candles and flowers and dill and sweets!

Our castles and palaces grand in design
are not the only marvels you'll find—
From Rēzekne to Riga just come and relax
we have herbs and blooms and candles of wax!

Our galleries brimming with sculpture and art
and magnificent buildings play their part,
but of Latvian joys I will ne'er have my fill:
of chocolate and candles and flowers and dill!

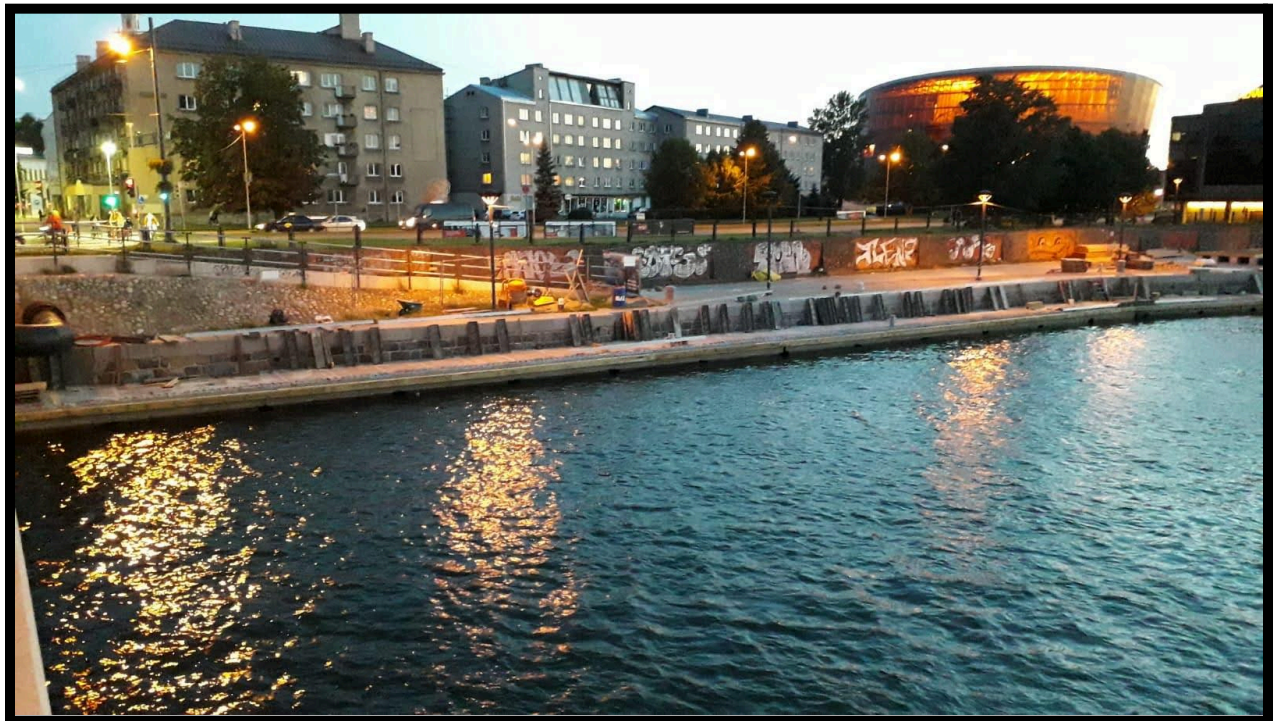
(photo by Kristen Carlson)



LATVIA: Iconic City

Liepāja Walking Tour

While you're in Latvia
be sure to take a side-trip to
Liepāja, "where the wind is born":
Amble down the Musicians' Alley of Fame
View Great Amber Concert Hall *Lielais Dzintars*
Take a stroll down Liela Iela or spot the Livi Ghost Tree
Hike out to naval port Karosta, historic military complex.
Defy the wind and bicycle along the path through shady pine trees
to the beach, then hunt for amber ensnarled in seaweed along the shore—
Try your hand at finding mushrooms in the woods and sadly when it's time to go
name the stray cat at the train station Liepāja as it purrs in your lap, and vow to return.



LATVIA: Capital City

Song of Riga

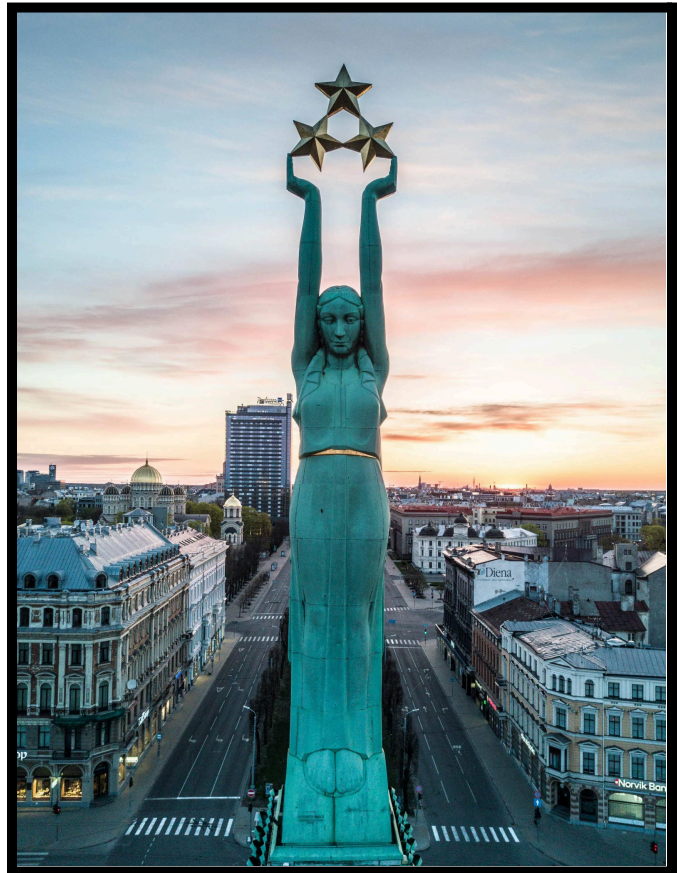
Come take the Riga Grand Tour with me,
this city built upon a mound of gold
or so the legend says. Trace its history
back to 1201 and see the city grow before
your eyes, through multiple regimes.
Sing a song of Riga, home of the

Latvian Song & Dance Festival:
join the Great Choir as thousands
lift their voices and perform traditional
dances plus original songs by classic
and contemporary composers. with
procession of all participants!

Stroll with me down Alberta Iela
to see why Riga is crowned as
Capital of European Art Nouveau:
some 800 houses throughout town
display the magnificent intricate
animal and nature motifs blend

Admire the wooden architecture
or marvel at the work of Architect
Mikhael Eisenstein; enjoy
the story of the cheeky Riga Cat,
Loop around lovely Livu Square
or cruise along the River Daugava

Take a Canal Boat Trip all around
The metropolis and out to sea.
View Riga Castle, Dome Cathedral,
St. Peter's Church! Then
contrast with the magnificent
National Library, modern pyramid



(stock photo)

Take in a world-class performance
at the Latvian National Opera House,
or explore the Blackheads Museum:
find the weathervane of St. George,
and check the time on Laima Clock
before slipping in to an Old Town cafe

Buy Black Balsam of Riga
at the Central Market, complex
alcoholic herb drink from
a mid-18th century recipe,
then amble through Town Hall Square,
go enjoy the Vermāne Garden

Or if you tire of Riga
(and no one ever tires of Riga)
then journey out to Jurmala
on the Gulf, 20 kilometers
and you are there along the beach
historic city at your doorstep

But always conclude your tour
at Freedom Monument on
Freedom Boulevard, and rejoice
with the citizens of Latvia
for their Independence hard
fought-for: Celebrate, and Sing!

LATVIA: Architecture



Castle of Light

(Latvia National Library)

MM

Window me
into the world of
books that are about
Everything you can imagine
And stack up several stories tall with
Four-million volumes wide and you can stretch
Sky high and climb into their wisdom like an explorer on
A mountain and scale their spiky spines like fore-edged footholds
Into new discoveries of all things Baltic and beyond because in here
Information and imagination, like the people of Latvia, are open and free

(stock photo)



POEMS: LITHUANIA

LITHUANIA: Contemporary Society

Vilnius HEARTS Ukraine

(Padèkime Ukrainai drauge!)

Weave a banner blue and yellow
all across the city wide
welcome in your war-torn neighbors
care and shelter to provide

From the busses to street corners
cafes to Cathedral Square
flags declare your full support
of suffering families needing care

Homes and schools fling wide their doors
to refugees fleeing their land
traveled far to seek the freedom
that's been wrenched from out their hand

Giant Putin skull-like mask
grins at the Russian Embassy,
and the Mayor paints a sign:
“Putin, the Hague—it waits for thee!”

Culture Nights the flags fly high
throughout the bicycle parade:
“Light always wins” says blue & yellow
and that light will never fade

So Vilnius gathers food and funds,
runs a city-wide campaign:
“Let's all help Ukraine together,
We're united with Ukraine!”



LITHUANIA: Capital City

Villanelle to Vilnius: Window Shopping

The Grand Duke in Vilnius' Cathedral Square
points out to local products on display:
the honey of the amber and the bee.

The honey of the amber and the bee
contrasts with hues of textiles woven fine,
in Vilnius shops just off Cathedral Square.

In Vilnius leave the Duke and stroll along
from Holy Donut to the Cat Café:
red amber and sweet honey from the bee!

The honeys of the amber and the bee
fill up shop windows with their warming glow:
just ask the Grand Duke in Cathedral Square.

Gediminas, Founding Duke commands the Square.
He knows Lithuanian Gold comes in two kinds:
from wave-washed amber and the honey-bee.

The honey of the amber and the bee
are jewels of the land and of the sea—
just past the Bronze Duke in Cathedral Square
find Vilnius' treasures waiting for you there.



(stock photo)

LITHUANIA: Culture & Identity**Jewish Heritage** (*in progress*)

LITHUANIA: Holidays

Sestina to St. Jonas' Day

On June 24 come through the gates
to celebrate Joninès with bonfires—
it is also sometimes called Holiday of Dew
because much dew brings good harvest and
we wear a braided floral crown
and search all night for flowers of the fern

Because if you can find the elusive fern
it's good luck and you may find it near the gates
as you weave your leafy crown
and dance around the blazing fire,
especially in Jonava you may find luck and
love as you hope for bountiful dew

As you know there's fortune in the dew
and in the sweet flower of the fern
so you dance all night with your friends and
pass through the cleansing gates
and together you leap over the crackling fire
and glory in your flowery crowns

You can help your friend make her crown
while the open fields are wet with dew
enjoy warmth from the fire
and seeking the green fern
as you see the verdant gates
standing tall and . . .

. . . and
crown
the gates
with dew
and fern
and fire!

(stock photo)



So don't compare to last year's fire
as this one burns for us today and
we can glory in the tender fern
while we wear with joy our woven crowns
and hope for plentiful and abundant dew
as two people stand guard at the gates

while the glow from the fire lights your crown
and you dance all night in the shimmering dew
and the flowering fern awaits you past the gates.

LITHUANIA: Iconic Cities

Pantoum for Palanga

Palanga Pier vaults out into the sea
 the wooden pathway takes you cross the waves,
 look back to see the dunes and golden shore—
 at night it's lined with lanterns glowing bright

The wooden pathway takes you cross the waves
 to see where watercrafts would come and dock,
 at night it's lined with lanterns glowing bright
 while in the day the sun lights up the way

Come see where watercrafts would come and dock
 while children run its length with shouting joy
 and in the day the sun lights up the way
 and seabirds share the crumbs that tourists drop

While children run its length with shouting joy
 and in the summer join the Carnival—
 wild seabirds share the crumbs that tourists drop
 then fly to to the Botanic Garden's shade

And in the summer join the Carnival,
 take in the Amber Museum's treasures fine
 then fly to the Botanic Garden's shade—
Palangos Tiltas vaults into the sea!



POEMS: PAN-BALTIC

PAN-BALTICS: Culinary Arts

Honey Cakes of the Baltics

ToP CrOwN oF FrEsH BeRrIeS & ChOpPed NuTs

then add a light smooth frosting of sour cream

Then the first thin layer of succulent honey cake

and again the cream, soft-whipped tangy-sweet

Do you see where we're headed, now cake again

now thickened sour cream filling, luscious-cool

Baltic honey famous for its rich complex flavors

and happy, well-fed cows bring forth their cream

Short summers make the honey's varied tones

So you anticipate each dense spicy-buttery bite

Until your fork sinks down through multilayers

impossible stack of alternating Baltic delights

As you bring it slowly to your mouth—Heaven.



(stock photo)

PAN-BALTICS: Unity

The Baltic Tigers

(After Adrienne Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers")

The Baltic Tigers prance across the stage

of world events, taking their rightful place.

Bright amber denizens in their world of green,

sustaining their environmental wealth.

They do not fear the growling Russian Bear

who paws upon their borders, sharp teeth bared,

They pace in sweet chivalric certainty,

Traditions Old embroidered into New:

The massive weight of history that they've borne

dwells deep within their hearts, imparting strength:

Through three-times strong the roar that they bring forth,

they go on prancing, proud and unafraid!



PAN-BALTICS: Capital Cities

Jewels of the North: Pan-Baltic Diamantes

Tallinn

Windy, Energetic

Soaring, Singing, Smiling

Castles, Weathervanes, Cafes, Wallhooks

Leaping into the 21st Century

Innovative yet traditional

Gem of the Baltic

Riga

Royal, Regal

Shining, Sprawling, Sailing

Candles, Churches, Cobblestones, Cakes

See its splendid Art Nouveau architecture

Old Town blending into New

Freedom City

Vilnius

Valiant, Vibrant

Growing, Expanding, Evolving

Historic and diverse neighborhoods

Palaces, pubs, priories, parks

See it by hot-air balloon

Athens of the North

PAN-BALTICS: The Future

Rail Baltica Route Map (Simultaneous Poem or Poem for Two Voices)

ESTONIA

Ten years in the making

Tallinn >

5 billion euros invested

Pärnu >

Both passenger and freight trains

LATVIA

All-electric, environment-friendly

Riga >

Safe: no level crossings with roads

LITHUANIA

High-speed max 150 miles an hour

Panevėžys >

Adds North-South Axis to East-West

Kaunas >

543 miles total trackline

Vilnius >

You can hear that whistle blow 500 miles!



POLAND

“Connected Baltics in a Connected Europe”

Warsaw >

Project of the Century . . .

THE WORLD!

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

M. Lee Alexander's poetry is inspired by her love of language, nature, music, and travel. It has appeared in a variety of journals and been anthologized in a number of collections. She is the author of three books of poetry: *Observatory* (Finishing Line Press 2007, nominated for the Virginia Library Association Poetry Book Award), *Folly Bridge* (Finishing Line Press 2011), and *Spinning the Compass* (Aquilrelle Press, Belgium, 2018). Alexander's work has won significant awards, including Finalist for the Robert Frost Foundation Annual Poetry Award; Finalist in the Political satire category of Ireland's Strokestown International Poetry Competition; First Honorable Mention in the W. B. Yeats Society of New York Poetry Competition; long-listed for the Bridport Prize; winner of the Yeovil Literary Prize 2009 for which the judge was UK Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy; 3rd Place, Torriano International Poetry Competition, London; and Commended, Formal Category, Poetry on the Lake International Poetry Contest, Lake Orta, Italy. It has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. M. Lee Alexander has performed her work, sometimes with jazz accompaniment, in multiple venues across the mid-Atlantic region, the Midwest, and internationally. She has judged local, statewide, and international writing contests. Alexander teaches creative writing including poetry and creative nonfiction at William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA, where she lives with a house full of pets who think they run the joint and pretty much do.

Back-Cover BLURBS:

M. Lee Alexander is our traveling bard, roaming distant places and reporting back in vivid, lively, and often playful verses, conjuring worlds we may otherwise only dream about. *Old Love Does Not Rust: Explorations in Baltic-Themed Poetry*, her fourth book of poems, translates her recent cultural tour through Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – in celebratory language and keen observation. It's also a tour of poetic styles and devices, including shaped poems, a villanelle, a sestina, a pantoum, rhymed stanzas, and delightful cadences. She celebrates capital cities and cultural objects – fountains, sculptures, a ferris wheel, a museum of puppetry! – in ways that are surprising and joyful. Accompanied by photographs of the sites and sights she describes, *Old Love Does Not Rust* is a truly fresh and original book. You will love it, as I did. — Nancy Schoenberger, *Poet and Biographer*