



Berkeley writer wins national poetry book contest with “Smolder”, a collection exploring the fire blazing inside life

Colleen Morton Busch is the 2025 winner of the Ex Ophidia Press annual poetry contest

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OMAHA, Neb. — A new poetry collection by Berkeley, California, writer Colleen Morton Busch is the winning submission of the 2025 Richard-Gabriel Rummonds Poetry Contest, an annual contest by [Ex Ophidia Press](#), an Omaha-based poetry publisher that fosters the publication of excellent poetry in elegantly designed books.

Busch is a writer, poet, and lay-ordained Zen practitioner who serves as board president at Berkeley Zen Center. Her prize-winning collection “[Smolder](#)” is a book of poems about the many kinds of fire blazing inside life. Many of the poems were inspired by the pains and losses Busch and her husband experienced after he was diagnosed with smoldering multiple myeloma 20 years ago.

“Some of the poems in ‘Smolder’ were written at the time of my husband’s diagnosis, for an audience of one — myself — because I needed to put language to my experience. I needed poetry’s medicine,” Busch said. “At the time, we couldn’t imagine he would be living the life he is now — even cycling with a team across Iceland this August to raise funds for the International Myeloma Foundation.”

“But from the beginning, we didn’t see myeloma as an enemy, but rather as an invitation to take nothing for granted and to touch gratitude,” she continued. “Life is a gift. It isn’t always the gift we expected or wanted, but it’s a precious gift. That’s my Zen training talking, but you don’t have to be a Zen student to know that the appropriate response to life is wonder. That’s what I hope shines through the poems in ‘Smolder’. Even in the midst of grief and loss, there is joy, there’s aliveness, if you’re willing to let it find you.”

Ex Ophidia Press is an independent literary press originally established in Seattle in 2016 that publishes English-language poetry that explores new territories of the imagination by using the traditional techniques of poetry. The press is owned by Dr. Amy Haddad, PhD, MFA, a professor emerita at Creighton University and a published poet who resides in Omaha.

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"With 'Smolder,' Colleen balances profound personal grief with a fierce devotion to being present, crafting a collection that is equal parts heartbreaking and triumphant," said Dr. Haddad, editor and publisher of Ex Ophidia Press. "We're thrilled to bring 'Smolder' to publication, a book that will stay with readers long after they turn the final page."

"Smolder" was selected from more than 300 entries through an anonymous, multi-tiered review process. The contest's annual winning poet receives \$2,000, 10 copies of the book and an author discount on additional copies. Unlike many poetry book contests, it is open to poets at any stage of their career, which gives mid-career poets an opportunity to find a new publisher and to extend their readership.

Busch is the author of "Fire Monks: Zen Minds Meets Wildfire" (Penguin Press, 2011), which was named a best book of the year by Publishers Weekly. Her prose and poems have been published widely, including in publications like Willow Springs, Poet Lore, Bellevue Literary Review, Orion, The Washington Post, Tricycle and the Ekphrastic Review. *Smolder* is her first poetry collection.

Copies of "Smolder" are available for purchase through [Asterism Books](#).

Submissions are now open for the 2026 Richard-Gabriel Rummonds Poetry Contest for poetry collections. **Learn more and submit an entry:** exophidiapress.org/contest.

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About Ex Ophidia Press: The mission of Ex Ophidia Press is to publish English language poetry that explores new territories of the imagination by using the traditional techniques of poetry: rhythm and melody, imagery and metaphor, irony and insight, apt language for important ideas. The Omaha-based press oversees the Richard-Gabriel Rummonds Poetry Contest, an annual poetry book contest established in 2016 to foster the publication of excellent poetry in elegantly designed books. Learn more at ExOphidiaPress.org.