

An Artist's Images

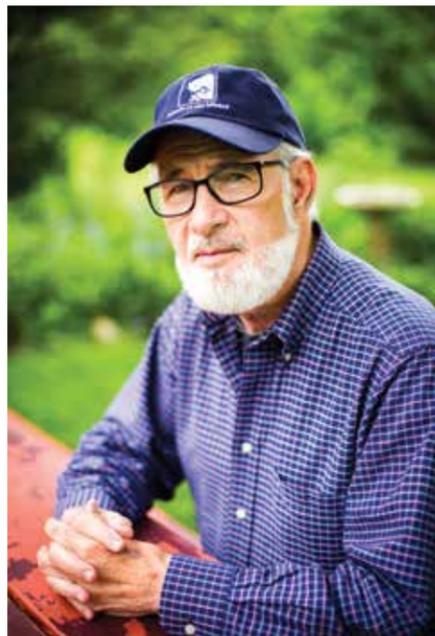
ON THE

B-LINE TRAIL

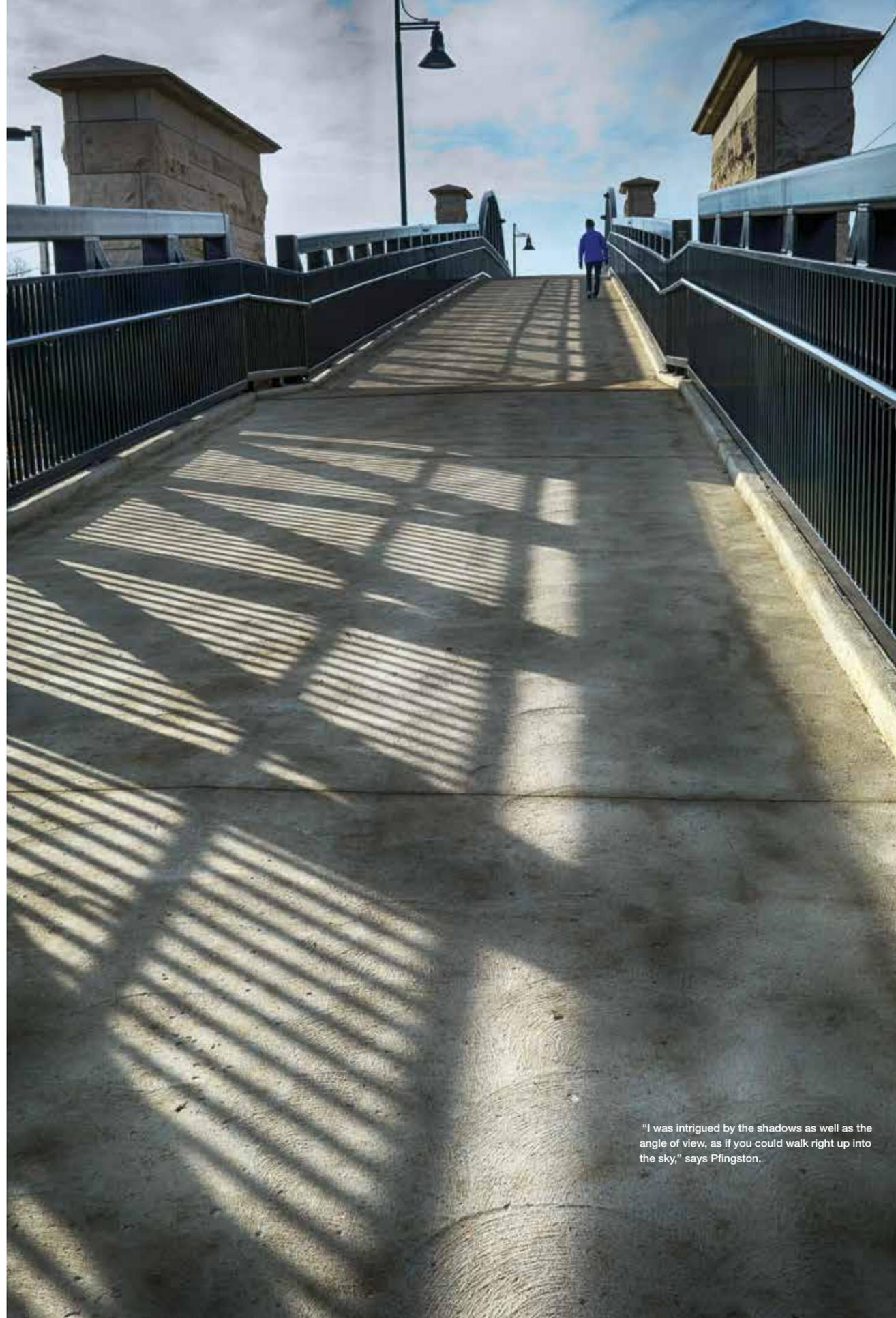
POEM AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROGER PFINGSTON

Roger Pfingston is a retired English and journalism teacher who taught at Bloomington High School North for 25 years.

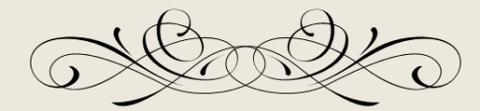
He has been quietly publishing his poetry and pictures in leading literary and photographic journals for five decades.



Poet and photographer Roger Pfingston.
Photo by Tyagan Miller



"I was intrigued by the shadows as well as the angle of view, as if you could walk right up into the sky," says Pfingston.



July: Farmers' Market and the B-Line Trail

*Market zombie, my arms hang straight down,
weighted with bags of corn, tomatoes,
Asian eggplants, an amber jar of honey
for the bagged bread in your left hand,
a delicate lemon tart floating flat
but wrapped in your upturned right.*

*We're walking the B-Line Trail, half a mile
back to the parking lot, day after the 4th,
bikers, some still sporting flags,
whirring by — warning, on your left,
or dinging their bells — others a felt
stream of hellish speed, arrogant silence.
The occasional anomaly of short shorts
and heels, enough to slow a biker
or strain a walker's peripheral vision.*

*All around us dogs walk their owners,
parents their children, while the homeless
claim the same benches each day, the music
of the market still with us, even the finger
cymbals of belly dancers, the perfect
clatter of cloggers on a make-do stage,
four young women having at it a cappella,
their voices as sweet a blend as a line of doves.*

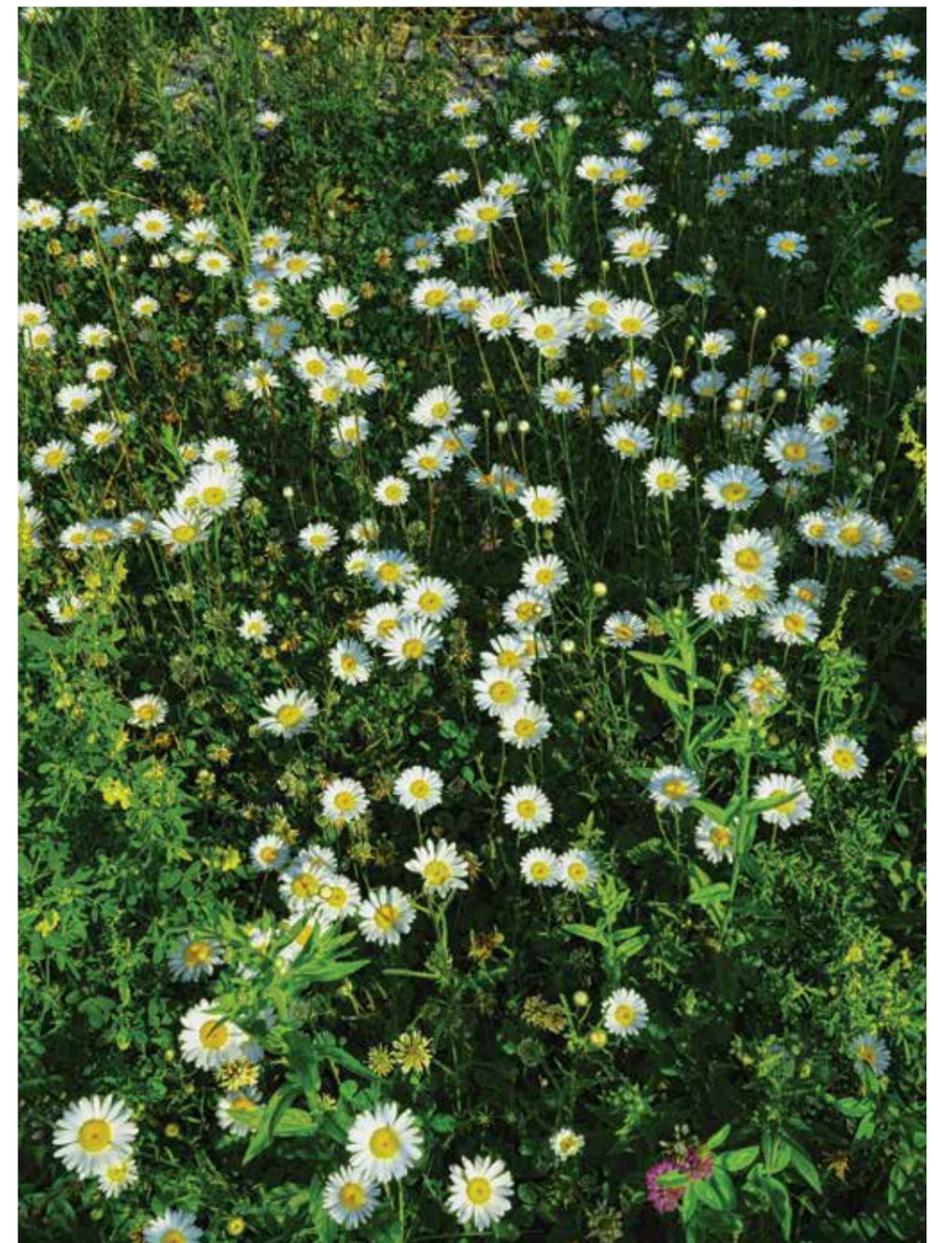
*Graffiti entertains with its in-your-face
panoramas running the length of two
warehouses, much of it admittedly gifted,
the wonder of its overnight appearance,
ephemeral as the lush growth on either side
of the trail — Queen Anne's lace, wild phlox
and daisies, blooming thistle, chicory —
and always the tribal trees of heaven.*

*Ten a.m., the welcome sight of our car,
my arms an inch longer, maybe a stop
or two on the drive home, Bloomingfoods
for a piece of trout, Marathon for a tank
of gas, scene of last year's lingering win,
wondering if I dare press the luck
of this day's gift with a lottery ticket?
You smile and shrug. I know, I know...
my dead mother shaking her head.*





"As I pointed out in the poem," Pfingston says, "I'm impressed with the boldness and the talent behind much of the graffiti on the buildings south of the Patterson Drive bridge."



(top right) "In recent years, I've been interested in texture and abstraction created by the effects of time and weather on painted subjects such as these bolts on the overhead railroad bridge at the northwest end of the B-Line Trail." (bottom right) For Pfingston, these wild daisies are representative of the rich display of flowers and grasses along the southern end of the B-Line Trail.

Roger Pfingston

Poet & Photographer

by Carmen Stiering

Reading the titles, it's easy to see that the subjects of Roger Pfingston's poems are unassuming: "Farmers' Market and the B-Line Trail," "Flower," "The Deer Poem." The images he captures through his camera lens — leaves and rocks and puddles — are equally ordinary. However, in the hands of

this Bloomington poet-photographer, the seemingly simple becomes sublime.

"I've always felt good about being known as a Midwest writer," says Pfingston, the poet, whose work centers on south-central Indiana. "I might be addressing something in my backyard, but hopefully it resonates with an audience and telescopes out. When you

get to the last word, I hope there is something universal there."

Pfingston, the photographer, keeps his camera at the ready, and at 75 he's still inspired by the sights around him. "I drive my wife, Nancy, nuts," he says. "We walk every day, and I stop and shoot. She just goes on and walks and comes back."

The two have been married for 52 years.

Nancy takes it all in stride. "How often he stops depends on the day," she says. "I'm used to it by now. Sometimes I'll stop and do yoga poses. If you see a lady on the B-Line Trail doing Warrior II, that's probably me."

An Evansville, Indiana, native, Pfingston came to Bloomington in 1958 to study at Indiana University, majoring in journalism and minoring in English. While there, he discovered literary magazines and was inspired to try his hand at poetry.



taking college classes in education could teach in the public schools. He started taking correspondence courses and found a position teaching English. "I went into it cold," he recalls. "Luckily, I liked teaching."

After a year, he came back to Bloomington and earned a master's in education with a concentration in English, then went on to teach English and journalism

at University High School. In 1972, he moved on to Bloomington High School North, where he taught English, photojournalism, and yearbook for 25 years, then added a class in creative writing for the last five years before retiring in 1997.

Through 30 years of teaching, Pflingston remained an active poet and photographer. "I did a lot of writing and photography on the weekends," he says. "I feel lucky Nancy understood I needed to do that." For her part, Nancy, also a teacher, says she knew what she was getting into when she married him. "I don't feel like it's been a sacrifice, it's just the way it is," she says. "It's harder when you have little kids, but they aren't little for very long."

The Pflingstons have two grown children: a son, Brett, who lives in Indianapolis and a daughter, Jenna, in Buena Vista, Colorado.

While he has been a devoted husband, father, and teacher, there have been opportunities though the years to focus intensely on his writing. One was in 1978, when he was awarded a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). He took a semester-long sabbatical from teaching and spent a month at The MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, the oldest artists' colony in the United States. "The benefit is you've removed yourself from your daily concerns and worries and responsibilities. All of your channels open up," he says. "I probably wrote more in those 30 days than I did in six months at home."

A longer creative period occurred when he retired and Nancy stayed on teaching at Lakeview Elementary School for another five years. "I swore I would do some of the cooking and cleaning, and I've been making breakfast since 1997. To be honest, I've failed at cleaning the house," he says. "But it was like being at an artists' colony for five years. I had a couple of one-man shows during that time, and I had two chapbooks come out in 2003."

Pflingston has published a total of 10 chapbooks [inexpensive booklets], as well as one full-length book, *Something Iridescent: Poems and Stories* (Barnwood Press). His poetry can be found in many literary journals and anthologies. His photographs have appeared in *American Photo*, *Orion Magazine*, *The Sun*, *Utne Reader*, and numerous literary magazines. In addition to the NEA fellowship, he has been the recipient of two PEN Syndicated Fiction awards and a Lilly Endowment Teacher Creativity Fellowship.

Pflingston doesn't plan to stop taking photographs or writing poems anytime soon. "I've always been in the mode where I've kept two or three poems in the mail. Now it's email, of course," he says with an easy laugh. "I'll say this, I'm 75 and I feel as productive today, or more so, than I was 30 years ago. Writing is a wonderful addiction to have, that process of discovery with poems in particular. You don't quite know where you're going. You think you do, but 400, 500 words later, you find it's different."

There will be an exhibit of Pflingston's photography and poetry at gallery406, 116 W. 6th St., opening Friday, October 2, during the Downtown Bloomington Gallery Walk. The show will run through November. ✨



"My first publication was the first issue of an IU literary magazine called *Pegasus* in 1962, about the time I got my undergraduate degree," Pflingston says.

That same year, he and Nancy were married; he enlisted in the Navy and was stationed at Little Creek near Virginia Beach, Virginia. It was while there that he discovered *The New York Times* published poems on its editorial page.

"They'd been doing it for decades, and you would recognize the names of some of the poets," he says. "I thought, 'I'll take a shot at it.' Over a period of two years, *The Times* published four of my poems and paid me \$25 for each one. I was probably not making \$3,000 a year in the Navy, so believe me, \$25 for a poem was significant."

In 1970, when Thomas Lask, former *Times* poetry editor, put together an anthology, *The New York Times' Book of Verse*, Pflingston's poem, "St. Francis," was included.

After his discharge, Pflingston needed a job and found that, in Virginia in 1964, anyone



(top) "I call this one 'Peeling Rhino,'" Pflingston says, "another example of my interest in the serendipitous and ephemeral results of artwork left to the whims of weather." (bottom) In this photo, shot from the Patterson Drive bridge, Pflingston was drawn to how the blueness of sky and the swirl of clouds complement the design on the side of the building.



(top left) "There used to be a huge rusted sculpture of an insect outside a small gallery as you approach the overhead railroad bridge on the northwest side of the B-Line Trail. This is one of the abstractions I did from that wonderful piece of work." (bottom left) "When I stopped for this image," Pflingston remembers, "it was the backlighting that had my attention until I noticed the grasshopper. What a bonus!"