

skipjack review

Journal of Arts, Environment, and Spiritual Currents



Featuring Art from

J.T. Robertson

Interview with

Laura McHugh

Skipjack Review

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From the Editors...

Skipjack

/skip·jack/

noun

- skipjack tuna (*Katsuwonus pelamis*); a small tuna with horizontal stripes, widely distributed throughout tropical and temperate seas.
- skipjack shad (*Alosa chrysochloris*); a North American, migratory, fresh- and brackish water fish species in the herring family *Clupeidae*.
- another term for click beetle.
- a sloop-rigged sailboat with vertical sides and a flat V-shaped bottom.
- a journal of arts, environment, and spiritual currents.

Conceived in 2022 at River Pretty Writers Retreat in the Missouri Ozarks, USA, Skipjack Review is named after the phenomenon of skipjack herring chasing lights on the rivers at night. In the fall, local fishermen mount bright floodlights on the front of their boats and trade fishing poles for fourteen-foot spears. The fishermen are after other fare entirely, but, fascinated, schools of skipjack hurl themselves at those artificial suns to the point of jumping in and over boats.

Skipjack Review aims to highlight the Midwest USA, but our scope is global. We are environmental advocates who wish to start a conversation the world keeps putting off having—and would keep putting off until it's too late. Meanwhile, we all go on dreaming of escaping from this fast-paced, single-serving maze of days that end in “Why.” Isn’t there a better way? We all just need to slow. down. Let’s get out of our heads for a minute. Take a breath. Make a change!

- Em, MM, Jim

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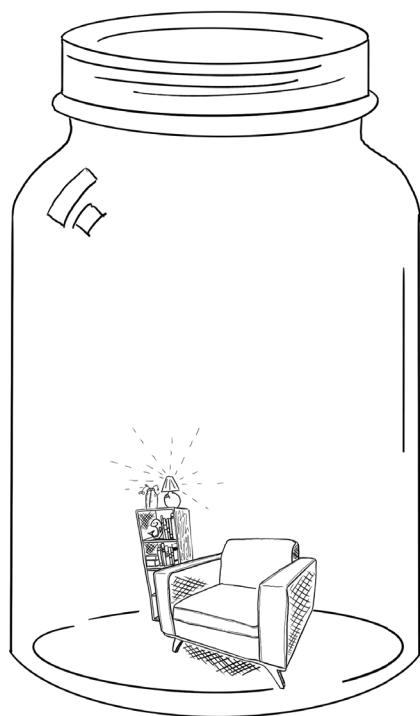
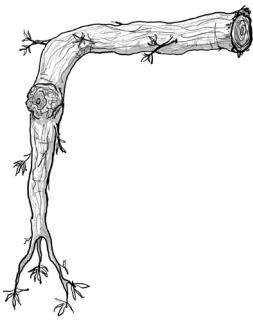
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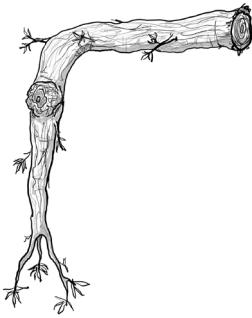


living room entropy

Leah Mueller

drooping blooms
inside a jelly jar
emblazoned with
a rodeo cowboy
you came fresh
from the farmer's market
but have since given up
on the fight against gravity
all your heads hang low
your stems defeated
so brave last saturday





Viridian

Julie Allyn Johnson

I love green.

Iridescent beetle-backs,
zebra-grass, clumpy teasers.
Slender shoots come spring,
clod-bursts aiming for the sky.

Iowa corn and soybeans,
every clean field I see
bumping along county roads
or the exhausting continuum of Interstate-80.

Hummingbird throats, jewels of light.
Colorado spruce and lodgepole pines.
Palm-fronds, Sunday-before-Easter symbols of triumph.
Pinnate leaves, feathery oppositions.
Woodland baubles of teeming life, swarming primavera.
Emerald, jade, malachite — astonishing lovelies.

Wrap around me, green.
Hold me close.
Hug me tight.

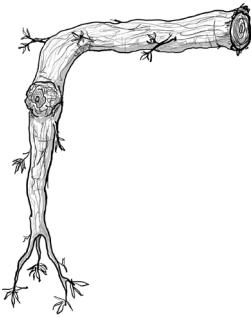
Fold me into your virescence.

Summer is Dying

Michael Lee Johnson

Outside, summer is dying into fall,
and blue daddy petunias sprout ears—
hear the beginning of night chills.
In their yellow window box,
they cuddle up and fear death together.
The balcony sliding door
is poorly insulated, and a cold draft
creeps into all the spare rooms.





Middle Fork

Johanna Haas

The sun is warm, but in May the waters are still frigid. We're standing on a sunny rock in the Middle Fork River, which promises the existence of other rivers that I have never seen.

On the bank, two minks play, ignoring us. The noise of the rapids covers our speech.

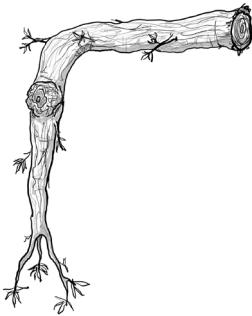
Downstream some teens are jumping off an old railway bridge. Occasional whoops and screeches rise above the din of the river. Upstream vultures circle a dead animal. Late spring makes promises, but the icy splash of the water means it's not summer yet.

Like Muddy Waters

Liv H. Scott

Between the legs of the Mississippi and Missouri
a slip of land like the fetid shoals
of Louisiana dipping into the gulf.
Where Heron presses head beneath
calm waters to pull forth bluegill
gasping mouth in perfect o.
Where sun's affair lights through
cottonwood and mimosa
dapples the teasing not so still waters
pleases them with beautiful sun shadows.
In the morning a Godlike place, misted, seeping in slowly
In the thicket of trees draped in kudzu
wood rattles, bone wind chimes shaking
against each other the song of life and moon.
Black water like black ink stains
down to savory marrow
with its crawdad depths.
Cicadas sing beyond the next tree, the next,
beckoning deeper, audial spook-light
leading wanderer to small death
to rebirth in river birch roundabout.
At night godless in the way old gods are.





Generational wealth

Sarah B. Cahalan

Someone's doing archaeology in the sand again
digging up old saltworks, a meeting house,
taverns with motels on top.

With little brushes, they reveal the bones
of stranded pilot whales:

The stench must have hung for months,
the things-that-feast-on-whales rejoicing,
raccoons and gulls and clouds of flies,
stockpiling fat for later.

The swarms of people who've made claim
to lands that wash away
are biomass beneath the smiling skulls
and weeping willows.

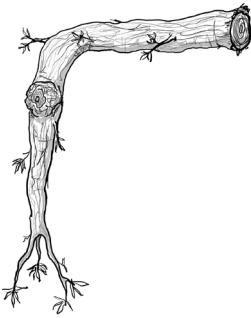
Even the gravestones food to crustose
lichens otherwise occupied with trees
and clapboard walls,
everything graying like the weather,
books in the library all warped from humidity.

History, I guess,
though quite a lot is missing.

It's strange the beach is playground
for a sort of whitewashed wealth:
The quaint names, the clean homes,
blue-green polo shirts on the golf course.
A diversified portfolio of real estate for all
seasons and climate crises.

But the truth is, it's hurricanes
and wreckage and wrack,
ghosts of widows,
Friends and witches hiding in the forest,
creatures barely surviving,
decay. The transcendent beauty
of one thing eating another.





Megafauna

Sarah B. Cahalan

There's a festival for everything but the foods
are all the same, funnel cakes, corn dogs,
\$8 lemonade. Tilt your head a bit and beneath
the midway are prairie lands and mound builders,
look: a well-meaning historical reenactor
tells a story my kids believe.

I'm ill-equipped to teach what's right or what
has happened here. And they keep removing
books from the library, building landfills where
history might be. We try to read but it's so hot.
We drink our lemonade across the land where
massive beavers built cathedral lodges from towering
chestnut trees. Maybe.
I'm so tired of this season, tired of survival.

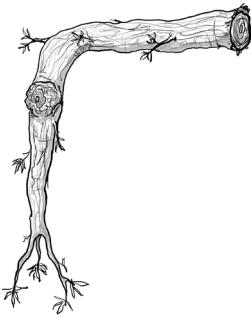
The only non-human animal we see all day
is a piece of farm equipment the size of an elephant
but spidery, designed to spray the crops.
It uses human roads.
Perhaps it could take my children
for a ride, away from me,
a moment's peace,
sing them its own epic origins:
a tale of soldered parts and chemicals and efficiency.

October, October!

Matthew Winchester

The most enduring love of my life
I gave her my heart when I was young,
delivering it unto her gilded evenings
of woodsmoke and firefly spark.
I couldn't help but surrender
To her enchanting gown of
maple red and stormcloud,
that swept along the scents of apples
and cinnamon and pumpkin.
And when she kissed me,
there was gold in the hills
and ice on my tongue.
And I longed for her stay forever.
Forever





The Japanese Beetle War

Karen W. Burton

Japanese beetles hummed about my head, their iridescent thoraxes reflecting the summer sun. I closed my eyes and decided they were humming in the key of C sharp. I stood in their chorus and the sweltering heat while I considered my problem from different perspectives:

Poetically: Rainbows were feasting on my blossoms

Scientifically: *popillia japonica* were consuming my *rosaceae rosa*

Practically: Japanese beetles were eating my Knock-Out roses

In loose agreement with Shakespeare, I concluded that a rose being eaten by a beetle of any name was still a dead rose.

I brushed a writhing cluster off a bush and surveyed the damage. The leaves, once green, were now pock-marked and browning. Their edges brittle like fall leaves, they crumbled under my gentlest touch. On one rosebush, I counted eight disco balls of beetles, each a revolving pile of insects dancing with each other while they feasted on the flowers I had carefully fertilized and pruned. Anger bloomed inside me as another petal drifted to the ground, its surface marred by mandibles.

I prepared for battle. For my weapon, I mixed a batch of Sevin, insect preventer and killer. For my armor, I donned elbow-length garden gloves, covered in pictures of tiny wheelbarrows and spades. For my helmet, I chose my straw hat, coated with insect repellent, to protect my head from both sun and foe. Thus girded, I made my way into the fray to deliver my first strike.

I chuckled as my enemy fell by the hundreds, stunned by my poison. I coated leaves and blossoms alike, speaking aloud my disdain. “Take that, you six-legged rose eaters!” Soon, beetles lay in piles on the ground, their dancing slowed to an epileptic waltz of death. Satisfaction filled me as I dubbed myself, Lady Karen, Protector of Roses.

Motivated by success, I plowed my way through the row of roses. Soon, sweat dripped off my face and arms onto the leaves, mixing with the pale white insecticide. The rainbow bugs, noticing my sweat,

considered it a moisture source rather than a nuisance. They congregated on my arms and soon became entangled in my hair. The humming grew louder in my ears, until I was forced to stop spraying as my hands were required to swipe away swarming reinforcements. Finally, I retreated to the protection of the house in surrender.

I began scraping beetles off my arms and hair—stomping them on the floor. While this method of extermination was slower than spray, I found it immensely satisfying. I noticed a lone *popillia japonica* inside my bra, resting quite comfortably in my cleavage. Must be a boob man. I chuckled at my own joke and reached to remove him. He deftly crawled out of reach.

I threw off my clothes and ran to the bathroom mirror to find the pest. I couldn't see him on my back or front. Frantically, I searched the floor and countertop, but there was no bug to be found. Just as I decided he had flown away, I felt movement under my left breast. I raised it to see that solitary beetle resting in the hollow under my bosom, just below my heart. He was not dancing or crawling. He simply lay there on my skin, soaking up the moisture and the heat of me as my heart pounded beneath his tiny frame.

I gently removed the creature that had chosen asylum on my body. I gripped him between my fingers and counted the different colors on his exoskeleton. His legs moved, leaving faint scratches on my fingertips. He raised his wings as if to fly, but I held him fast, watching as his joints bent and flexed.

I carried him to the back door and released him to the summer sun, humming in the key of C sharp.





Timelines

Jared Phillips

We've nothing to take with us, they say, but the end of ignorance. Our museums display the suffering dead and drivers glimpse fading roadside ghosts as progress reshapes our world. My hills—the Arkansas Ozarks—are a study in squandered inheritance; tangled legacies compete for backlit irrelevance and meaningless decay.

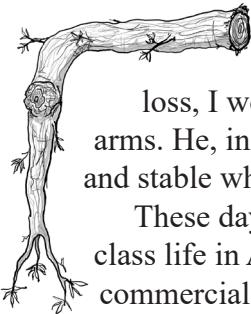
Let me start over.

When I was young, my family was completing the great American pastime of leaving the farm for the city's brighter lights. My uncle's new land, outside the swelling cities of northwest Arkansas, had a dilapidated barn reminiscent of the one on the old home place. Decades of neglect had left it worn and failing, but the original builders had worked true and it still held rain out and animals in, mostly. The barn would do, my uncle decided, as he joined the throngs leaving farming behind while our region rushed to get above its raisin'.

At the same time my uncle was thinking about that barn, my grandparents sold off a lifetime of work. Clarence and Beatrice's farm a few counties away no longer competed for their children's attention. And so, like millions, my father and aunt and uncle broke with the rhythms of small farms in small mountains. Grandpa didn't let everything go, though. His love of good horses anchored him to his new home as efficiency and culture swept his kind away. That old barn at my uncle's became central to my grandfather for a little while as he and my grandma transitioned to the small acreage where they lived out their last years.

Over the last decade, my wife and I have turned back to our family's old ways, and I understand better the cost of selling the farm and leaving behind a life defined by hard labor. It's a bill I hope never comes due. As my grandparents moved closer to their children and grandchildren, they hid the sorrow well. Had I known the pain of leaving dreams behind, or of the cancer growing silent and unchecked in both, I wouldn't have





been so full of excitement at their arrival. Fearing the loss, I wouldn't have sought refuge as quickly in my grandpa's arms. He, in his imperfections, became a place that I knew was safe and stable when all things at home were not.

These days I tell my students about the ideal imagery of middle-class life in America, and like any dutiful teacher I blow it apart, one commercial image at a time. What I don't tell them is that I, like many of their parents, grew up in that image. But my image was gilded, empty inside. Not only were we pretending to be economically stable—like the Ozarks in general—but the hidden struggle of mental illness surrounded us. Though she likely didn't understand the impact of her actions, the ever present bipolar and depressive version of my mom created a household I realized early on was unstable. Out of that volatility and fear grew my dependence on my grandpa, on the things he valued, and on the folds and forests that still surround me.

One weekend when I stayed at their house, he woke me up early, daylight breaking through the trees, slowly shaping the world. As we hustled about, the light came in fits and starts, glinting through oak fingers and steam from his coffee cup. It broke the brittle darkness into a million pieces, clearing the nightmares from my eyes, casting ghosts on my eyelids when I blinked. Distracted, not even shaved yet, he hurried me out of the house, and plopped me on the seat of his truck. As he shoved newspapers over dust bloomed around me, catching the growing light, spellbinding me. The sweet, spicy scent of tobacco spilled out of its pouch into everything from the spare hat on the dash to my hands even now.



Memories of a different time wreak havoc on modern hopes, reminding us that things don't have to be this way.



I didn't understand the rush, his nervousness. I was scared. At home, when that energy crackled in the house, I knew a storm would soon break over us as another wave of emotion overtook my mother and upended whatever hope the day was born with. I shrank into the seat before the tidal wave I was sure was coming, positive I had done something wrong and that he was taking me home. He slowed down,

stopped, saw me, and understood. “Honey,” he said, “it’s alright. There should be a new colt this morning. I want to check on it and thought you might like to see it, maybe have it.”

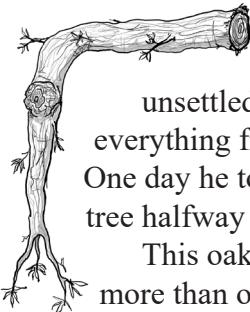
We drove down the road a short bit to my uncle’s barn, an echo of grandpa’s old life. He got me out, truck doors groaning with his haste. Fear gone, I was excited, chattering like only a little kid can. He went to the door, calm and steady, hat tipped to the side like the old movie stars we watched together. I saw his face break into a smile as he beckoned me over. There, peeking through her mother’s legs, was a face shining with a white star, bright eyes trying to figure out what these two-legged things were. The nervousness went out of grandpa, and he breathed free and laughed, startling the little filly. He picked me up and declared it was time for breakfast. Later I named her Belle and watched her grow into a strong, solid horse before my parents sold her, years after cancer led my grandad back to the rocks of his home county.

His love of horses was a thing I never saw in its prime and, given my wife and I’s dependence on horses to power our farm is a thing I wish I had known. I have snippets of his care of them, his attention. Once, when I was little—I don’t know how old—he decided I needed to learn how to ride. He was busy, and likely needed me out of the way. He grabbed up his horse, pulled the blanket and saddle onto her, and then swung me up. “Go on, ride her around. Holler if you need something.” And so, for hours, it seemed, I rode in circles, this way and that, caught up in a corral but bounded only by my imagination.

Today, nearly thirty years later, my aunt shares stories with me of grandpa and his horses—working horses in particular. I’ll never be the horseman he was, but his love of horses—a love he gave me, somehow knowing I’d need it later—has been an inheritance I didn’t know about until the first time I stared at a pile of harness. Six years ago, on a grey and blustery day, I listened to a man, his hat tilted like my grandfather’s, explain how it settled onto a horse. The names of the harness parts spilled from his mouth, taking the jumble of britchen and quarter straps and belly bands and tugs and gave it form. Order from chaos, as another teacher of mine says.

My kin moved north from the Ouachitas, south of the Arkansas River, setting the work down as they stepped off the farm and into a place coming under the domination of Walmart and Tyson. They landed just outside of a blue-collar town in the northwest corner of the state. When I was little my granddad would grab my hand and pull me outside and we’d walk through the small pasture behind the new house. Indoor





retirement didn't sit well on him. The region's hustle unsettled him. Slowing down to look and see, he showed me everything from poke weed to the finer points of a good black heifer. One day he took me into the holler and showed me a gnarly old oak tree halfway down the slope in the back corner of the little field.

This oak—I can't remember its kind now, though he surely told me more than once—was bent, likely on purpose, though nobody really knew why. A team of university folks came out once and looked at it, part of a group supposing that Spanish explorers had bent the tree to mark some secret treasure that fortune hunters had missed. My granddad didn't have the heart to tell them the tree wasn't old enough to know de Soto and his lost boys. The tree still stands strong in my imagination—it scrambled from the rocky slope straight for a few feet before it bent 90 degrees and stretched out over the hillside, then turned skyward, punching its way through the forest cover to break free of history's rhymes. I learned about stump water from this tree—at its first bend the years had hollowed out an opening of sorts that was always full of water and leaves. I didn't know then that the water was magic, a pagan baptismal fount that cured warts and maybe everything. I didn't know a lot, then. I didn't know that oaks, like people and places, can be eaten away by disease until they're just a pale shadow of themselves.

I didn't know that folks would revel in the death of their inheritance, gleeful at the demise of their old world.

The farm my wife and I own is powered by a pair of horses, big Belgians, strong enough to terrify but steady enough to trust. The equipment we use is liberated from fencerows and junk heaps, worthy of museums but longing for practical use. The world we inhabit is a jumble of memory and nostalgia and the growing weight of taking up the lines and spells of an ignored bequest.

Every few months I drive deeper into the Ozarks for a load of hog feed. I leave early—the slow road is winding, not terribly long, but the farm truck can't take the speed of the highway. Neither can I. Once I break free of the Walmart corridor the hills fold into themselves again, hiding what they've had to show the culture makers along the bypasses. The highway forced the hills onto a stage, shoved some singles at them, and demanded to see it all. When you get away from the stage, though, the reticence of the place comes back. To see my hills in their true glory requires a blood price be paid, a witchcraft even hilltop Baptists cling to.

As I went along one late spring day mists rose out of the hollers,

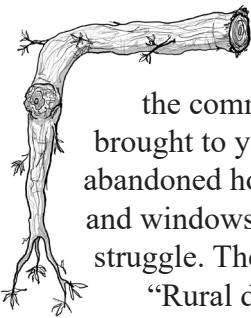
a robe pulled tight over softly budded trees. Like a schoolboy stealing a glimpse, I watched for a gap in the robe. No immediate luck—my place has learned to be shy. Then the light crashed through, throwing everything into relief. Hills outlined against a bright window, a lover's silhouette in relief. By the time I turned north toward Missouri my eyes were full and mind overcome. The dance between the light and hollers and trees was constant for hours, a vision just for me I thought. I shook my head free, unsure of how to manage the gift.

But there's another voyeurism at work in the hills. I doubt it has a clinical name, but I guess you could call it decay porn. Most roads I drive are littered with dead dreams. Some have been dead for generations, some recently left to rot. Don't get me wrong—as I twisted across the landscape old barns grabbed my eye, farmhouses held it, and fencerows built of old machines sent me on the way again. There is a beauty in death to be sure—when the oak tree falls in the timber it isn't wasted. Its death provides for the birth of countless things—worms, fungi, insects, things that burrow in, under, and through. Its body is an offering to the place that birthed it, a closing of the circle. The death I see along these Ozark roads, though, is different.

It's common practice here when a piece of land is bought to cut down most of the trees—from oak to elm, the whole ancient wealth of the place. Their fallen bodies lie unused, pushed into a big pile, limbs intertwined, broken and bleeding. A fire is lit in them, not as a sacrifice to the old gods but a final act of disregard. The fire destroys, it doesn't cleanse. Our circles of community are reduced to ash and the fading stink of death. It's the work of an army clearing a battlefield of dead enemies. The old barns and houses here often meet the same fate, collateral damage in the rush to the present. The fallen places I drive past haunt me. As I go, I don't see beauty. I see what was and what could have been.

Every time I drive deeper into the heart of the hills, I pass an old two-story farmhouse. When I was young the house and its outbuildings anchored a lively farm on the edge of a small town. The old highway ran off to its south, curled across the top of the state like a rat snake lounging in a hay loft. Suddenly a bypass was needed—though we still don't know why—and the farm and its family were sacrificed for the good of the region. The house still stands, pinched between a remnant of the old slow road and the new four lane fast road. For years the house stood proud; now it's falling. Like so many places, the empty promises of progress are no longer sufficient to keep it alive.





This was brought into stark relief when I saw the comments on a social media post captioned “Rural decay brought to you by the #Ozarks.” It was a common enough picture: an abandoned home with an old tree beside it, roof splitting at the seams and windows askew, finally letting in the weather after generations of struggle. The response to the photo was enlightening:

“Rural decay always translates to poetry...for me. Beauty,”

“I love rural decay. I have a whole collection of old barns and sheds/houses;”

“Love that description. I know the Ozarks and this fits like a well-worn shoe;”

“If a man had a decent lawn chair, he could sit at the base of that tree and think his own thoughts, I bet.”

I went hunting for the “ruraldecay” hashtag (which had some forty thousand posts). A quick look showed more of the same: busted up homes, boats, cemeteries, churches, barns, junk in abandoned yards, empty main streets, rusting cars, trucks and tractors given over to the weeds. The usual. It was all heralded as a great moment of beauty, even celebration, as our old world died and a new one made of concrete and social networks emerged, a Frankenstein from the storm.

It made me angry. It still makes me angry.

Rural decay is brutal. Death by neglect is violent. Photograph collections of old barns and sheds and abandoned houses are not mementos of a day well spent, they’re the vulture-cleaned reminders that a community once was dreamed into being and is now destroyed by the nightmare of an economic war machine. Rural decay doesn’t create space where someone might sit and think deep thoughts. It’s the destruction of life, of hope. It’s rooting for the contractor plowing out the Joads.

The newcomers and boosters that feed the fires, once called carpetbaggers, see a picturesque landscape populated by grey barns and broken houses. Relics of our simple hillbilly past. “Look at this old barn,” they say. “Here’s an old store,” another proclaims, “look how amazing it is,” right as their piss splatters the wall, the stench of it overpowering my people’s ghosts. The decay of my homeland isn’t the slow rebirth of a fallen oak on the forest floor. It’s a calculated indifference to what’s here in favor of what should be, always defined by our betters and their accomplices in city councils, county planning boards, and corporate boardrooms.

It’s hard to mourn—especially as we mountain folk don’t do that sort

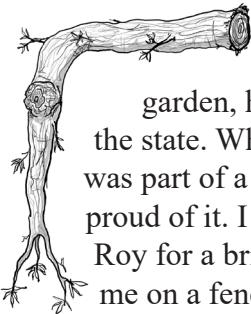
of thing anymore. Once we did. When I was a kid and we'd drive past a graveyard, my dad and grandad slowed down, hats off. If we passed a funeral procession, we pulled to the side, turned the radio off, joined the grieving for a moment. The world slowed to acknowledge the loss, a final effort to reclaim the dead, even though we likely had no claim on them in life. A person's death is mourned. The death of the hill country, the place of my blood and bone, is sought and celebrated and I don't know how to stomach it. Where's the funeral, the cemetery for the hill country? Where do I go to doff my hat and toast the memories when the place is buried in an unmarked grave beneath progress? Where do I go to weep and rage when my grief and anger are denied at every opportunity? And make no mistake: this is a death only rage can mourn.

Some years back the heirs to the Walmart fortune began giving a damn about the place that birthed their billions, though I'm not sure we can afford their interest. Leisure and culture making spiral out from an art museum that ignores us. Instead of public schools and rural health care, bike trails and high-priced restaurants sprout like weeds. The out-of-town folks populating these enclosed trails and eateries ignore the worsening inequalities in our place, afraid to bite the hand that feeds them—or because they're blinded by salvation via recreation. For those of us that deal with the consequences of our regional overlords' latest whims day in and day out there's nothing to cheer. Rooted in greed and an unflinching disregard for anyone that might not be worth a few billion dollars, they wish to cure the Ozarks of being the Ozarks. Ask the towns that have withered away, stores shuttered and people going, thanks to Walmart. Ask the farmers on the hook for millions to appease the whims of Tyson. Ask the regular folk who want to be let alone when conservation groups set their sights on their land—groups whose efforts are paid for by the decaying descendants of a dime store magnate and their henchmen.

The old ways, though, don't go as quietly as some want. Memories of a different time wreak havoc on modern hopes, reminding us that things don't have to be this way. The future didn't have to be built on sorrow.

One day, as my grandparents were packing up their hopes on the home place, my great uncle Roy came in from California. He stood tall, tan and smiling with his new Stetson tipped back on his head. Grandpa took me along with him when he and his brother went to the barn. It was one of those mystical barns nobody builds anymore, gambrel roofed with red walls, horse stalls hung with tack.





I have no idea what they talked about—probably the garden, how the horses were, if Clarence liked the northern part of the state. Who knows. What I know now, and maybe then, was that I was part of a lineage that worked with big animals and the land and was proud of it. I remember being eye level with my grandad and Uncle Roy for a brief moment when Roy swung me through time, setting me on a fence rail somewhere between the 1940s and now. It seemed that afternoon all cares fell away, and they were stepping out of time as I reached after them, ghosts of themselves and their place. My child's eye still sees them, hats tipped, grinning in the dappled light as the world changed around them and left them in between me and the future, beckoning me to pick up what they dropped and step into the work.

The holler and it's bent oak are buried now; unmarked graves known only by memory. I don't know when or why the new owners filled it in, I guess to level out the small pasture. It shocked me. I hadn't realized that the holler, filled with ghosts and a little rainwater creek I stumbled on one day, was such a stabilizing force for me. A little part of grandpa had remained unburied, at least in my mind, but as I drove past the old place it was clear that he was now fully folded into the rocks and soil he had toiled in.

Of course, I had known for a long time that he was gone. Like tea used over and over, some things fade. The essence remains, the faint aroma, maybe a little of the flavor. His ghost hasn't faded at all—thoughts of him, if dwelt on too long still stop me, forcing me to bargain with the dead again and again to stay among the living. Time has only served to sharpen the urgency of his loss.

I used to think of my grandfather as matter; solid and always present, like the stone and timber that hold our hills together. Now he comes as spirit instead, transmuted from human to something more, floating above the trees before settling onto the pond bank. We don't walk together anymore, but I watch him, and he watches over me.

Time's a bastard, laying bare bones like a butcher and never repairing wounds. Its cruelty is only outperformed by progress. In the Ozarks, time and progress have worked out a deal. It was signed at the crossroads in dust with the Devil as witness. It's the same kind of deal that cancer worked in the body of my grandfather.

My place is changed and changing, being buried, just like the last of my grandpa. The end of a thing may bring about a relief to long suffering, but there's a difference between an end that erases and one that

heals. The assumption by those in the know, it seems, is that these hills are empty, only capable of promise if we erase the old ways. There was no culture here, the Walton matriarch declared, until she brought it. And so, a family's wealth is spent to create the world they want instead of bettering the world that is.

One hope against another, the new against the old. It's easy to despair in such a situation. Old things in the hills have a way of hiding before wealth and power, fading to weathered grey as the rain gets in and worries away the hope of the future to nothing. The legacy of the past is something they seek to erase, one old barn and fencerow at a time. But occasionally somebody will keep the roof on a barn and a little filly will arrive. A remnant will hold fast against the onslaught of progress, beckoning those who see to pick up the work and hold on a while longer.

By happenstance, seemingly, when we needed a new work horse this past year, a friend had one for sale. She's tall and lanky, not prone to holding fat, like grandpa.

And the name she came with was Belle.





Some Rivers

Bruce Robinson

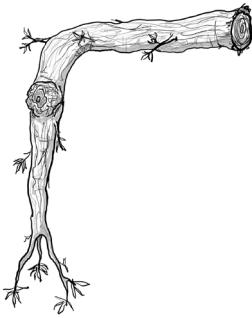
have a one-track mind
until a rock juts out
and reminds them
they may retrace

as in a geological
game, retrench, or
as some in the river world
like to see it, reverse

their course, not for long,
because their course
of course is inevitable,
just like ours, although

our drought is more likely,
and comes much sooner.



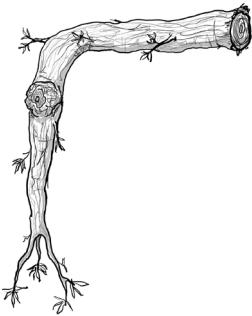


Dear Bruce Springsteen,

Lee Busby

Remember that time you came over
and ate all of the corn and tomatoes
we had set out for dinner
before we could even offer
it to you, and, smiling at me,
one golden kernel stuck over
an incisor, you said it wasn't hard
to be a rock star, but it makes you
hungry all the time, and the little garden
you keep on the tour bus,
everything comes out of it tasting
like exhaust, and then you hugged
my grandma, you left
a little food on her shoulder
as you pulled away, but you didn't
notice, cause dad was hollering,
“Was the Chicken Man real?”
and all I wanted to know
was, ‘Was Clarence Clemons real?’,
and you didn't answer,
but left us with a jolt and a mess of corn,
left us with those sloppy tomatoes, and grandma
smiling anyways, brushing off
her shoulder what was left of you?





Laura McHugh

An Interview with the author of
What's Done in Darkness

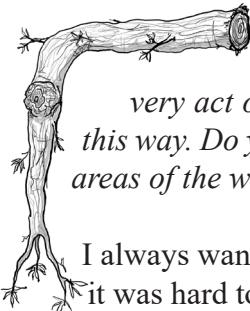
Anybody who's ever called the Ozarks home shares a particular heritage with the land itself in a way that is unique from the rest of the world. Almost a stereotype, we Ozarkians grew up catching lightning bugs, climbing trees, and tearing through the hills barefoot. We are born of honeysuckle and dogwood and baptized in the rivers that carved the hills. Some of us leave, swearing we will never come back, but when a new friend asks us where home is we'll always say Southwest Missouri.

Most of us are working writers; we write for our day jobs, side jobs, and as favors to friends, making time for private, personal endeavors when we can. This day-to-day away from the hills and hollers on our work laptops has a way of leaving us “LOL’d” to death, disconcerted with, or embittered by the world around us. Sometimes, it’s hard to see the trees for the forest of obligations of everyday life. It’s a slippery slope, forgetting our roots. Luckily, as writers, we have the power to immortalize our home. And we do—especially those of us hailing from the Ozarks mountains. We do so unconsciously and organically. You can take the writer out of the Ozarks, but you can’t take the Ozarks out of the writer.

It’s a relief when a book comes along which brings us back to specific parts of this vast world. Stigmatized, forgotten, or never fully realized ethereal places have so many stories to tell, and the best stories are tied to place. Every so often, a writer appears and gives us something that paints a face and lends a voice to a place they intimately know. Time and again, we are enchanted to find how similar our stories are.

Laura McHugh is widely known for her fantastic debut novel, *The Weight of Blood* in which she douses readers in the sublimity and anxieties of the remote Ozarks. This book was only the beginning of a promising career for this great new novelist who has already followed up her seminal masterpiece with three other incredible tales. And, the word is, she has another novel on the way!





Writers are in a unique position to keep place alive by the very act of writing about it—or to resurrect or resuscitate a region in this way. Do you think in such terms when focusing on lesser talked about areas of the world such as southern Missouri and northern Arkansas?

I always wanted to write about the Ozarks. When I was growing up, it was hard to find any contemporary books set there, or anywhere in rural Missouri. We read *The Shepherd of the Hills* in school—that was published in 1907. By the time I was writing my first novel, Daniel Woodrell and Gillian Flynn had published popular books set in the Ozarks, and I wondered if there was room for another voice in that niche. Now, there are plenty more, and I’m glad to see it. Obviously, we all hope our books have wide appeal beyond folks living in our native areas, but I think it’s special to see the place you’re from represented in novels, and kids growing up in the Ozarks now have so much more to choose from than I did.

We have the honor of sharing the Ozarks as our home and elements of the landscape appear in our writing. Are there specific images you find yourself returning to as you write, or specific places in the Ozarks that are seared into your mind?

The rivers and caves. I think I have a river in every book I’ve written. I lived on the North Fork of the White River, the water spring-fed, ice cold, clear as glass.

Religion plays a significant role in your latest novel, What’s Done in Darkness. Because Missouri and Arkansas make up part of the Bible Belt, how has the religiosity of the Ozarks influenced your writing and the stories you want to tell?

I was raised Catholic, and there were very few Catholic churches in the areas where I lived, but there was always an abundance of other churches. It was rare to meet anyone who didn’t belong to a church. I would go to church with friends and was always fascinated by the different rules. No dancing, no drinking, certain kinds of music and TV shows off limits. Most teenagers were breaking those rules, but most of them would come back around to the church when they were a little older. It’s a part of life there, and plays into the lives of my characters in various ways. Some are devout and sincere, some hypocritical, some desperate to escape.

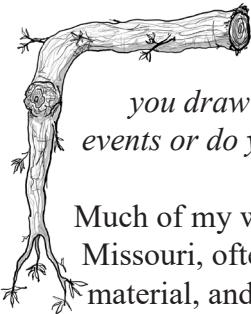
The Ozarks have always had a presence in literature. Mark Twain and Laura Ingalls Wilder, for example, wrote novels about growing up and coming of age in this part of the country. In a more modern view, we have Winter's Bone, Gone Girl, and on Netflix, Ozark. These more modern examples lean towards crime or "Missouri Noir," if you wanted to think of it as a genre. What do you think of this shift in literature? What do you think about the representation of the Ozarks in these stories?

I love to see the Ozarks represented. That said, I know plenty of people are unhappy with those depictions. I've been yelled at in book clubs by individuals who were furious that my books don't match their personal vision of the Ozarks. Most of the modern books and shows set in the Ozarks are crime-based. By their very nature, they focus on the darker elements of the region. And, importantly—they're fiction, not documentaries. They're meant to entertain. If someone had an idyllic Ozark childhood devoid of poverty and crime and wants to write a cheery novel set in the Ozarks, they can do that. There's room for all kinds of stories. Many regions have stereotypes that we see in literature or on TV, and there's usually a kernel of truth there. Sure, we might not like certain stereotypes in shows like Ozark, but if you drive down a few rough country roads, you will absolutely see some run-down shacks, outhouses, confederate flags, and individuals who might fit right in on such a show. I write dark things, but with a love of place, and I hope that shines through.

Are there any Midwest authors whom you hold in high regard? In what ways do you think your writing has been influenced by them?

I've loved Ray Bradbury all my life, from *The Halloween Tree* and *Something Wicked This Way Comes* to his adult novels and hundreds of short stories. He wrote about small Midwestern towns in such magical ways, drawing suspense and horror and expansive ideas from such familiar settings. I always think of a short story of his, a mother waiting for her son to come home—very little actually happens in the story, but the tension and mood and atmosphere are so well-crafted that they completely envelop you. That's something I keep in mind when I'm writing.





You've written four phenomenal novels. Where else do you draw inspiration and ideas from? Do you draw from any true-life events or do your ideas come solely from within?

Much of my work is inspired by true crimes that have taken place in Missouri, often in towns where I used to live. There's no shortage of material, and so many ways to reimagine those stories.

Reading your work, it's clear that you grew up in the Ozarks—there's a depth of detail that cannot be attributed to research alone. The details are what bring the setting to life; it's likely only someone with lived experience would think to include them. You clearly know the area, but how much do you find research factoring into your writing process?

I tend to do very little research aside from Googling necessary facts as the need arises. When I wrote *The Weight of Blood*, I was calling upon my past, writing that world from memory and imagination. I threaded in small, vivid details that I've carried with me, like splitting open a persimmon seed to predict winter weather, or using pennyroyal to repel ticks. Someone could research and come up with the same details, but I feel like I've spent my life collecting all this information, and I love finding ways to use it in my books.

*When writing a first draft, one might “follow a voice” as George Saunders suggests in his newest release, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. For some writers, a character is fully realized before the world around them is created; the characters determine their setting. For others, the world might come into focus first, followed by the characters. Do you find one of these methods works better for you or do you have your own process when piecing together a new story?*

With my first novel, setting came first. I didn't have a story, but I knew I'd find one in the Ozarks, so I began writing about the place. The characters arose from the setting, and the plot came last. But it's different every time for me. Sometimes I start with a premise, or a crime, or a character. Sometimes it takes a bit of work to find my way into the story, and I don't impose any rules on myself at the beginning. Whatever small idea excites me, I follow that and see what potential it has. Once I know what the story will be, I do make more of an effort now to think through the structure before committing.

We hear you have a fifth novel coming out soon. How do you begin working on your next book? Is there any overlap in the process or do you focus on one project at a time?

I don't have a long list of novel ideas, and I don't usually come up with the next idea until I'm near the end of the book I'm writing. Once I reach the copyediting stage of one book, I'll start thinking of something new. The overlap comes during the long phase of edits, proofs, and the lead-up to release—during that time I'll write a pitch for the next project and start writing. My fifth novel, *Safe and Sound*, will be published April 23rd, 2024, and I've just recently pitched the sixth and seventh.

At Skipjack Review we strive to foster inspiration for new writers with a focus on the environment and place. What advice would you offer budding writers struggling to find what works for them?

If you were to tell a story about your hometown, or some other place that is meaningful to you, what would you include? What details are you excited to share? It could be good things or bad things, a mix of both. What's unique to this place? How can those details enrich the story and bring it to life? With my first novel, I wanted to include bits of wisdom about the natural world that I'd learned growing up in the Ozarks—which wild greens you can eat, which plants ward off ticks—and those things added to the overall world-building and sense of place.

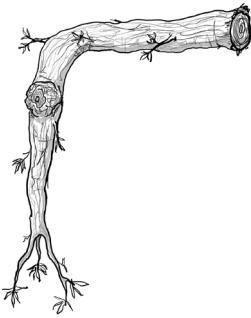
What are you currently reading?

Mister Magic by Kiersten White and *Beware the Woman* by Megan Abbott. I'm anxiously awaiting Jesmyn Ward's new book this fall.



*The editors at Skipjack Review would like to thank Laura for taking the time to answer our interview questions for this first issue. Laura's books include *The Weight of Blood*, *Arrowood*, and *The Wolf Wants In*. Make sure to follow Laura on social media and visit her website for more information.*





Dash

Robert Vivian

Somewhere between fence posts and the long furrows of fields and the slow blinking of wind turbines and the dry soughing of highways in the ever quickening of a vast American dread here in central Michigan a simple dash is waiting for me to claim it out of every last possible shred of slashed movement to ride across the horizon once more on the slight shelf of its sleek obsidian like an arrow head chipped by a man sitting in front of a fire and singing a thousand years ago, a dash like quicksilver or the scimitar half-moon or maybe Tina's laughter in the room above talking on the phone with her daughter like some summer day suddenly here again in all its precious raiment and greenness and the deep swaying of ferns out in a forest where childhood is waiting for me even now to reclaim it barefoot and running under the sashaying trees stippled through with wheeling spokes of sunlight murmuring my name and every name with such tender susurraations and how to gambol and play on a handwritten page I can hardly read myself for perspicacity maybe only the glowing ferns know as they slowly move side to side and up and down nodding in eternal agreement to a great wedding night secret whose sheets say nothing at all except sighing and windblown and an eyelash drifting down to the soft landing of a pillowcase like a butterfly

with sore feet moistened by holy tears in this very river of song, the sleep and dream inspired kind awakening into the murmurs of a prayer for all humanity, maybe a few drifting spores from a cottonwood tree like tiny, bright teachers of an almost bursting adoration so bright and sweet they light up my

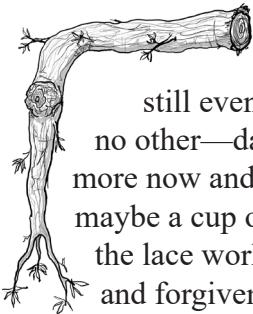
*...sleep and dream
inspired kind awakening
into the murmurs of a
prayer for all humanity...*

eyeteeth with something like glee until a single human smile becomes the face of the entire earth turning in tender whorls of blueness—and I

ache for the dash, I yearn for how it conveys urgency and something like leaping over a car in Buster Browns like back in the day, I swear it—some dashes to light the way as if they are tracing my path to salvation and they are and they are and they must be in every written utterance, even a scrawled truth in the sand on a beach near Lake Michigan—and dashes, dashes, oh, slashed and luminous song nudged along by my age-spotted hand with some dashes to light the way as if this brief and urgent mark is a kind of salvation and maybe it is and it is and it must be—dashes of a Midwestern dervish who whirls alone in the basement near the succulents and holy books written by others whose wisdom is unmatched in the annals of every smoking page smoldering in Pasternak's hands and every cubic burning—and dash like a wand to make every fear go away or out distance them in a headlong sprint maybe I was even made for even now in the taut alacrity of middle-aged hamstrings still eager to sprint like a border collie with his lolling tongue rapt and headlong in whatever chase is deemed appropriate by the God of movement whose every burning imperative is Now, Now, dash a new way to live and move and honor this being who is human, yes, but also somehow bird and trembling hare about to break for the bushes and hummingbird keen for the nectar, the miraculous and glorious colors of a 12-lb. steelhead netted despite every angling error possible in the arsenal of screw-ups, and maybe truly after all I will write with my index finger on a dusty pane of glass or subway window racing by apartment buildings and rafters of bridges spanning the world, and who doesn't want to grow up in bright, clear running water and die there to grace, Emily's dashes a thousand times over stashed away in her sister's drawers after she died or Rumi's radiant and pellucid truth that there are a thousand ways to kiss the ground even as I am kissing it now on my hands and knees in a corner of the basement hours before dawn, oh, broken and luminous song again pieced together by dashes, by commas, by this need to celebrate things just because they are, as Milosz once wrote to the amazement of all the dead and the living also, we who are still breathing through our mouths and throats and letters to

*...a tiny fracture
somewhere in the lace
work of my soul whose very
fissure is an opening for grace
and forgiveness and maybe
even a little laughter...*

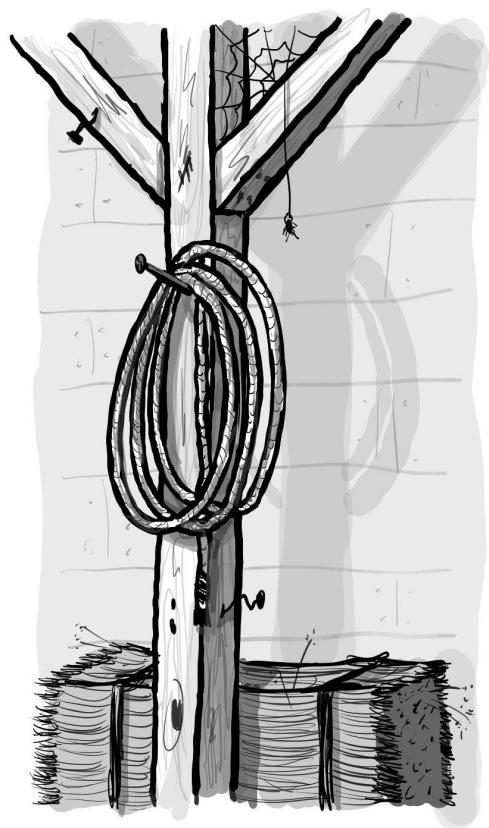


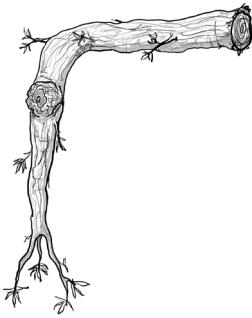


beloved aunts and relatives, still breathing, still moving,

still even somehow dancing for after the first moonwalk there is no other—dash taking me home now, taking me central, just a little more now and a little longer, a little more tender-broke of feeling and maybe a cup of tea after a great sorrow or a tiny fracture somewhere in the lace work of my soul whose very fissure is an opening for grace and forgiveness and maybe even a little laughter, a little pause before

a vase of flowers even as the waters rise along with global temperatures and ice floes becoming a melting version of the past, but there are dashes, dashes, oh, my sweet crushed angel, and we are just one of them when we live or try to live and maybe plant a few seeds of lilacs in another person's heart for him, for her, for them, to grow and cherish one day and yes, to bloom and to blossom however they want and however they must, reaching out their rainbow fingers across the sky.





The Undisputed

Robert E. Petras

I should have taken up
A less bloody sport
Like boxing.
I was swinging and missing,
My hooks returning only air
My nose was trickling
As though bloodied, stinging
As were my ears and face
From the cold, callous right crosses

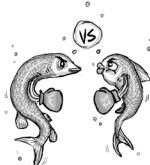
Of the north wind, my legs
Wobbly from skidding on the icy shore.

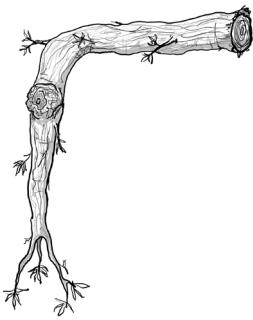
But I kept going
Like a journeyman
Wanting to put on a good show
For his prize money,
Knowing he has only
A knockout of a chance.

Cast after cast after cast
I continued and yet
The musky slipped my best shots
And slinked away into the shadowy depths.

Finally, finally,
I was so numb, so leg weary,
I dumped my minnow bucket
In the lake like a cornerman's towel,
And I hobbled home,
The latest on a long list of losers
TKOed by the undisputed
Heavyweight champ for freshwater fish—

The muskellunge.





September Night

Jim Burns

cicada serenades
explode through
dew-soft black,
tree frogs croak
cacophonies of approval,
defy sullen silence
of patient winter
waiting

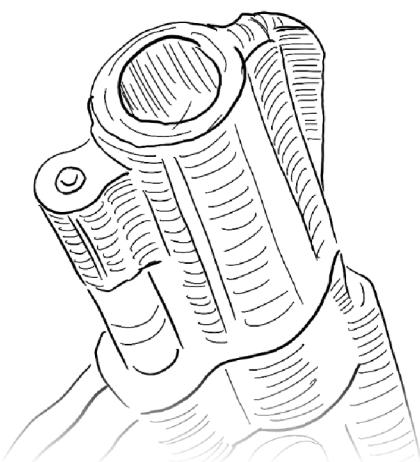
The Trouble With Water

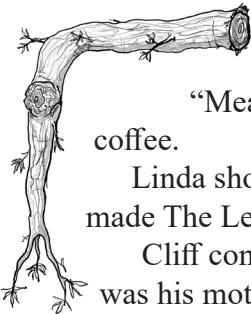
C.D. Albin

The window front of the Ozark Grill looked onto the square, where Cliff Murchison watched his daughter slow traffic as she marched through the crosswalk. Her face was set in the teacher's frown she'd been perfecting for twenty-five years now, and he suspected she was about to lecture him like a student. Turning from the window, he poured a packet of sweetener into his coffee and told himself to hold his tongue. There was no reason to let himself get riled, even if condescension came from someone he'd put through college and graduate school.

When Linda entered the grill, Cliff motioned her over and let her peck his cheek, chuckling at the way she settled herself like a fluttering bird. She waved the waitress away and spent a long moment inspecting the square. "Well," she said, gesturing toward the courthouse, "this is awfully public. Right here in the window."

"Might do us good."





Linda smiled tightly. "Whatever that means."

"Means I don't feel like a scene," Cliff said, and sipped his coffee.

Linda shook her head. "I'm just concerned, Daddy. Your tenant made The Ledger."

Cliff considered for a moment, then opted for precision. "No. It was his mother who made the paper. He wasn't mentioned."

"Well, his father was. And that beast of a brother. The whole sorry clan."

"They're a mess," Cliff admitted, mulling The Ledger's story about shots fired near downtown without a weapon found or arrest made. He folded his napkin into a neat rectangle. "But this boy has pride."

"What he has is baggage, the kind you don't set down and walk away from. Especially if all you do is move across town."

Cliff studied his daughter's face, contemplating sternness as a mask for fear. "He was your student, wasn't he? He said he had you."

Linda stiffened. "This isn't school. You can't compare the two."

Cliff unfolded the napkin and began smoothing wrinkles. "Maybe I was an administrator for too long, but when a teacher forgot some kid's situation, I called them in for a talk."

"I called you," Linda said, setting her water to the side as she leaned toward him. "And I haven't forgotten. Orie has good qualities."

"Well then?"

"Baggage, Daddy. Think about what Ava Fairchild put you through."

Cliff would rather forget Ava Fairchild, who held a grudge as closely as some women held their infants. Only a few days ago she'd stood on his porch and threatened to sue him, still furious he'd let her go after she dropped the price on his house without consulting him. The moment he fired her she'd shown her teeth, and she hadn't stopped showing them.

Orie seemed different though. He had a sense of right and wrong, and as best Cliff could tell it ran straight as a plumb line. He tucked a dollar beneath his coffee mug before scooting his chair away from the table. "That boy left home over his mother's dealings. He's earned his keep."

Linda's volume rose. "Then pay him a bonus. But don't board him."

Glancing around the room, Cliff guessed half the diners were retired like himself, routines so settled they'd need blood pressure medicine if the lunch special changed. "I'm not quitting on him," he said. "Not over something like this."

Linda lowered her trifocals and stared. "Gun shots in the middle of

town? What's it going to take, Daddy?"

"He wasn't a part of that."

"I hope not."

Cliff plucked his phone from a shirt pocket and glanced at the skimpy list of calls. "Is that all you wanted?"

Linda sat back and shaped her mouth into a pout. "Nice talking to you, too."

"I told you I didn't want an argument."

"Fine. Keep company with the Fairchilds." She gathered her purse and stood. "Mama would turn over if she knew."

Cliff looked out the window at the courthouse. "I doubt that."

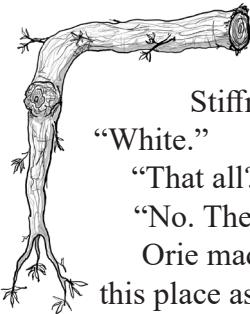
"Look who's arguing now."

Crossing his arms, Cliff let silence be his final word. Linda stood over him for several moments, drawing timid glances from a couple seated near them, but when he didn't respond she threw up her hands and bumped past three tables on her way to the door. Watching her go, Cliff felt a pulse of relief at the back of his neck. He'd dreaded this conversation and was glad to have it over, but he still needed to talk with Orie about the whereabouts of that gun. So far, the boy hadn't volunteered a word.

After purchasing house paint at Walmart, Cliff pulled into his driveway and braked beneath the high shade of red oaks, amazed that the sight of his own house could be a revelation to him. Over the past weeks, Orie had scraped and sanded the Victorian's front facade down to bare clapboards, revealing solid siding beneath a decade's worth of peeling paint and neglect. Cliff swallowed a bolt of shame for letting the house Catherine had filled with period pieces fall into such a state. During her decline he had cared only that the place kept her warm and dry. After her passing, he delayed listing the house until last March, when Ava Fairchild knocked on his door and promised she could get him top dollar. He sent her away, but she returned so often he finally told her to put a sign in his yard and do her thing. She'd done exactly that, behaving from the start as if the property were hers. Cliff gave the dashboard a punch, annoyed that he'd tolerated such high-handedness for as long as he had.

Ahead, sunlight flashed in the door glass as Orie left the apartment over the garage, long legs pummeling the stairs as nimbly as pistons. Cliff rolled the Buick to the end of the drive, then jabbed a thumb out the window. "Paint in the trunk," he called. "Four cans."





“What colors you get?”

Stiffness grabbed Cliff’s spine as he unfolded from the vehicle.

“White.”

“That all?”

“No. There’s some white too.”

Orie made a face and waved toward the house. “Can’t you imagine this place as a painted lady?”

Scratching his jaw, Cliff recalled how last week the boy had borrowed Catherine’s book on Victorian architecture. “You been reading up?”

“That’s what they’re called.”

“I know. But it’s too much work.”

Orie clawed his fingers through wavy dark hair. “I’ve scraped the whole front already.”

Cliff’s eyes wandered along the complicated design. “Muscling a scraper’s not the same as matching all those colors. You start Ozark Mountain next month. That’s the priority.”

Orie came to the rear of the car and lifted a sizeable can of paint from the trunk. “I can keep up. It’s not Harvard.”

“Keeping up’s not too high a standard.”

“I made honor roll in high school.”

“Then I guess you ought to enroll at Harvard,” Cliff said. For emphasis, he jangled the keys in his front pocket.

Orie rolled his eyes, then hefted another can of paint toward the shed. After a few steps he paused to look over his shoulder. “Just think about some colors, okay? She’d be pretty.”

“We’ll see.”

“That sounds like a no.”

“Just finish the prep work,” Cliff shot back, but Orie was already disappearing behind the garage.

Irked that so many people disagreed with his decisions these days, Cliff left the remaining cans in the trunk and went inside, where he poured himself a cup of coffee and took refuge in his study, the one room Catherine hadn’t filled with period pieces. She’d never complained about his creaking club chairs or mismatched mallard prints, never pressed him to clear the ragged files he’d gathered while running the Lotten school district. Even with the door closed he’d been able to sense how she rooted for him on the other side, willing him to solve whatever policy issue or personnel problem had come his way. Her faith had been a comfort, and he wished for it now the way he wished for the feathery

tracings of her fingertips on his skin.

Cliff threw open the curtains and glimpsed Orie hauling the last of the paint to the back shed. The kid was a worker, dogged in a way Cliff hadn't noticed in others his age. Yesterday Orie had been up at first light sanding spindles and brackets, then went at the delicate scrollwork on the porch pediment so obsessively Cliff had to go out at noon and yell for him to break before he gave himself a heatstroke. Something about the memory made Cliff's mind veer to the girlfriend, Trish, who'd impressed him as a good match the day Orie made introductions. Slight and pretty, she'd popped her small hand in Cliff's paw and held his eye throughout their conversation, prompting him to judge her a serious person. Now Cliff thought she might prove an ally, someone who might persuade Orie to talk about the missing gun.

Cliff hated to think the weapon was hidden somewhere on the property, but he worried. Last Sunday after church the new police chief, Bartolini, had caught up with him in the parking lot, each question as bent on detection as a dowsing rod.

"How's your new helper doing?" Bartolini had begun.

At first Cliff feigned confusion.

"Fairchild boy," the chief persisted, stepping closer. "He doing a good job?"

"Doing fine," Cliff said.

"Hear he's staying on your property."

Cliff palmed his keys. "There's an apartment over the garage. Just two rooms."

Bartolini leaned against the fender of Cliff's Buick, then gazed skyward as if lost in passing clouds. "You know, his family got into it over at Ava's office."

"I read about that."

A frown reshaped Bartolini's face. "That reporter thinks we should have found a gun."

"If there were shots, there'd be a gun."

"Not if somebody took it before we got there."

Cliff gave a slow nod and unlocked the car door.

"Curious if you'd noticed anything?" Bartolini asked. He straightened, and the Buick's fender creaked like a warning. "Way the boy's behaving? Habits?"

"He wasn't involved with that mess."

The chief tilted his head. "Couple witnesses say he was, for just a minute or two. They place him there that long. He mention anything





about that?"

"He hasn't mentioned it at all."

"Funny thing not to talk about."

"Really?"

Bartolini shrugged. "Guess he wants some distance from the family."

"Maybe."

"Well, I was just curious."

After the encounter Cliff drove straight home and turned on the Cardinals, but now he replayed the conversation while Orie prepped the east side of the house. The boy had a lifetime in front of him, and Cliff wondered if he intended to scrape the family past the way he scraped clapboard, not a single fleck of old paint left behind. Eyeing the remains of his coffee, Cliff mused on how often he'd known the past to bleed through whatever was meant to cover it. But could someone Orie's age anticipate that? He might see the future as a painted lady, colors so bright you'd forget what went before.

That evening, Cliff stalled through the local news and a Wheel of Fortune episode before prodding himself up the steps to Orie's apartment. When Orie opened the door, Cliff raised two cans of soda. "Hate to drink the hard stuff alone," he said.

Orie laughed and motioned him in. The apartment seemed smaller now that it was occupied, and Cliff chose one of two dinette chairs, leaving the armchair for Orie. A paperback copy of *Choiring of the Trees* saddled one arm, marking an early chapter. Cliff pointed. "Little light reading?"

Orie tossed the volume on the bed and slumped into his seat. "Trish says we'll read it for English. Figured I'd get ahead."

"It's set over in Newton County."

"I caught that."

"Pretty good book."

Orie pulled the tab on his soda. "Mr. Chism's in some trouble. Wonder if he'll get out?"

Cliff smiled. "You'll have to learn that on your own."

"Do my own homework, you mean?"

"Something like that."

"No problem. I like reading."

While Orie tipped back his drink, Cliff scanned the room. Catherine's volume on vintage Victorians lay on the dresser, and near it

was a thick paperback, the half-curled cover showing a picture of Henry Aaron. No other books were visible.

Cliff gestured toward the dresser. “Aaron fan?”

“Guess so.”

He squinted at the spine, making out *I Had a Hammer*. “That book will teach you things about this country.”

“You’ve read it too?”

“A while back.”

“You must read a lot.”

“Redeeming habit.

Everybody needs one.”

Orie’s forehead became a question mark.

Cliff shrugged in response. “One’s about all I can manage.”

Orie flashed a quick grin and rested both elbows on his knees.

With his forefinger, he traced the rim of the soda can as if wiping away moisture. “What’s up, Cliff? This is the first time you’ve visited since I moved in.”

Cliff crossed his legs, letting his eyes roam the room again before meeting Orie’s gaze. “I’ve been getting some questions,” he said.

“About that deal at your mama’s office.”

“Why would they ask you?”

“Why do you think?”

Orie leaned back, shoulders pressing the armchair. “I get it,” he said. “You’re probably better off if I leave.”

Cliff backhanded the comment as if it were a gnat. “That’s not what I’m saying. I just need to get straight on a couple of things.”

“Like what?”

“Like the gun. Where it is.”

Orie said nothing.

Cliff grunted and ran a hand back and forth over his buzz cut. “Nobody’s found it. That’s the issue.”

“What if it never turns up?”

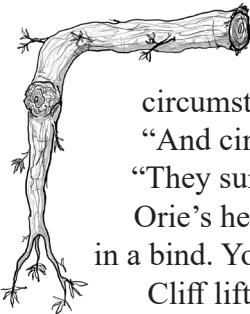
Cliff thought about the question and wished he’d played more chess. “Well, there’s no guarantee it won’t show up. And if it does, it might get in the wrong hands.”

Orie glanced out the dormer window. “So what matters is who has it?”

Cliff sensed the start of a headache and massaged his temple.

51





“I guess that’s true, sometimes. It depends on circumstances.”

“And circumstances can crimp.”

“They sure can.”

Orie’s heel bounced a few times, then fell still. “I hate putting you in a bind. You’ve been good to me.”

Cliff lifted his soda and studied the damp ring of condensation left on his khakis. “Not everybody gets a square deal,” he said. “Sometimes it’s hard just to true up a corner.” He shifted his eyes to Orie. “But I think you’re trying.”

Orie sighed. “Be nice knowing things were trued up. Not have to guess.”

“I know what you mean,” Cliff said. “But having to guess is part of the deal, I think.”

“Maybe so.”

Cliff set his soda on the dinette table. At the door, he rattled the loose knob. “Tell me this much, at least. Is that gun on my property?”

A moment passed before Orie stood. “There’s a corner still needs worked on,” he said. “But I’m staying with it.”

Well after midnight, Cliff awoke to the rumble of a vehicle on the driveway below. He struggled out of bed, but by the time he reached the window he saw only taillights receding into darkness. Knowing he would be unable to sleep, he pulled on a T-shirt and khakis before going downstairs, knees plaguing him the whole way. When he stepped outside, Orie’s pickup was nowhere to be seen.

The night felt close and muggy. Cliff settled into a rocker, wondering how many years it had been since he waited for a young person to return. To his surprise he began thinking of Ava Fairchild, who only a month ago would have fallen asleep knowing Orie was under the same roof. The knowledge would have meant a moment’s peace, even for an unpeaceable woman like Ava. Cliff wondered if Orie would go to her now, but it seemed doubtful. The boy wanted separation from his mother, not alliance. More likely he’d go to his half-brother, Paul, who’d peaked as a linebacker for the Razorbacks before majoring in bar fights, losing his scholarship, and returning home to pound shingles for Osage Roofing. Orie looked up to him though, certainly more than the father. According to what little Orie had said, Arlen Fairchild rarely left Kentucky, and only then to wreak havoc on the family. Cliff figured the gunplay downtown stemmed from Arlen’s presence in Lotten.

Near the far end of the street a dog barked, then came an answering howl, its mournful length layered with animal angst. Cliff listened to the creatures' call and response, but as the minutes ticked by, he could tell the dogs had bridged no distance. The realization beset him like a sore, and he went inside.

Cliff's morning routine was as steady as a metronome. Despite a lack of sleep, he went downstairs at 6:30 to make coffee and toast, and fifteen minutes later he was rinsing dishes when Orie parked his pickup beside the garage. The young man exited slowly, mounting the stairs to his apartment as if each limb were burdened by weights. Cliff stifled an urge to rush across the patio and interrogate him about where he'd been. Instead, he returned to his bedroom and cleaned up, shaving more carefully than he had in months. Rather than his usual khakis, he chose a pair of gray worsted wool slacks, the creases from Acuff's Cleaners sharp enough for paper cuts. A crisp white shirt replaced his normal plaid button-down, shiny wingtips his comfortable Rockports. After locking the house, he paused a moment in the drive to picture his home transformed into a painted lady. The image didn't appeal to him, but if the work occupied Orie and kept him from God knows where at night, Cliff figured he could tolerate a house that featured as many colors as a painter's palette.

Settling into the Buick, he glided downhill toward the middle of town before realizing he didn't know where Ava Fairchild's real estate office was. He had signed papers at his own kitchen table and never bothered to visit her place of business. Now he reconnoitered based on memory of recent Ledger articles, but after a handful of tentative turns, he spotted her oversized sign on the front of a little stone house near Pavilion Park.

The moment Cliff entered Ava's office, alarm altered her features. "What? Is Orie all right?"

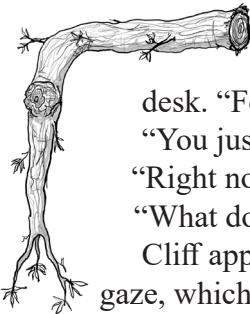
Cliff pushed both palms toward her as he neared her desk. "He's fine. He's at my place."

Gradually Ava relaxed into the cracked vinyl of her office chair, but her narrowed eyes held the portent of drill bits. "You're dressed up," she said. "What do you want?"

Cliff ground his teeth, regretting the notion that a visit might be fruitful. Then he remembered Orie hauling himself up the apartment stairs and decided he might as well try. "Maybe a truce," he said.

"A what?"





He lowered himself into the chair in front of her desk. "For Orie's sake."

"You just said he's fine."

"Right now he is."

"What does 'right now' mean?"

Cliff appraised the bare walls of Ava's office before braving her gaze, which was as hostile as an assault. "I'm worried about that gun," he said. "Aren't you?"

Her face remained fierce, but when she spoke, her voice was a schoolgirl's. "What do you know about the gun?"

Unclenching his fists, Cliff felt the knuckles throb. "Not enough. Not by a damn sight."

"Why don't you just stay out of it?"

"Because a gun can hurt you whether it goes off or not." He leaned forward. "Sometimes all it takes is gettin' caught with one."

"Because a gun can hurt you whether it goes off or not." He leaned forward. "Sometimes all it takes is gettin' caught with one."

He's got too much going for him."

Ava sighed, a slow, defeated surrender of air. "He took it from me, you know. I was out of my head."

Sitting back, Cliff laced his fingers over his belt buckle. "I'll not ask about that. But I'm pretty sure he was keeping it at my place."

"Not anymore?"

"He went somewhere last night. Late. He didn't come to you?"

Ava shook her head.

"His brother, you think?"

"Orie doesn't trust Paul to hold his temper." She rolled her eyes. "Nobody does."

Suddenly Cliff realized she was nearly as old as Linda, his youngest.

Ava turned away and put a hand to her forehead. "I've been thinking about that too."

"So he does have it?"

Knuckling a forefinger, she rubbed circles along her temple. When she turned back, the drill bits were gone from her eyes.

"What are you asking?"

"I'm just trying not to guess. Maybe I don't have to be in this thing, but somebody ought to."

With his thumb, he worked his wedding ring back and forth. "You ever feel like you've tripped and fallen into the deep end?"

She bit her lip. "I'm not a good swimmer. I try to make people think I am, but I'm not."

Cliff looked away. "Well," he said. "Me neither." He felt an unfamiliar urge to assure her, but he couldn't think of how. He looked at her again. "Maybe all we can do is help each other to the side of the pool."

Ava swiped at her hair, then pulled open a desk drawer and searched for something without finding it. "I'll have to think about that."

Cliff nodded. "That's the trouble with water, I guess. Just as dangerous as a gun."

She nearly laughed.

"No chance he'd have gone to his daddy then?"

She looked at him, assessing. "If he did, I've lost him."

Cliff raised his chin. "That's sounds pretty drastic."

"Arlen is poison. He'll make you think he's medicine, but you get sicker every second you're around him."

"I've not met the man."

"Be glad."

Cliff took in her clenched jaw, the tight seal of her lips. He pushed his chair back and stood. "I appreciate the talk. You didn't have to."

She nodded, then spaced each word like buttons on a placket. "That pistol belonged to Old Pap."

"Belonged to who?"

"Arlen's daddy." She drew herself up, shoulders stiffening. "There's no knowing all he did with it."

Cliff tensed at the implication. "But you had it."

"It's small. Like Old Pap liked. Arlen said it fit my hand."

"Protection?"

"I thought so, until I heard the stories. Maybe he just wanted rid of it."

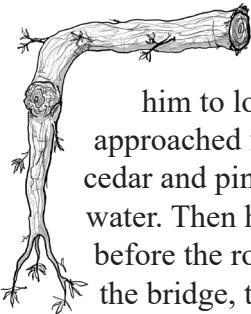
"But you kept it?"

Her laugh was bitter, like cloves on the tongue. "Holding it made me feel stronger. Maybe it was the stories. I never told Orie."

Cliff looked out the window behind her, where it framed a corner view of the park across the street. "Right not to, I'd say."

The corners of her mouth drew down, dimpling deeply. "I hope so. I hope it was one right thing."





Cliff had the girl's address from Ava, who'd told him to look for a brick and stone two-story in Lake Haven. He approached from the north, past a string of tiny rental cabins, scrub cedar and pine parting every quarter mile or so to hint of wide blue water. Then he hit the brief run of bait shops and convenience stores before the road curved close against a chalky bluff and furled him onto the bridge, the lake waiting mammoth and still on either side.

Shortly after Catherine's diagnosis they had discussed a home on the lake, somewhere they could watch sunsets over the long line of bluffs to the west, but weakness and fatigue invaded more rapidly than they expected, their options erased by the numbing, consuming repetition of days. Cliff arched his shoulders and concentrated on the nearing terminus of the bridge, where it intersected land like the point of a spear.

Within minutes he was at the heart of the Lake Haven development, which he had prized for its tax base while superintendent. Now he followed Ava's directions and tried to think of what he would say if the girl, or her parents, were home, but every idea seemed as subtle as a tire iron. Remember me, Cliff? I'm looking for a gun.

When he finally spotted the house, only a light blue Fiesta sat in the drive, though it looked familiar enough to be the girl's. He parked and started for the front door, realizing midway that a phone call might have smoothed the conversation ahead. He had no number though, didn't even know Trish's last name. Shaking his head, he extended an arthritic forefinger and poked the doorbell.

She answered on the second ring, voice lilting like song. "You're sure a morning surprise!" Motioning him in, she guided him to a soft, tartan-covered armchair near a fieldstone fireplace, then perched opposite him on the sofa. "I haven't been up long," she gushed. "Orie was here until late last night and I haven't had much sleep."

Cliff processed the information, grateful Orie was nearly the only topic they had in common. "I think lack of sleep is going around," he said.

"You too?"

He nodded. "Your young man has that effect."

Trish mulled the concept for several seconds before firming her posture, lines as fine as filament appearing over her brow. "Okay," she said. "What's wrong?"

Cliff palmed the ends of the armrests, wary he might bungle an opportunity before he started. Leaning forward, he rolled the dice

anyway. "Has he ever mentioned a pistol to you? One his mama had?"

Trish's eyes pulsed, and she settled against a cushion. After a deep breath, she crossed her legs. "That's all we talked about last night."

Cliff took in her frankness like tonic. "It's got me worried. I don't mind saying it."

"He said you talked to him. He doesn't want trouble for you."

"I know that. But a lot could go wrong."

She drew both legs onto the couch and settled them beneath her. "The gun's some heirloom, I guess, but Orie doesn't care about it. It's just that Ava used it when she shot up his dad's truck. That's what he's protecting her from."

"I know that too," Cliff said. "But I talked to Ava this morning. She let me in on some things."

"You talked to Ava?"

He chuckled at her surprise. "We've worked out a cease fire."

"Good," she said, giving him a thumbs up. "It's better for Orie when you two get along."

Cliff used his sternest superintendent's stare. "The best thing for Orie is to turn in that gun."

She shook her head. "He won't do that. He has differences with Ava, but this all comes back on her if the police get the gun."

"From what she said this morning, that gun's likely to have a history." He moved to the edge of his chair. "Are you sure he knows what he's signed up for?"

"What kind of history?"

"Serious, I'd guess. I've never known Ava to hold back. She did on this."

Worry crossed Trish's face like a moving shadow. "Could Orie get in trouble?"

"If he isn't already, he's on the verge. This would make it worse."

Her eyes fell to her lap. Behind her, through French doors, Cliff caught a distant view of the lake and mused fleetingly on the drowned farms and hamlets beneath, hidden now for nearly a century. He spread his hands. "Somebody called Old Pap? Has Orie ever mentioned him?"

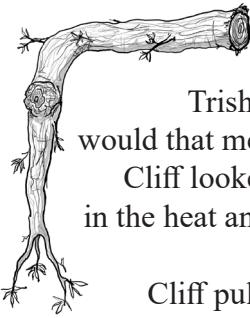
She looked up, shrugging in slow-motion. "His grandpa, I think. He didn't like him."

"Why not?"

"Just mean. Worse than Arlen."

Cliff settled back in the armchair. "Ava said that pistol was his favorite." He tapped his thigh, considering. "She gave me a strong





impression. I left thinking he'd put it to special use."

Trish's voice came softly, quiet as a mewling kitten's. "What would that mean?"

Cliff looked out again at the lake, its surface shimmering peacefully in the heat and stillness. "She wouldn't say. Which widens my worry."

Cliff pulled into the parking area near the marina at Catamount

Bay, his mind discomforted by the pistol resting in his right pants pocket. An hour ago, Trish had asked him to wait while she left the house, eventually returning with a felt Johnston & Murphy shoe bag, its bottom weighted by something solid. "I'm trusting you," she said. "Orie doesn't know I'm giving you this."

Taking the bag, Cliff removed a light, well-balanced revolver that looked to have been charcoal blued, although it had now begun to gray. He thumbed the intricate checkering on the grip, mindful that if Ava's intimations were true, the gun had been used for considerable harm.

"This is it?"

"Yes."

The feel of the weapon reminded Cliff of a party he'd attended years ago. The host, who collected artifacts, invited him to hold an alleged Osage war club. Its heft had been uncanny, the balance between stone and handle so perfect Cliff had known instantly the object's purpose. In the next breath, he'd wondered how many souls had been lost to what he held in his hand.

He returned the revolver to the bag. "Where was it?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Well, no reason for me to know that."

Suddenly she looked up at him, a wave of pleas rising in her eyes.

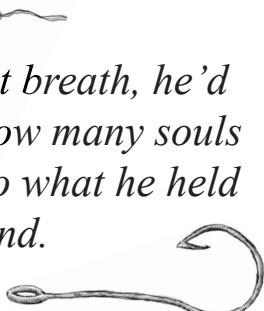
"If Ava gets arrested, he'll blame me."

And me, Cliff thought.

He patted the top of her shoulder, his big hand as stiff as a ping pong paddle. "Maybe we can avoid that. Let me think on it."

She nodded, but he saw no confidence in her face,

only a dawning sadness that love might mean anguish, the rupture of separation.



↗ In the next breath, he'd wondered how many souls had been lost to what he held in his hand.

“I’ll do my best,” he promised, desperate to assuage her dread, but she grabbed her elbows and turned away.

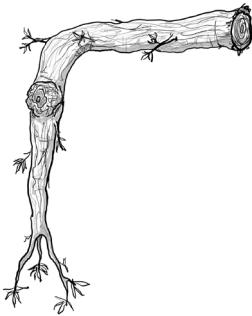
Now, as Cliff stared out at a shoreline where boats floated in their bays as passively as drifting leaves, he worried he’d become an old busybody trampling the affairs of the young. What good would turning the firearm over to Bartolini do anyway, other than creating more fractures than already existed? And who in this world needed one more fracture, the visitation of yet another heartache?

That evening Cliff borrowed a small bass boat and single-axle trailer from old Mr. Guffey down the street, then started for Lake of the Bluffs in the rusted-out Sierra he used for hauling trash. He felt nervous on the curves, riding his brakes around bends and worrying that he hadn’t properly connected the brake lights, but in less than an hour he put in at Harken’s Point and began making his way toward deeper water. After a few minutes he slowed and looked back, catching his breath at how far he’d come from the darkening shore.

To the east, house lights began to appear, glinting from shadowed woods like stars. Farther out on the water, a small vessel emerged from a cove and started in the direction of the bridge. Watching it, Cliff remembered fishing the same area in his thirties, savoring hours apart from work, family, the life he was building. Yet even then he had pondered the drowned world beneath him, the tiny shacks and outposts along the river that had been sacrificed in order to prosper the rest of northern Arkansas. Now he cut the engine and drifted, remembering that the dispossessed had answered back using an argot of trouble, from shootings to sabotage to arson, yet the wide water remained, along with a lingering, sullen bitterness.

From his pocket Cliff drew Old Pap’s pistol, palming it against his thigh. Suddenly he felt small and old, a silly man who belonged with retirees at the Ozark Grill, not floating alone on deep waters. Yet what he had come to do might spare Ava an arrest, save Trish a heartbreak. Bending, he reached over the side and released the revolver, letting it fall toward the detritus of loss that lay at the bottom of the lake.





Waiting for the Rain

Paulette Guerin

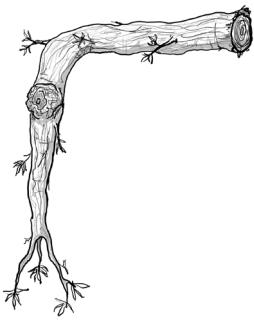
October blisters. Squirrels don't bother
burying nuts—the ground's baked.
In the humid air, nothing dries.
At three a.m. my shirt sticks.
I'm up for another round of the restless
toddler's medicine—double ear infection.
Rain, they say, is driving in from out of state,
a relative we haven't seen in awhile.
I'd scramble except there's nothing left
to prepare: the windows are open
in every room of my heart. I dream the rain
is in my mouth. It falls fast and sounds like spilled glass.
It cuts the ground and carries it away.
Morning opens her eyes, naked and glistening.

Ode on a Trilobite

Paulette Guerin

Antennae curving like scythes,
they once moved like excited pups
waiting for their owner to arrive.
This Cambrian creature
patrolled the darkest seas,
growing up to six feet long.
But this one fits in my hand.
Mid-curl, forever in chase,
its eyeless carbon ghost lives on.
Oh, ancestor of today's cockroach,
once the height of the food chain,
teach me about impermanence!





No Spoilers

J.T. Robertson



Contributors

C. D. Albin is the author of the story collection *Hard Toward Home* and the poetry collection *Axe, Fire, Mule*. Currently he is compiling and editing *Storied Hills: Contemporary Ozarks Fiction*. For many years he has taught writing and literature at Missouri State University – West Plains, where he served as founding editor of *Elder Mountain: A Journal of Ozarks Studies*.

Jim Burns is a writer born and raised in rural Indiana and residing now in Jacksonville, Florida. He received degrees from Indiana State University and Indiana University and spent the bulk of his working years as a librarian. A few years after retirement he grew a bit restive and returned to writing poetry, some of which he had done decades earlier. He has written over 100 pieces, and has published seven poems and one prose piece. Formerly a long-distance runner, he now spends much of his non-writing time gardening.

Karen W. Burton serves clients as a book coach and developmental editor when not fulfilling her duties as Managing Editor for a small publishing company. Writer of both poetry and prose, her work has appeared in journals and trade magazines in the United States. Recently, her work has appeared in *Rat's Ass Review*, *Panoplyzine*, and *Book of Matches*. She resides in the Midwest and served as editor/contributor for the River Pretty Arts Foundation's new compilation, *Paddle Shots, III*.

Lee Busby was raised in Ozark county and studied Poetry and Creative Writing at Missouri State University before attending Vermont College of Fine Arts for his M.F.A. Lee has published three collections of poetry: *Wild Strawberries* published by Finishing Line Press, and *5th Generation Immigrant* and *Fingertip Scripture* (F.S. was cowritten with poet Ian Bodkin) both published by ELJ Publications. Lee has moved around from Bakersfield, MO to Springfield, MO to Kansas City, MO, and has most recently moved to St. Petersburg, FL.

Sarah B. Cahalan writes about art, books, natural history, landscape and human connections in the context of deep time, as well as the layers of places and how those correspond with our own layers as people moving through time and place. She is based in Ohio (USA).

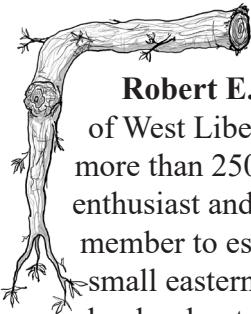
Paulette Guerin lives in Arkansas and teaches writing, literature, and film. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *epiphany*, *Contemporary Verse 2*, and *Carve Magazine*. A suite of 25 poems appears in the anthology *Wild Muse: Ozarks Nature Poetry*. She is the author of *Wading Through Lethe* and the chapbook *Polishing Silver*. Her screenplay, *Irish Rose*, was recently optioned by Cinterra Entertainment. Her website is pauletteguerin.com.

Johanna Haas lives in Illinois, in a cottage with three lions. From there she writes fiction, non-fiction and poetry with a focus on magical realism. Her work has appeared in *Bewildering Stories*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Young Raven's Literary Review*, and *A Story in 100 Words*. When not writing, she's playing with plants and animals or tying a long string into many knots.

Julie Allyn Johnson is a sawyer's daughter from the American Midwest whose current obsession is tackling the rough and tumble sport of quilting and the accumulation of fabric. A Pushcart Prize nominee, her poetry can be found in *Star*Line*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, *Haven Speculative*, *Penumbra Speculative Fiction*, *Coffin Bell*, *The Lake*, *Chestnut Review* and other journals.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era. Today he is a poet in the greater Chicagoland area, IL. He has 293 YouTube poetry videos. Michael Lee Johnson is an internationally published poet in 44 countries, a song lyricist, has several published poetry books, has been nominated for 6 Pushcart Prize awards, and 6 Best of the Net nominations. He is editor-in-chief of 3 poetry anthologies, all available on Amazon, and has several poetry books and chapbooks. He has over 473 published poems. Michael is the administrator of 6 Facebook Poetry groups. Member Illinois State Poetry Society: <http://www.illinoispoets.org>.

Leah Mueller is the author of ten prose and poetry books. Her work appears in *Rattle*, *NonBinary Review*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Citron Review*, *The Spectacle*, *Miracle Monocle*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Your Impossible Voice*, etc. She is a 2023 nominee for both Pushcart and Best of the Net. Leah's flash piece, "Land of Eternal Thirst" appears in the 2022 edition of *Best Small Fictions*. Her contest-winning poetry chapbook, "The Failure of Photography" will be published by Garden Party Press in Summer, 2023. Website: www.leahmueller.org.



Robert E. Petras is a resident of Toronto, Ohio and a graduate of West Liberty University. His poetry and fiction have appeared in more than 250 publications across the globe. He is a longtime outdoor enthusiast and fisherman and is currently working as a committee member to establish public hiking trails and fishing access for his small eastern Ohio hometown. He has recently published two humor books about growing up in his small town, *River Rats* and *Release The Belgium*, both available on Amazon.

Jared Phillips is a multigenerational resident of the Arkansas hill country. Together with his wife he farms above the Muddy Fork of the Illinois River, relying on draft horses to keep them anchored to their place. In addition to farming, Jared is a historian at the University of Arkansas, and is an alumnus of the Rural Writing Institute, led by Wainwright Prize winner James Rebanks (*A Shepherd's Life*; *English Pastoral*) and Kathryn Aalto (*Writing Wild*). His work has been published by the University of Arkansas Press, *Successful Farming*, and the Arkansas-Democrat Gazette.

J.T. Robertson is the author of *The Memory Thieves* (2014) published by Black Hill Press. His work has also appeared in *Jelly Bucket*, *Louisville Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *the MacGuffin*, *Moon City Review*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, and other publications. Sometimes, he takes a break from words to doodle a bit. J.T. holds a B.A. in creative writing from Missouri State University and currently lives in near St. Louis with his wife Pamela.

Recent work by **Bruce Robinson** appears or is forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*, *Spoon River, Rattle, Mantis*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Last Stanza*, and *Aji*. He divides his time uneasily among several four-footed and sure-footed creatures.

Liv H. Scott is a St. Louis poet and native. Their poetry has appeared in *Puerto del Sol*, *River River Journal*, and *Crabfat Magazine*. Liv believes in acknowledging joy and learning to sit with the feeling, accepting its comfort and brevity. They wish to impress upon others the importance of the minutiae—the first sip of coffee on a brisk morning, the smoothness of a sunflower seed under your tongue, the pleasure of a kiss on the temple.

Robert Vivian is Dana Professor of English at Alma College—and his most recent book is *All I Feel Is Rivers*.

Matt Winchester currently lives in the Missouri Ozarks and has written the Young Adult sci-fi novel *The Blood Racer* along with two other books.



One fall evening, the Skipjack Editors were sitting on the porch of the Cotton Gin Inn, strumming their guitars, sipping on whatever they were sipping on, and enjoying the sedate stillness of the Ozarks riverland. Jimmy told a story about certain fish leaping out of the water to chase after spearfishermen's spotlights—and an idea was born.

The River Pretty Writer's Retreat is a writing intensive program offering generative workshops in poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Hosted every spring and fall, the retreat features instruction from dedicated staff as well as visiting writers. Between readings, workshops, fellowship, and trips down the hill to the North Fork of the White River, not only is there something for everyone, there's an unmistakable sense of coming home.

Skipjack Review would not exist without the editors or without the writers who so bravely entrusted us with their writing. And it wouldn't exist without Ope. (He insisted we say that.) This journal also would not exist without our river and the writing retreat we call home.

Learn more at riverprettywritersretreat.org