

Skipjack Review

SUMMER 2025

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Published by Skipjack Press

Printed in the United States of America

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Skipjack Review
Springfield, Missouri
www.skipjackreview.com

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Letter from the Eds...

Here at skipjack camp, our minds are on the river. It's not always calm waters and clear skies, but that's okay. We take our Yin with a little Yang, thanks. Forget the map. Time stands still at the river, as if we're not just animals in boats. We are and we are not, and the water is a mirror.

It's all there.

All aboard,

Em, MM, and Jim



LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Bougainvillea in Rome

Pink bougainvillea in Rome: it flirts
With you, observing tourists, lost or cross,
Discovering it suddenly behind
Native globed heads in artichoke beds, framed
Loud blossoms licking up the light. Perhaps
Where palms are scattering slim shade on bricks
Or blocks of broken marble it appears,
Regarding you retracing steps, distressed,
Lest you should miss some ruins, eternal bronze,
Le terme di Caracalla. Dov' è . . . ?

And then it shakes its hair: long grapey red,
Mature, royal purple bougainvillea.
Untamable, these woody vines outside
Time keep hitchhiking on Italian breeze.
Green tumbles over relics, wills itself
In cracks, until it stakes you far afield
From tomba di Cecilia. Ready to yield?

You've come, arranging Rome to grow inside
 Untended, martyring the moment, numbed
 And bougainvillea-blind — till absolved
 By flowers, cleansed of clocks, your soul's involved.

LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Acts of Light

She's old, my neighbor, planting daffodils
and hyacinths, these plump brown hopes asleep
for now, when she addresses me, that voice
deep, curved like a construction hook, as if
she's building with that voice things both of us
will need. A kaffir lily, bare root nude,
is offered for inspection, years away
from blooming orange trumpets, syllables
blown bright. There's so little light left now.

Inside I watch her bordering the beds,
determined, making order to impose
love's colors — to oppose a nothingness.

Colleen Harris

An Arching Shrub Outshines the Roses

Honeysuckle has fewer suitors
than the promiscuous rosebush.
We never plucked the roses,
they tasted the way a grandmother's
perfume smells, too bold, too old,
and something our mothers noticed.
The honeysuckle falls over fences
within easy reach, shelters the dog
and nourishes the bee, goes flaccid
when children break off branches
to use as dueling swords, as whips,
as something sweet to chew on
when the sun was too high above
for us to head home. Even now
when I pass the sunshine spill
sheltering the latest litter, I pluck
just a few blossoms, raise them to my lips,
blow frail bugles, hunting my childhood.

Josh Mahler

Childhood

Footprints reveal night as a web of mystery,
smoke in place of a lingering sigh.

Then a voice, a soft tapping at my window,
the door, the comfort of nearly dying,

the cost of dreaming. Spirits walk where I have
been, naked to the waist. Like the maples

in winter, the flesh of life erupting from dirt,
surging roots in rhythm with chilled air,

ecstasy of vision. Patient for light to pass thru
the blinds, the moon I save like a cereal box prize.

Anthony and the Squirrel

You had to know Anthony's trailer was there. It couldn't be seen from Route 20, a highway that sped west out of town. Our family wasn't anywhere near rich, but at the age of ten when I saw how he lived, I started forming better notions of what it meant to be poor. Full-blooded Cherokee, Anthony shared that trailer, beached, propped on cinderblocks and stacked tire rims, with his mother and sister. Regarding our friendship, this made no difference. Once the last bell rang, we'd hike a trail into woods behind Clara Barton Elementary where we'd search for arrowheads. I learned from Anthony how to identify a garter snake, and a black racer, and not to panic when I came across them.

One afternoon we found pure water bubbling gently out of the ground and spreading there. Anthony drank first, without fear, to prove it was safe. It tasted better than any water I'd ever drunk. We delighted in showing this spring to other classmates, particularly on May afternoons after classes. We'd drop to our knees and slurp from cupped hands before venturing off to hunt more arrowheads.

Anthony knew nothing about his Cherokee father. He told me his mother was from Oklahoma. I told him I was confused about the Cherokees origins. Not the Sooner State? Why'd they call it that anyways? Why didn't he have an Indian-sounding name? Anthony, shrugging, said he didn't know and was puzzled by this too. It seemed nobody taught us anything in school.

Nowadays, whenever a school shooting occurs, I think of Anthony with his arresting smile, his broad cheekbones and raven-black shingles of hair. Nothing like the Indians we saw on TV when he'd come over to my house. I think of our innocence in those woods. Nobody telling us what to do or how to behave. Our kneecaps damp with mud in the spongy grass around that spring. The one time Anthony found an arrowhead, marveling over it, cleaning off the dirt, saying to me, "They tell stories."

One day, he just disappeared from school. Nobody knew where or why. Nobody talked about it either. Nobody seemed to care. I rode my bike to the gravel expanse he once called home. The trailer was gone. A big Land For Sale sign had been erected.

Scott and I were talking about Anthony, missing him. I argued, since Scott's father Sid was full Cherokee, maybe he knew. Scott said even if he did, his father wasn't one to tell. I think Scott was too scared to ask him. I wasn't. Sid, however, didn't answer. Instead, he invited me to join him and Scott on a drive out to a sand pit, bringing with him a .22, and a Winchester 30-30 rifle.

"You want to know how Cherokee go missing? Then go on, Little Yansa." This was his nickname for me. He put one bullet in the Winchester. "You're white. Shoot one."

There was an uncompromisingly malicious look on Sid's face as he led Scott away from me and watched from a safe distance. I aimed that Winchester and fired, its barrel spiking into the air, thrusting me to the ground, dazed and ashamed. Those two were laughing hard, especially Sid, but I was so deafened I couldn't hear them.

Sid then grabbed me by the arms, stood me up and dusted me off. He showed me how to set my feet, brace myself, aim and squeeze the trigger. He grooved the rifle's stock against the soft spot between my shoulder and chest. "You guide the weapon, Little Yansa. Don't fight it and don't let it control you."

I missed my target with each shot, Sid adding bullets one at a time until he'd seen enough. The .22 came easier and a few times I hit the can Scott set up for me. Later, I told my Dad about this and asked if I could save to buy a gun. His answer was, "Your mother doesn't want weapons in the house. Neither do I."

Yet for Christmas that year, aged thirteen, I received a Crossman BB gun. My father was swift to tell me he'd store it in his bedroom. My brothers were never to touch it. This generosity puzzled me. Maybe my mother had spoken to Scott's and learned that he already had one. So did two other boys we ran with in the neighborhood. Like Sid, my father had served in the military. He knew about guns and had seen what they could do. Maybe he considered Sid the best teacher I could have. Still, he wouldn't allow Sid to take me deer hunting. Sid brought home at least one deer, usually a buck, each season. He kept a freezer of venison steaks in his basement.

Scott hadn't yet gone deer hunting with Sid either, but insisted he would once he turned sixteen. Though I envied him this, I took solace in the forays we made into the woods where we hunted squirrels, foxes and raccoons with our BB guns. I never killed anything. I was too poor a shot. I saw Scott kill one squirrel. He brought its carcass home, skinning it himself, later showing me its tail as his trophy.

The sight of that twitching carcass ended my fascination with the BB gun. What had that squirrel done to deserve such a fate? I spoke to no one about this, least of all Scott, believing myself weak for such a reaction. The gun stood wrapped in a sheet in my father's bedroom closet and stayed there for years until long after I'd move away. During one trip home, hoping to sell it, I asked my mother where it was. She didn't know. Nor did my father. Like Anthony, it had disappeared.

Emma Galloway Stephens

Containment at Table Rock

The mountain ain't done burning yet.
Is this fire an act of God
or of a careless cigarette?
Is the fire that eats the trees
slander or apocalypse?
Behold the rot the fire reveals—
hear what slips the burning bush's lips.
God help both heedless hiker
and widowed possum, babies on her back.
Fire burns both saints and sinners black.

Peter Cashorali

Rain Forest

We've come to see for ourselves,
A forest where clouds live
Not because they rise from the ground
But because they come down from the air
And bring a sky under the branches,
Where we can set foot in it.
The clouds never stop weeping,
Not because life is bitter
But because it's sweet.
For it they let their whole bodies
Turn into tears and fall.
See how everything here drinks and prospers.
Ferns and moss and maple saplings cradled by an alder.
Fir trees can live a thousand years.
After all of its centuries a red cedar fell,
Now it supports a stand of hemlocks.
Mushrooms unfold in the leaf mash.
Do we already know this?
Have we left room for it
In all our plans and figurings?
We're drenched in it here.
Each of us has grieved our own--
Husband, wife, generation of friends--
Each carries sorrow specific to no one else.
Unlike us the clouds are nothing personal.
They reserve no part of themselves for themselves,
When they finish all of them is gone
Into the forest, the lichens, the sleeves of moss.
What we love guides how we hurt.
We celebrate our love by weeping
As we celebrate our lives by dying,
Our deaths by living.

Peter Cashorali

Sunlight in Woods

Soon we're drunk,
The air a bit too strong for us
Like liquor made of shade and fire.
We move more slowly as we go
And swim as much as walk.
Wells of daylight stir the ferns
That burn between the deep deep trees,
Bright lit schools of maple leaves,
Star-shaped flowers at our feet.
Listening to one another
Our silence seems to be inspired
By the restless breathing green
That hosts us in its afternoon.
Our path is strewn with moving coins.
We sleep and let ourselves be dreamed.
From deeper in and further up,
Their voice and echo in duet,
Someone's saying, "This is where.

This is where."

Peter Cashorali

Low Life

A tiny person landed on
My unimaginable bulk
And not the first to realize
They were a person dignified
I watched them walk their six-legged way
Up the continent of shirt,
Antennas questing, curious,
And nothing cumbering their miles.

They modeled such a nimble life
Not filled with thoughts that crowd the mind
Or dreary tasks to barter love
Or hurried steps to outwit death
But just a way that you might walk
With legs however numerous,
The path your own, and simple too,
In this minute all your life.

Zachary Forrest y Salazar

Clearing Ditch

Off the gravel roads of Hallowell, Kansas,
I reeked of gasoline & sweat. Heat bore down on me

in the ditch, on my shirtless shoulders & arms
& chest—sans sunscreen. I welcomed the burning sun

& struggled to keep the lawnmower blades
lifted, the engine from choking out cold. Ditch grass

is viscous, like oil. One had to be careful—
with all the black snakes & rocks & roots just below

the blades—you learn to let the mower
down gently—a small bit at a time. Moving forward

was hard labor, I got so tired of the starter
rope, every fucking time the engine stopped, sun

burning me alive, my strength waning
with every jerk & pull. I studied the lessons of starting

over—with nothing, with being down in
the dirt. I'd almost forgotten all of this, having put

out of my mind the callouses I got clearing
fences of rose bushes, thorns in skin & cut forearms—

for what? A measly twenty bucks?
It meant everything to me. The days I spent free

of my father's hand & gas for my truck—
I could go anywhere, be anything. & I did. & I was.

The Silence of the Lamb

Dr. Durand had just bought a tomato/egg/cucumber sandwich from the hospital cafeteria. Seated at his desk, he chewed it absentmindedly, having first removed the wilted lettuce leaf. To keep his mind occupied, he skimmed through an article titled “The Scandal of Sheep and Lamb Slaughter,” which a local newspaper had featured on its front page. A photograph showed the condemned animals, packed tightly one behind the other between two barriers, in the death corridors of a slaughterhouse. “In 2024, five million sheep were slaughtered in France, 80% of which were lambs under one year old.” So far, nothing unusual; man is a carnivorous animal, after all. Continuing to read, Dr. Durand learned that before being bled, the animals “are stunned using an electrified clamp, with electrodes applied to enclose the brain.” This process was intended “to plunge them into a state of unconsciousness and insensitivity.” At least, it spared them significant suffering, thought Dr. Durand. But as he read further, the article explained that some sheep, “poorly stunned,” regained consciousness once hung on the slaughter line. Worse, he discovered that in too many cases, the electrodes were improperly placed—on the animal’s neck or back—rendering the procedure completely ineffective.

Dr. Durand closed the newspaper. The psychiatrist in him wasn’t solely concerned with human suffering; he was also deeply sensitive to animal suffering. Everything he had just read struck him as utterly nauseating, barbaric, and wholly unacceptable. In a dramatic gesture of protest, he threw the remainder of his sandwich into the office trash can. Then, after gulping down a large glass of water to regain his composure, Dr. Durand immersed himself in the file of his next patient.

It was only four in the afternoon when Dr. Durand got back into his car in the parking lot. He was leaving the hospital early because he had an appointment a few kilometers away, deep in the countryside. Once every quarter, he visited the Saint-Amour farm to stock up on exceptionally

high-quality pork. Ham hocks, shoulders, tenderloins, chops, and ribs for roasting... Everything from the Saint-Amour pigs was superb. Occasionally, he would also bring home one of their fine free-range chickens, whose necks had been wrung just that morning.

This time, he had reserved half of a freshly slaughtered milk-fed lamb. His wife wanted to prepare a cumin-spiced shoulder for their guests the following evening. As he got into his car, Dr. Durand thought again of the article he had read earlier in the local press. He resolved to ask the farmer if the young animal had been properly and humanely stunned.

He took to the road, his heart light, his conscience clear, pleased to contribute to the national effort of buying French and supporting local, short supply chains. At that moment, in the distance, a lamb's bleating could be heard. Wondering what it meant, Dr. Durand kept his eyes on the road ahead.

A CONVERSATION WITH MARY COLLINS

The river has always been my happy place. Any river. Anywhere. However, one specific region always comes to mind: the Dora, MO area, where there are as many watering holes as names in the phonebook. I was fortunate enough to call Dora home for a number of years. Mary and I were even neighbors for a short time. What a small world. (Even smaller when you've lived in Dora for any amount of time.) It's a different kind of living when the only grocery store in a thirty-mile radius is a gas station (Roy's). You're more in touch with your roots, more in touch with your neighbors, and more in touch with strangers, even. Rhonda, who basically runs Roy's, employs a brand of kindness that you just don't see in the city. In spite of the world today, small rural gems like Dora maintain a difficult-to-put-your-finger-on sensibility that's a rarity even in other parts of the U.S., what once might have been called "southern hospitality." And then there's the river.

Two major riverways and dozens of tributaries scabble these hills and hollers: The North Fork of the White River and Bryant Creek, the latter a river in its own right. The region's lush beauty is home to a multitude of wildlife and fish species, including some of the best trout fishing in the country. Whether I'm

interested in fishing or just knocking off a few hours tubing under the summer sun, there's no place like home.

Mary Collins is a historian, a small business owner, an avid river goer, and the former librarian of the Dora R-III School District. Recently retired, she now invests more time than ever into her research of Ozarks histories.



JW: *Our unexpected theme of Issue 5 is Rivers—and so, by extension, Change. Tell us a little about the evolution of Ozark County, Missouri area over the years.*

Mary: One of the biggest changes I have seen and lived through is moving to the Ozarks when the area was still catching up with the rest of the world and adapting to modern times. My family was going through our own adjustments moving to the area from Chicago during the back-to-the-land movement in the early 1970s. The transition was harder for my parents than it was for me and my sister (we were pretty young), but we all adjusted to rural living. By the time we came to the area, most everyone had electricity, but not telephones. There was limited television; we got three channels. Radio stations were pretty much limited to country music, unless you could manage to pick up WLS AM at night to listen to rock music.

It was a great gift my dad gave us, making the brave move of relocating his family to the Ozarks. We didn't know what to expect. We didn't have any family in the area; we only knew a few people. It was life-changing for all of us. Fifty-five years later, each of us still calls the Ozarks home. I can't imagine still living in Chicago.

Even though the modern world has changed some things about Dora, most of the important things have remained. For the most part, locals are helpful and friendly to outsiders. There is a slower pace of living, and porch sitting does still exist, at least for us. Waving at people while driving and stopping to talk when you meet on a dirt road is still a part of the culture. Once you meet someone, they pretty much always know you, if that makes sense.

JW: *It always blows my mind when I visit a specific place at the river and it's nothing like I remember it. It can be the most familiar place, somewhere I've been literally hundreds of times, but all it takes is a heavy rain, and then, bam: everything changes. Life is like that: all our day-to-day choices causing quiet consequences that eventually shift the bedrock of our lives.*

Why is change so hard?

Speaking regionally, one big example that comes to mind is that (correct me if I'm wrong) for years the people of Dora have been fighting Dollar General to keep them from building a location in the area. Recently, that Dollar General was finally built. I'm sure Roy's is already taking a hit, but perhaps not as much as I think. I'm sure many people went into West Plains, Mountain Grove, or Gainesville to get groceries anyway. Is the local feeling that a big change has occurred?

Mary: It's a little sad to be excited about a Dollar General coming to town, but with the closing of so many general stores in the area, it was needed. Our area was considered a food desert and still may be in some ways, as there is limited access to fresh fruit and vegetables. I think most people were relieved to have a place to buy supplies without making a trip to town. Dora went from three stores to just one, not including the stores within a ten-mile radius that slowly closed over the years. I think everyone misses the family stores that were scattered around not only our area, but everywhere in the Ozarks. Like Sycame Store. And Richville Store, which was at the corner of State Route W and 95. And, of course, Crossroads at H and 181. The era of these stores sadly has ended. Dollar General is a necessary evil. [Laughs.] If only they had cold beer and fresh produce.

JW: *Another thing that comes to mind in regard to "Change" is how much the river accesses and general floating conditions have transformed over the years. Tell us a little about the subtle and not so subtle changes that have occurred for river goers over the years.*

Mary: The flood of 2017 did contribute to the closing of a couple accesses, but river access for local people had been slowly dwindling for years. The canoe rentals stopped allowing locals to use their river accesses for free, for one thing, which was how it worked for many years. This has caused some

hard feelings, especially when the canoe rentals asked for local support when the government attempted to make the North Fork River part of the National Scenic Riverways. It may not have been a bad idea considering how many houses are being built along the river. Now where are you supposed to take your boat out? You can take out at Dawt or Twin Bridges, but for ten bucks a pop. The truth is, big canoe rentals have shut out the locals. You'd think it would be better to be good to your friends and neighbors. I guess we should start charging people for taking out at our spot. [Laughs.] Kidding. I would never do that.

Even accesses that remain from the old days, like The North Fork Recreation Area (Hammonds Camp) in the Mark Twain National Forest, have changed drastically. The gates close at the end of the tourist season, which discourages people from floating in the winter on that end of the river. This area used to be a go-to place for locals, but not so much anymore.

***JW:** The last question briefly touched on this, but I want to talk to you a little about floods. Rain is one thing in the city or on high ground, but in regions like Dora, major floods can cause major problems. The flood of 2017, which you mentioned, was devastating to say the least. There was so much destruction; houses, business, bridges, and all manner of property were damaged and destroyed. But even minor floods can cause problems. As it happens, you bought a riverfront lot in the past few years, and as I understand it, a recent flood turned your property upside down. What's it like maintaining a place on the river?*

Mary: Yes, the last flood was a bad one too. It brought in lots of sand, not so much in the swimming area, but more in our camping area. It even took out our camper—along with all our river neighbors' campers and gear. It also brought in parts of campers and camps from upstream. It's been hard to get motivated to clean things up, especially with all the ongoing rain we're having. When it's not flooding, mowing and weed eating is a weekly chore.

The 2017 flood definitely caused some major problems for the area as it took out James Bridge and Hammonds Bridge that cross the North Fork River. It was a major flood. Summer vacation came early to Dora School, because of the difficulty in student transportation, gravel road conditions, and teachers having problems getting to work. It really brings into perspective how settlers

were at the mercy of the rivers for access to areas across the river. There were crossings and ferries at different spots along the river, but they were always at the mercy of the rain. It wasn't as desirable to live along the river as it is now. The building of bridges must have been life-changing for the area.

JW: *These days people float rivers and hike trails for recreation, but once upon a time these leisure activities we take for granted today were a means of survival. I often think of my how my grandpa was always hunting to keep the freezer full, trapping to sell furs, digging ginseng, gardening, and canning anything and everything. Back then, there was more reliance on the land—not to mention reliance on yourself to get yourself out of a jam. There weren't cell phones or the internet. There was no Google to turn to for everything. You had to know how to skin a deer and how to catch a fish and how to grow corn and potatoes. You had to know how to survive, period. How was the Dora community, and access to rivers and lakes (etc.), different before cell phones and Dollar Generals and all?*

Mary: I think Ozarks settlers spent most of their time during the spring, summer and fall getting ready for winter. Large families were common and large stores of food had to be put up to make it through the winter months. I think Steel Bridge at Hebron on the North Fork River was one of the first large bridges that connected eastern Douglas County with the West Plains area. When Twin Bridges was built, it was a major celebration, with bands, speeches, and the Missouri governor attending.

But yes, you had to know how to fix things yourself for the most part. Each community had niche small businesses going to help people out. Every town had a blacksmith, for one thing. Enoch Fox moved to Dora, MO in 1929 and was the local blacksmith.

JW: *One of our favorite pieces of fiction in Issue 5 is a tale of a canoe trip gone wrong. It's a story about finding yourself in a tough situation and, simultaneously, finding the will to overcome it. Have you ever found yourself in a tight stop on the river? What happened? What did you do? And what effect did this have on your relationship with the river?*

Mary: When I was about 10, we were swimming at Hammonds Camp. I went under and got a mouthful of water and choked, which was scary. Luckily, the current took me to a shallow spot where I could get my footing and get back to the bank. Another time, we were canoeing on the North Fork and my cell phone rang while we were going down a shoal in the middle of nowhere, which threw me for a loop. I think the kids were teens and my instinct was to answer. We ended up getting stuck in a deep-water eddy up against a bunch of sticker bushes. I turn my phone off now, for one thing. It's crazy to have cell service on the river, but it could be helpful if you got in a real jam. I feel lucky that I haven't had more close calls. You have to respect the river. You never know what is around the next turn, especially following a flood. I still love floating and fishing and wish Bradley and I spent more time on the water.

***JW:** You were formerly a librarian at Dora School, but since retiring you've become a historian. I imagine there must be a fair amount of overlap between the two vocations, but how has your experience as a librarian informed your research of Ozarks histories? And how have the library sciences changed over the years?*

Mary: Libraries and library sciences have definitely changed as the internet has evolved. Card catalogs are no longer a physical case of alphabetized cards to look through when searching for a book. I removed the reference section at some point in our school library, because more up-to-date and accurate information can now be found in databases and online. I quit saving magazines for the same reason. Almost everything in a library can be found online, even though the feel and experience of reading a physical book, to me, is something that can't be replaced. And getting rid of the school's defunct physical collections made room for more books! I really expanded our fiction collection and tightened up the non-fiction. Choosing books to add to the fiction collection became so much easier and more enjoyable. Students were always so excited to see the new boxes of books coming in as they were very much involved in choosing what was added to the collection.

JW: *Your social media account, Dora Historian Ozarks, has sparked quite an online following. This hasn't happened overnight—you've been sharing photographs and histories of Ozarks culture, heritage, and environment for several years now—but it seems like just yesterday. How does this process work? Do people send you photographs and histories and so on? (And if so, how can our readers reach you?) Has this project been something you've always wanted to do? Any connection with your time as a librarian?*

Mary: The Dora Historian Ozarks page was originally my Dora School Library page. I posted the old Dora yearbooks and some historic Dora photos that people had shared with me and found that people were more interested in the old photos than the library news. Teacher Zach Hamby started an Ozarks History class at Dora School years ago and I started a special "Ozarks" collection in the library to support his class. Developing the collection sparked my interest in Ozarks history even more.

When I retired two years ago, I decided to change the page name and concentrate on local history, which has evolved into a larger area of the Ozarks. People can email photos to me at maryscollins11@gmail.com and message them to me through Dora Historian Ozarks.

The Ozarks Research Center at the Garnett Library at MSU-West Plains has been a great resource for the old West Plains Quill articles and other collections. Toney Aid donated his extensive collection of Ozarks real photo postcards of area towns and Ozarks ancestors, which are very interesting.

I love seeing people make family connections on my page. Recently, somebody commented on one of my posts saying, "That's my grandpa." Not long after that another person commented on the same picture saying, "That's my grandpa, too!" I think they knew each, but they had no idea they shared a common grandparent. Similarly, people who live in different states often make cousin connections. Families were so large in past generations and they in turn had big families of their own and may have moved away or just lost touch. It's very rewarding work.

JW: *Do you have any new projects on the horizon?*

Mary: I have been helping the Ozark County Historium in Gainesville, MO sort through photos and ephemera that have been donated to them over the years. We are trying to come up with a way to make the photos and their collection accessible online. If you are doing genealogical research in Ozark County, they have an extensive collection and wonderful volunteers. In time I would like to look through the newspaper archives in Ava and Mountain Grove.

JW: *What are you currently reading?*

Mary: Light summer reading mostly: I'll What She's Having by Chelsea Handler, currently. She can be so funny, but also profound. I've been binge listening to NPR's This American Life podcast. I find other people's life stories so very interesting.

Frog Friends Forever

“I’m wearing it!” Sadie gripped the frog hat tight against her scalp while her mother crouched in front of the door like a goalie. Sadie stood in a fighter’s stance, prepared to take this as far as she needed. It was her first day of fourth grade, and nobody was going to stop her from wearing her favorite hat. She already had on her frog shirt and frog socks. She needed the plush hat to complete the look.

“Sadie, please. I know you want to wear the hat, but you need to make a good first impression. You’re going to middle school now. Don’t you want to make friends?” Her mother panted like she’d been wrestling with a wild animal, but Sadie knew the bus would be coming any minute. If she could hold out for just a little longer, she would win.

Her mother squinted, then darted her eyes to the left. Sadie followed her gaze but as soon as she looked away, she snatched the hat off the top of her head.

“Hey!” Sadie glared at her mother.

“I’m sorry Sadie, but there’s a time and place for things. This is a silly hat. You can wear it when we’re having fun, but you have to go to school.”

“I’m wearing it to school!” Sadie crossed her arms. Out the window, she could see the bus pull up. She glared at her mother one more time, brought her hands up to her head, and thrashed her fingers through her hair, leaving it a frazzled ginger mess. “Can I wear it now?” She said with a smirk.

“Fine!” Her mother groaned and threw the hat at her, “but do not come crying to me if you get bullied because of it. Just hurry up before you miss the bus.”

Sadie put on a pouty face as her mother hugged her goodbye but as soon as she stepped out the front door, she grinned like an expert con artist. She was well aware of potential bullies, but not wearing a frog hat wouldn’t stop them from picking out something else to make fun of. She wasn’t sure what it was, but all of the other kids always found something she was doing

wrong. It was like everybody else had received some kind of manual that taught them how to be a normal kid and instead, Sadie was handed a manual on frogs.

She knew everything about them. She could explain their life cycle, identify all the local species, and chart their anatomy. She even had a huge collection of stuffed frogs and tadpoles. Her mother tried to get her to tone down her froggy aesthetics, but she just didn't understand that this was all a part of the plan. She just had to find somebody else who liked frogs as much as she did, and they would have no problem being friends—in theory.

Once she made it to school, she walked through doors with confidence but soon realized not a single other student was wearing their favorite animal. Sure amphibians were an acquired taste, but there wasn't even a cat obsessed girl she could make friends with.

She thought maybe somebody would compliment her outfit, but nobody said anything to her, at least directly. A couple kids whispered as she walked by, but she tried not to think much of it. She sat through her first few classes hoping somebody would strike up conversation with the frog girl. She'd even prepared a few interesting frog facts to use as an icebreaker but made it all the way to recess without speaking to anybody.

The bell rang, and all the other students rushed down the hall to the playground while Sadie trailed behind. She spent the first few minutes of recess bouncing between different groups of people. Everybody was talking, but she wasn't sure what to talk about. Standing on the edge of conversations, waiting for a chance to jump in, her frustration was reaching a tipping point when a boy yelled behind her.

“Hey frog girl!” She turned around and the boy snatched the hat off of her head. Instantly she used her arms to cover her frizzy hair while everybody around her laughed.

“Give it back!” She screamed and lunged towards him, but he threw the hat to another boy. The group of kids played keep-away until Sadie was on the verge of tears. “Please! Give it back,” she begged in a wavering voice until finally, one of the boys threw the hat off the playground where it landed in a mud puddle.

Sadie let out a cry and ran after the hat. It was soiled, but she brushed off what she could, holding onto hope that the mud would come out in the wash. The group of boys laughed behind her. Heat burned the apples of her cheeks. Tears welled in her eyes.

She ran off from the playset, down a hill towards a small patch of trees at

the edge of school property. Sitting with her knees pulled up to her face, she cried silently, but jumped when she heard somebody speak.

“Are you okay?” She looked up to see a boy with a wide mouth and a loose t-shirt. His hair was a little messy, and he had mud on his jeans. She nodded her head. “Those boys were mean. I’m sorry they did that.”

“It’s okay,” she said, wiping her nose with her sleeve. “My mom told me not to wear it.”

“No way! She doesn’t like the hat?”

“I don’t know. I think she likes it. She just didn’t think anyone else would.” She looked up at the playground with a trembling lip. “I think she was right.”

“But I like your hat,” the boy said, teetering back and forth between his left and right foot, “Frogs are my favorite.”

“Really?” Sadie’s eyes widened as she smiled. “Me too! I love frogs. Did you know that they can breathe through their skin?”

“Through their skin? What? That’s crazy.” The boy held out his hand. “The name’s Mitch by the way. Nice to meet you—”

“Sadie,” she said, shaking his hand.

“Don’t let the other kids get to you. We can be frog friends,” he said with a wide smile. Sadie wiped off the last of the tears from her cheeks and stood up.

“You’re right. They’re losers.” She said, almost believing it.

The next day, Sadie left her hat at home and even though it pained her, she didn’t put on a single frog accessory. She felt like a bland vanilla wafer, the ones that taste kind of like paper, but it at least stopped the hallway whispers. She kept her head down until she made it to class. Mitch was sitting in the back.

“Hey Frog Girl,” he said as she sat down at the desk next to him.

“It’s Sadie,” she said.

“I know but I like Frog Girl.”

She glared at him for a second but soon her facade broke, and she smiled. The bell rang for class to begin, and they sat through the lesson whispering frog puns to each other. Once recess came, they both ran past the playground, down to the edge of the woods.

“Follow me. I want to show you something,” Mitch said and brought Sadie to a basket tucked behind one of the trees. “Look.” He opened the lid, revealing what had to be at least twenty little frogs. Sadie instantly

recognized most of them as American Toads, but he closed the lid too quickly for her to identify them all.

“Why are they in a basket?” She asked.

“Just wait. Follow me.” Hr took off towards the playground. Sadie tried to keep up, but he was running with a determination she didn’t understand.

“Wait! You can’t keep frogs in a basket. They need a proper environment. You need a terrarium!” She flailed her arms, but he didn’t stop. He ran with the basket up to the playground, up behind the blonde boy who snatched her hat. The boy turned around but before he could say anything, Mitch dumped the basket over his head.

The boy screamed. Sadie screamed too, but Mitch doubled over, laughing. The boy thrashed his body around until all the frogs had been flung off. He turned to Mitch, then punched him square in the jaw. Sadie let out another scream, but soon all of the students were chanting “fight” as Mitch dug his heel into the rubber mulch and punched the boy in the stomach.

The teacher, red-faced, came and grabbed the two boys by the back of the shirt, ending their scuffle. After the excitement died down, he sent them to the principal’s office and everybody else went back to playing, but Sadie remained collapsed in the rubber mulch.

During the tussle, somebody must have stepped on one of the frogs. Its organs exploded out of its mouth, leaving a bloody lump of flesh coated entirely with tiny chunks of recycled tire. She tried to hold it in, but her eyes welled with tears, and they started rolling down her cheeks.

Nobody cared. There were still several frogs hopping around the playground, at risk for being squished, and somebody had to help them. She took a deep breath, wiped off her eyes, and spent the rest of recess catching the frogs and returning them one by one to their home in the woods. It made her feel a little better, but each time she saw the dead toad, her stomach twisted into knots.

The next day, when she walked into class, Mitch was sitting in the same place as the day before.

“What’s with the long face?” He asked as she sat down.

“I’m mad at you.” Sadie crossed her arms and refused to look at him.

“What? Why?”

“One of the frogs died because of what you did.” Her voice cracked, but she fought back the tears.

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Mitch’s smile fell. His shoulders slumped. “I was trying

to get revenge.”

“I didn’t want revenge,” she said quietly.

“I’m sorry. Can we still be frog friends?” Sadie thought he sounded genuinely sad and decided that this one time, she could forgive him.

“It’s okay,” she said tersely as the day’s first lesson began. Mitch had to go to in-school suspension during recess, so Sadie spent the time sitting by the edge of the trees, watching for frogs. Eventually, she got bored and asked if she could get a book from the classroom. Once she walked in, however, Mitch was hunched over in the corner. Two empty glue bottles sat next to him.

“What are you doing?” Sadie asked. He jumped, but turned around and smiled.

“I’ve been working on a project,” he almost whispered. He brought another bottle up to his mouth and squeezed it, spewing the glue into his mouth. Sadie backed away slowly while he emptied the bottle, started running as soon as she hit the hallway, and returned to the playground without grabbing a book.

Sadie didn’t say anything about Mitch eating glue, and the teacher didn’t seem to notice. When the class returned from recess, Mitch didn’t say anything either. He acted like everything was normal. She was still angry at him but couldn’t find the words to express it. By the time she made it home, her mother could tell that something was bothering her.

“Sadie, is everything okay?” She asked, kneeling to look at Sadie eye-to-eye.

“Why would somebody say they like something and then kill it?” Sadie’s lip trembled and for a second her mother’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“What do you mean? Did something happen?” Sadie nodded her head. “What happened?”

“A boy at school said he likes frogs too, but then he squished one, and it died.” Her voice broke, but she told herself to remain calm.

“Did he do it on purpose?”

“No, I don’t think so. But why did he squish it? He said he likes frogs, but he put a bunch of them in a basket all on top of each other. I would never do that to a frog. Why would he?”

“Oh,” her mother thought for a second before responding, “Well, you know there’s many different ways that people can like things. You like pineapple, right?” Sadie nodded. “But do you like pineapple on pizza?” Sadie shook her head. “See, but I like pineapple on pizza. So we both like

pineapple but we like it in different ways. It's this way with everything, Sadie. For instance, I'm a nurse, right? I'm a nurse because I like to help people, but there are some people who become nurses for a different reason."

"Like what?" Sadie said. Anxiety swelled in her chest, but she wasn't sure why.

"Well, the people I help are sick right? They need help, but there are some people who don't actually want to help. They just want... somebody to need their help. Does that make sense?" Sadie nodded her head. "Sometimes, I meet these other nurses, and I think we're going to be good friends until I realize they like being a nurse for different reasons than I do. It sucks to think you've found a friend and realize they're not who you think they were but look, I made it through, and I know you will too. You're tough."

"Yeah, I am tough."

The next day, Sadie wore the frog hat to school again. There were no whispers. It must be old news, she thought and walked through the halls with a newfound sense of confidence. She knew she liked frogs, and that it was a little weird, but everybody has weird parts of themselves. She was just choosing to wear it on her sleeve, or rather, on her bracelet full of frog charms.

She didn't sit next to Mitch. Instead, she sat in the front of the class like how she usually prefers. At recess, she ran down to the trees. Mitch walked down the hill a few moments later but didn't stop at the treeline and kept walking into the woods.

"Where are you going?" Sadie asked.

"I'm working on my project," was all he said before disappearing into the thicket.

Over the next few weeks, Sadie noticed a change in Mitch. His skin developed a faint, greenish tint. His cheeks bloated outwards, and his skin became oily, sticky looking. He stopped talking to her or anyone else really. Every recess, he just walked past her and straight into the woods.

One day, after the summer heat had started to die down but before the winter cold had settled in, when the frogs were still active but slow, Mitch stopped on his way to the trees.

"Follow me. I want to show you something," he said, but Sadie hesitated. "What's wrong? Aren't we still frog friends?"

"Yeah," Sadie said, feeling guilty. She honestly thought he wasn't even interested in being her friend anymore. They hadn't really talked but then

again, she never told him they weren't friends.

She followed him into the woods, the pit in her stomach growing deeper and deeper. About ten feet in, there was a trail that wended down a steep hill to a creekbed. Mitch took a left and led her up a small cliff that looked over the stream.

"I've been practicing," he said with a smile, "Watch." he then leaned over the cliff and drooled until he had a long glob of spit dangling over the edge. Sadie watched as the line of spit descended all the way down to the ground. He made a noise that sounded like "wait," and they sat for a moment.

Sadie was about to leave when he tugged on her sleeve and pointed to the bottom of the cliff. An American Toad was hopping along the gravelly embankment. He waited until the frog was directly under his string of spit, then he bent his head down and stuck it to the frog.

He sucked the spit back into his mouth like a noodle, and the frog followed with it. Sadie screamed in horror as he slurped it into his mouth, grinned, then swallowed it whole.

Sadie's head spun. Her blood went cold. This boy just ate a frog in front of her — alive. She could feel her heart beating in her chest. "Wasn't that cool!" he croaked. His smile sickened her. She couldn't speak. She was angry, but no words were coming to her. A tear rolled down her cheek as she glared at him.

"No." Sadie's voice wavered. "No. It's not cool. I'd never do that to a frog. You don't like frogs. We are not frog friends!" The end came out in a screech.

Mitch collapsed into the dirt. His eyes fell to the ground. A pang of guilt shot into Sadie's stomach, but the anger burned. She waited for him to say something, to apologize or anything, but he just sat there, whimpering, sniffing.

Sadie had enough and left him there. She returned to the playground and went back to reading. The guilt still lingered in her gut, but it felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

Mitch never came back from the woods.

The teacher noticed as they lined up to go back inside. She asked if anybody had seen him, and Sadie said she saw him go into the woods, leaving out the frog eating. The teacher got angry. Apparently, it was against the rules to leave the playground. Nobody told Sadie.

Things got serious fast. The teacher's aid called the office for help, and

the teacher ran for the woods. A few other teachers ran out to help, but they returned after only a few minutes and called the police.

A cop brought Sadie off to the side and started asking her questions. She heard a teacher say they couldn't get ahold of Mitch's parents, but the cop brought her attention back to him. She asked if he would be okay, and he reassured her the best he could. She told him about the frog basket, and that they weren't frog friends anymore. He nodded his head, jotted down some notes, then let her go.

They didn't find him.

The teachers kept a close eye on the students for the next few weeks, but eventually they stopped paying attention to Sadie, and she took the opportunity to sneak into the woods. She ran down the path to the cliff that Mitch showed her.

"Mitch!" she screamed out over the water. All was quiet save for the chirping of crickets, but she screamed again. Tears welled in her eyes, but she screamed one more time, calling out his name until her voice cracked. She collapsed to the ground, her cries escaping in little bursts, but then she heard a tiny voice from below.

"Frog Girl?" She crawled back to the ledge of the cliff, peered over and sure enough, it was Mitch. His head was sticking out of the water. His skin was covered in lumps and bumps, and splotches of brown and green. Sadie instantly recognized the markings of an American Toad and gasped.

"What happened?" She covered her hands with her mouth. His eyes were yellowish, his body bloated, but Mitch smiled.

"I finished my project."

"When are you coming back?" Mitch just rolled his eyes.

"I don't want to go back. Nobody likes me there."

"What do you mean? You have to go back. Everyone's been looking for you." Sadie's heart pounded against her chest.

"So what?" He looked down at the water, possibly at his own reflection. "They may want to find me, but they don't want me to be back."

"Yes they do."

"Bullshit." Sadie gasped. Mitch sounded angry, but he smiled again. "They don't want me around. They all think I'm weird and annoying. Even you don't want to be my friend anymore."

"I'm sorry." A tear rolled down Sadie's cheek, the guilt from before rearing its ugly head.

"It's okay. I like it here. I'm now Frog Boy, ruler of the swamp." Sadie

almost reminded him that it was a creek, not a swamp, but she held her tongue. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

Sadie bit her lip. She didn’t know what to do. She couldn’t ask anybody without ratting him out, so she just nodded her head. “I won’t.” She stood up, brushed off her jeans, and started heading back to the playground.

“Wait!” Mitch called. She looked back over the ledge. “Can we still be frog friends?”

“Yeah.” Despite the sniffing, Sadie smiled. “We can be frog friends again.”

Mitch smiled wide, then sank back into the water.

Back at the playground, the teacher was furious, but refrained from yelling at Sadie once she saw she was crying.

“I was looking for him.” Sadie said as she broke into sobs. The teacher nodded, patted her on the shoulder while she let Sadie cry it out.

“Did you find anything?” She asked in the way that adults ask things that aren’t really questions. Sadie looked out into the woods. She could just barely make out the chorus of croaks coming from the creek. She took a deep breath and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Peycho Kanev

Night Silence

She is beautiful,
“Morphine” plays from the phone,
set on the little table beside the bed,
in this hotel room
with exquisite white walls,
vodka and wine in two plastic cups,
tinged yellow by the night lamp,
through the windows with blinds comes
only the howling and sadness of the city,
and our fingers touch lips, breasts,
and the eyes clutch the last hours of darkness,
like a child the last summer days,
and when the sunlight finally
finds us,
it brings with it timelessness and
the familiar feeling of resignation—
a price we pay willingly,
for the chance to be free for an hour
or two,
for the chance afterward to remember,
though briefly, how beautiful and
happy we have been,
while life all along
will insist otherwise.

Peycho Kanev

Mrs. Dalloway

A hot summer afternoon.

I sit on the terrace above the boulevard
and drink beer.

The sirens of ambulances and fire trucks
pass beneath me, birds fly by,
and the clouds listen to Arvo Pärt from my laptop.

From close by downtown come the shouts of a large crowd
that wants some kind of change—herd-like and immediate.

While I listen, I feed the cat, who has
the soul of a dog and one missing front tooth.

Then I clean her litter box.

Finally, I light a cigarette and let the smoke rise
upward together with the music.

Soon, on the boulevard, passes a scooter,
on which a beautiful girl rides behind a boy and has
hugged him around the waist.

“Probably going to the movies...” I think to myself.

I finish my beer, stub out my cigarette, go inside,
and say to the beautiful woman sitting on the couch:

“Mrs. Dalloway, do you want to go to the movies?”

She says nothing, only smiles and licks her lips.

Debbie Cutler

Tributaries of the Heart

Arizona

In my teen years, my friends and I would take off on ditch day, a holiday not recognized by the school district but acknowledged by all our peers, and go to the Lower Salt River near Phoenix and float and swim for the day.

The approximate 200-mile-long river, stretching through Maricopa and Gila counties, is the largest in the state and feeds the area with its water—but back then we didn't care about that. When you're young, the tendency is not to understand, not to care about ecosystems as such. It was just another thing that pleased me. All we cared about was the Arizona sun on our backs, the boys in swim trunks, the river's water cooling us from the desert heat, and beer, beer, beer.

We played our music loud, sunned our bodies with baby oil to make us bronze and lemon juice in our hair to make us blondes. We didn't know the threats of excessive heat and sun upon our skin. Nor did we realize drinking and floating were a dangerous combination. All we knew was that we loved the dark, rich color we turned in summer and the stares and whistles from hot guys that came with it as we tipped Coors or Budweisers to our mouths.

We shared a love of the desert: its wildlife and blooming cacti; its quietness and calm. We were so far removed from the city that it felt removed from everything, all of life's strident seriousness. We could be young, act young, feel young, all with no parental control, with no worries in the world.

Louisiana

I moved away from Phoenix in my late teens and at twenty was living with my husband in a small duplex in a run-down area one block from the Red River in Bossier City, Louisiana. My home stood on cinder blocks as did all those in the neighborhood to keep the house safe from the inevitable floods.

I made daily romps along the river's edge with my Bassett-Beagle mix, Molly, first climbing the high banks, then trotting down the hill to the river below. I loved that river with its dark, slow-flowing waters and boats that pushed up and down it.

It was not a swimmable river, at least not where I was, and I learned to appreciate the fierceness of its unpredictable currents. The banks were full of green trees and the trail was rocky with lots of roots and unpredictable footing, but it was an adventure. The treetops overhead protected me from the summertime heat where I liked to sit and read, quietly, happily disappearing from civilization.

On weekends my husband would join me. We would sit and talk, sometimes even making love along the river's banks. We went more or less undetected thanks to the foliage and our blankets, but we often laughed about staff and patients being able to see us through binoculars from the hospital across the river.

"We're giving them an eyeful," my husband laughed. I didn't care. I enjoyed the warmth of days like those, the cool breeze coming off the water, and the touch of my husband's hands.

When I got pregnant with my first child, I still wandered along the Red River, talking to my daughter inside me, telling her about trees and dogs and the sounds and the river. It was too early to feel my child move, to feel the flutter of tiny kicks, but I could sense her.

I watched the river in awe and wonder, sensing the life in it as much as the life in me. After one such walk, I came home and dreamed about sweet babies, soft as dough, smelling like wind blowing gently across wildflowers.

Once, my husband and I were stopped in earshot of a man piloting a steamboat. "Hey, you wanna ride the river?" he asked. He said he'd bring us back afterward. I wanted to go, but I was scared. I didn't trust the man.

"Heck yeah!" my husband declared automatically. And so, it was decided. There was nothing I could do except follow in fear.

We rode up and down the river, the captain offering beers and turns at steering the boat. I tried to enjoy myself while reconciling my fear of the unknown. Would he throw us overboard? Would he steal us away from our home? Did he have something sinister in mind? How could we have accepted this? Seemingly the whole time I watched my husband's warm smile as, meanwhile, I froze. However, after a while the man brought us back just like he said he would. All was well.

I didn't remember how we got on or even when we got off the boat, how deep the water was near the shore, or anything we'd talked about, conversations I, myself, took part in, nervous as I was. All I knew was we were safe. The relief was immediate as we stepped back onto the familiar banks.

One day late into my pregnancy I took my last walk along the river, though I didn't know it at the time. A large, imposing man watched me as I climbed down the banks. He followed me above the levy as I walked the shore. When I turned, he turned. Something was off about it, about him. Still, even pregnant, I was faster. I picked up my pace and passed farther ahead, racing up the banks and to safety.

Much as I loved that river, I never walked that particular trek again. Instead, I walked the streets of Bossier City with a tiny gun without bullets. I had been harmed by men before. Although I was afraid of guns, I started carrying that one on walks to protect myself and my daughter.

Alaska

Eventually, we moved to Alaska where new rivers began to course through me. In Alaska, there were rivers everywhere, most of them glacier-fed and ice-cold. Still, some were silty from the glacier dust, created from rock ground by the pulse of the rivers. But most of them were astonishingly clear.

Some of the rivers there were large, some small; some tumbled ferociously, while others dripped along slowly and steadily. There was every size and variation of waterbodies imaginable, many of them braided together with multiple channels and tributaries. These were usually shallow and old and had sandbars nearby that were walkable. I'd stand on an overview looking at them, with multiple wildflowers blowing near me in the wind. The sweet smells and pull of the river mesmerized me from Day One. I was home.

There are more than 12,000 rivers in Alaska, many of which are important for transportation purposes to small villages in Bush, Alaska, where the only way in is by boat or plane.

I flew to Native villages as a reporter and covered stories such as the dangers of erosion on local villages. It was saddening at times that the rivers, which brought so much beauty, could so easily cause such strife for the communities. The rivers were the lifeblood of Alaskan communities, pathways through which precious cargo was delivered to store for the long winters. The rivers were even used as driving lanes for snowmachines during much of the year when the rivers froze over. And yet, the rivers had a mind of their own, a power of their own. Sometimes they were kind and giving; other times they were harsh and dangerous. Nevertheless, they were always beautiful.

The Kenai River, a recreational river located on Alaska's playground on the Kenai Peninsula, is one of the world's premier sportfishing sites. My family and I often went there in the summers. The area was frequented by bears, but they were more interested in salmon than people. However, this wasn't true of other locations. Bear attacks, although not common, happened nonetheless. It was more of a frontier-like living, living in Alaska; it was necessary to keep your guard up. Once, a mother bear huffed behind me in standing position as I sat eating a bowl of split pea soup. A friend I was with yelled, "Run, Debbie!" And I did so, scared for my life. Another time it was wolves that nearly got me, trailing me and my dog for miles, only disappearing when the bush got thick. Even then, I was afraid others were in hiding just out of sight, ever ready to pounce.

I often sat on the shores of the Russian River reading books while my family enjoyed the combat fishing—anglers lining up close together, each casting in unison along its banks, their poles dipping and their gears reeling in with a beat like the lyrics of a song, broken by the singing of "Fish On!"

We liked to camp at the Russian River Campground, making smores by the fire in the evening after a dinner of the day's catch. In the morning, it was pancakes and bacon, full bellies, and the memories we shared. My children, who learned to catch fish like any of the men and women, would dance around the campground in their hip waders and raingear waiting for the day to start. "Can we go to the river? Can we? Can we go?" It was a wonderful experience.

I loved the Turnagain Arm and the Gulf of Alaska that flowed into it, climbing up mountain tops along the ridge and watching streams flow down the mountain into the tailwaters below. But my favorite river in Alaska was always the Eagle River. It's only forty miles long and begins at Eagle Glacier in Chugach State Park, following the original Iditarod National Historical Trail into Eagle River Valley and Chugach National Forest. On the Eagle River side, about twenty miles from Anchorage, that's where I liked to hike.

Winters were quiet there except for the swish of our skis or the crunch of our feet, not to mention the fog of ice coming from our mouths coating our glasses or shimmering from our hair. We didn't mind. The weather might have been twenty below, but our movement, the thick layers of clothing, and our passion for the outdoors kept us warm.

Once, a friend brought his well-wrapped young daughter with us. He carried her on a sled near the thickly frozen river, but with her lack of movement she became too cold and faced frostbite. Her fingers and toes were ice-cold. We were about a half-mile from a cabin and raced toward it, planning to build a fire. When we got there, it was occupied, but the campers were gone. We stayed until she was toasty warm and rushed as fast as we could out of the wilderness. The cold had almost gotten us.

Alternatively, the summers were glorious. People came there to hike, bike, see the glaciers, ride ATVs, hunt, gold pan and so much more. And the wildlife was diverse; everything from wolves to bears, from moose to beavers, from Eagles to marmots, called this land home.

The rivers of Alaska were also teeming with life: all those spawning salmon from the Pacific Ocean that showed up from late spring into the fall. They filled the rivers, flashing and dashing in the spawn. It was amazing to watch as they lived and spawned and died at their final resting place: their birthplace. There was a life-affirming circularity to these seasonal comings and goings.

I often hiked the three-mile stent into the wilderness to Echo Bend and beyond. My dog, Toby, splashed through the river with joy as I sat on a rock or tree stump, enjoying the beauty and the warmth these endless days had to offer. On weekends, I spent hours in the woods along the river in this way.

The alone time, however, came to an end the same way as my time at the Red River had: with a man following me along the trail, playing cat and mouse, scaring me and reminding me that at the end of the day humans are the biggest danger in this wild world.

This particular man ran circles around me and Toby, sometimes in front of us, sometimes behind, along trails thick with bush and trees. Everything was silent except for the chatter of squirrels, the sound of our footsteps, and my panicked breathing.

The man, likely in his mid- to late-twenties I thought, appeared then disappeared, over and over, again and again. As terror rose, I could smell the fresh green of shrubs and the glacier water around us as he circled in closer and closer until I could almost feel his breath upon me. A decade later, I learned that a nationwide serial killer who stalked victims on hiking trails had been in the area at the time of my encounter. When later he was found and arrested, authorities discovered his cache, including duct tape, shovels, guns, rope, Drano, and lye. Had that been him? I asked myself. I still ask myself sometimes.

Missouri

After twenty-nine years in Alaska, I moved to Missouri to be closer to family and found a totally different way to enjoy rivers—one that was both safe and fun!

Here, in my senior years, I sip wine, craft beer, or grapefruit mules along the banks of rivers while listening to bands play—everything from rock to soul, blues to country, music as varying as the rivers of this world. I love spending my times this way, sitting on picnic tables or benches with the warm wind blowing, a river flowing nearby. I like to watch the boats and to see all the young people dancing in their swimming trunks and skirts and singing along with the bands. The river functions as a backdrop, and a beautiful one at that.

At Cooper's Landing, located along the 237-mile-long Katy Trail on the Missouri River in Columbia, I love to hear the strum of guitars against the swish of the river. I love the feel of dirt beneath my feet and the shadows cast from shade trees above. I love the blue skies with billowy clouds that turn to a flash of red as the long summer days give way to blushing sunsets, all the

lovely people dancing freely as day turns to night and one more drink turns to last-call.

The Rocheport A-frame called Les Bourgeois sits high above the Missouri River's banks and is known for its amazing views and music. I like to go there during the day, before the bands start, and sit in peace and quietude, staring transfixed at the smooth Missouri River below with its vastness and green banks on each side, rich with wildlife and flora.

Glasgow, a small rural town in Missouri, also rests along the Missouri River. I like to sit on their spacious patio which overlooks the muddy river below and take in the magnificence all around. Birds build nests in the flower pots in the rafters above, intricate works made with sticks and mud and love. I toast to the summer and to more days like this as we take in the beauty of the river.

Hermann, a German town rich with wineries, also sits on the Missouri. I'll never forget a time in recent years, sitting under the cool, covered patio, a band playing, the young ones dancing, a huge crab feast underway, the weather utterly perfect. We couldn't see the river, but we could feel its presence. The river made the town, which would not be the same without it.

Hannibal, Missouri is home to the great Mississippi River. I've toured it three times on a Mark Twain riverboat, hearing the stories of all the characters of his books: Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, Becky Thatcher... Most of these old-time stories were based on real friendships, a historian said that day. I'd never thought of that, but probably the same could be said of most stories. Fiction or not, real life peeks through whether we expect it to or not.

Each of us in this wide world, our stories flow through us like rivers, tributaries offering up to others what we know and what we, ourselves, have seen. It happens beneath the surface, mostly—not unlike the way springs often form the headwaters of freshwater streams—but I see it ever the more clearly the older I get. These days, I am most content to sit here beside a river somewhere and share with others a love of music and stories and the rush that falls over us when the words come pouring out. It is a depth and clarity unlike anything I've ever known. I am thankful for every dip into these waters. I am blessed.

Hamish Kavanagh

Before the Sun Comes Up

Fingers frozen to handlebars. Following paw prints in the frost. Barking rains down from the hills. Hooves beat chunks out of the track.

Cattle patties send steam up your nostrils. Shapes: ginger, white and black move on down the ridge ahead. Boney shoulders, swaying tails, obedient in their fear.

It's tempting to think them naive as they cut up the mist with their rushed steps. But they're not. Even if they've got the day wrong. They're not wrong.

You are death to them.

But that doesn't mean you're their enemy.

This world you built out of wire and wood, is all they know.

Every blue skied day is owed to you. Every virus they didn't catch. Every emaciating plague that rolled over the next farm but not this one, is by your hand.

You're not god, but you're not the devil either.

Their tongues wrap grass with no thought of the fertiliser that let it grow so high and green. Their choice to swallow sweeds rather than turnip was made months back. Their choice to chew veggies rather than flesh was made centuries back. Neither had a moral basis.

The one day, their worst day, when the truck growls up the road, is your 'why' for all this.

But if your critics pretend they didn't notice you look away. They're lying.

It's no coincidence that the model and make of that eighteen wheeler became important details to you all of a sudden. That electric prod became a tool. That Hereford became a beast, became a head, became a dollar.

They'll call that callus, transactional behaviour. But it's not. That's the human part kicking in.

Your son's fiancé scratches her beagle's ear, one carnivore to another.

Gum boots as ill fitting on her as a Lamb of God T-shirt. She proudly announces her pet is no tool.

“It’s a simple choice,” she says.

Words invented indoors far from the mud.

You’ve got your own words like that.

‘A deer is a pest.’

That’s why you take a rifle with you on nicer days. That’s why you spend afternoons skinning and carving.

‘It fills the freezer for a month. Imagine what that saves us on groceries.’

More words.

Those figures out in the cold. Two legged, four legged, breeding, feeding, nurturing and killing one and other. Exist beyond words.

They were out there before the sun rose. They’ll be out there when you lay your head down between feather and linen.

Simple doesn’t belong in this place.

Mojaffor Hossain

Translated from Bengali by Rituparna Mukherjee

A River Present and Absent

It flowed at some distance from my house. I went there every dawn or dusk. I can't recall why I went there. I left home one evening to head to the river, and then something strange came to pass, the river was nowhere to be found! How did such a large, long river just vanish overnight? Morose, I returned home and asked Ma, can you tell me where I can find the river? I couldn't find it!

Ma laughed and then turning serious, she said, you lost the hill just a few days back! And now, the river as well? What are we going to do with you?

I remembered the hill. I climbed it little by little every day, starting from the point I finished the last day. One day, I forgot to climb down. I told Ma that I couldn't get down. Ma said, forget it. So, I had to forget about the hill. After that, I couldn't find it anymore. Only after searching and searching, I chanced upon the river. Someone had planted a forgotten history in that river of oblivion that bloomed every evening exactly when the daylight faded. And no sooner did it bloom than it melted away in its waters. I had to gather all the concentration in the world to learn how to decipher that story. I asked Ma about it. She said the day her story unspooled in all the river water, she would cease to exist. Stories float in the river when people cease to exist, she explained. I was really hurt that day. Standing by the river, I watched as each story morphed into a person. I had never seen these people; still, they were familiar. They called me by their children's names. And I searched for my mother among them. And weirdly enough, I wished my mother's death in wanting to unearth her story in the river!

When the night separated itself completely from the day, I stood next to the tubewell and told Ma a lot of things, but I couldn't tell her this.

Today, when I couldn't find the river, I kept thinking, the river was right there, it was supposed to stay. It wasn't my own creation. Perhaps it ceased to exist because I didn't understand it properly. Many such paths get lost this way. I told Ma one day, if only I could share with someone whatever I had

seen! Ma laughed sadly and said, then you will have lesser things to see!

I don't lose heart. I know the river is out there somewhere. It is not visible because no one acknowledges its presence. But it is there, just like my mother. Everyone knows that six months and ten days after my birth, my mother floated in the river as a story. And even if they do not know this, the river knows.

Portages

They portaged into the Minnesota wilderness for six hours that day. They carried the heavy canoe through the narrow, wooded trails, sometimes a mile or more, until they could put it into the water again. Each time they came to another portage, where shallow rapids flowed over exposed rocks, they climbed out of the canoe onto a muddy, sucking bank, hoisted their gear onto their backs, positioned the canoe on their shoulders between them, and trudged to the next spot in the river that was deep enough for the canoe. This was where the mosquitoes hit hardest, in the cool shadow of the trees. It was a misery of fluttering attacks. A constant, terrifying buzz around the face, eyes, and ears that at times brought a scream to her throat. She felt silly, though, so she choked it down and kept walking.

She had assured him that she could do it. He had been making this trip with his dad and brothers since he was a teenager and wanted to share it with her. Such a tender and eager offering. The stories he told about jumping off rocks into a crystal lake, fishing silently in the crisp hours before dawn, and frying fresh, battered fish in the cast-iron skillet while the sun burned down the horizon. Their dad yelling at them ten times a day to “zip up the tent!” while grumbling about mosquitos. Pranks played on each other; years later they still laughed about them until they cried. He beckoned her across the threshold of these stories and she, hungry for something that would bind her to him, agreed.

Crossing the lakes was her favorite part, despite hours of paddling that turned her arms to jelly: vast, dark water stretching endlessly before them; ancient hieroglyphs chalked on passing cliffs; a tree line bursting into a million shades of green. It all welcomed her, an initiate on an alien planet. He pointed out a moose on the far bank, dipping its antlers low for a drink.

“He looks tiny from here, but up close he stands higher than a 6-foot

man,” he said. “Aggressive as hell, too. A moose will charge you just for looking at him sideways.” He grinned. She pushed hard on her paddle and stared at the moose as they glided past. He lifted his head from the water and stared back.

They made camp on a small outcropping with a magnificent view of the lake. “Nobody else for miles,” he said. “We have the whole place to ourselves. No electricity, no cell service, complete privacy.” He grinned again and wiggled his eyebrows, pulling her close and nuzzling her neck. She laughed and wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

He set up the tent and unpacked the food while she shuffled among the brush and pine needles looking for firewood. She brought back an armload that seemed fine, but he shook his head and said, “Too green. That won’t burn.” He showed her how to spot aged kindling, dry enough to start a beautiful fire under a starlit sky.

The storm came up in the evening, so fast that even he was taken by surprise. They were sitting on a large log they had dragged over to the fire, eating a dinner of rehydrated beef stew from an aluminum pot. She noticed the sudden uptick in humidity and looked up to see black storm clouds racing across the lake toward them, fists bared. The wind whipped her hair hard around her face.

“It’s okay, just some rain,” he said. “Let’s clean up and get in the tent so we don’t get wet.”

But the moment they stood, the rain descended in a screaming wall of white. They were instantly soaked, their clothes heavy with water. The fire was gone, just a small line of smoke snaking up through the sheeting rain. Lightning crashed, branches snapped, and she felt rather than heard tree trunks being ripped from the ground. He grabbed her arm and shouted something at her, but she couldn’t hear. He pointed to a large flat rock at the edge of the water line away from the trees. He got to his feet, dodging flying debris, and pulled her toward the shore.

Suddenly she heard a crack! and up ahead saw a thirty-foot tree break halfway up its trunk and tip toward them. He saw it too, and in one swift motion stepped back while he pushed her hard to the side. She fell out of the way of the tree and watched as it smashed down on him, pinning his legs to the ground. She cried out and scrambled over to him, cradling his head in her lap. His face was twisted in agony, his mouth open, eyes closed tight. She pushed her shoulder against the tree trunk, but it was like pushing against a

cliff face. She didn't know what else to do so she hunched her body over his, shielding him from the pounding rain as best she could while the storm tore the land apart around them.

The storm's fury wore itself out eventually. The rain slowed to a stubborn patter, then finally gave up and stopped altogether. She looked around at the broken branches, the overturned trees, the rivulets of water crisscrossing their campsite. The canoe was on its side near the shore, filled with water and sand. He groaned next to her and opened his eyes.

"You're pinned under a tree," she said. "Can you move?" He tried to shift his body and gasped in pain, closing his eyes again.

"Bring me my backpack," he said, panting. When she retrieved the backpack, he pulled out a small collapsible shovel and pushed it into her hands. "Dig me out." She crouched down and dug under and around his legs. When the earth was loose enough, she dropped the shovel and grasped under his shoulders and pulled. After a few tries she slid him out from under the tree. His legs looked wrong. They jutted at strange angles that made her suddenly nauseous.

"Your legs are broken," she said, and started to cry.

"You have to splint them." He talked her through it; she found some sturdy branches and ripped apart one of his cotton shirts into strips, which she used to secure the branches against his shattered limbs. She placed a stick between his teeth and he clamped down while she tied the splints firmly in place, but still he screamed. When it was over, she wiped the tears from his cheeks and stroked his head. He slept. When he woke, she gave him four Advil from the first aid kit. He slept again.

When he woke again, she asked him. She couldn't wait any more. "What are we going to do? You need to get to a hospital. Maybe if I can get you into the canoe...?"

She saw a strange hard look in his eyes. He was afraid, but there was something else. Anger. Disappointment.

"Even if you could somehow carry me through the portages, which you can't, we would need the canoe to cross the lakes. You can't carry both."

"Won't someone come across us eventually? What about forest rangers?"

"It could be weeks."

The next morning, she cleaned out the canoe and packed enough food and water for one day. She settled him as comfortably as possible under a makeshift shelter made from a tarp that had survived the deluge. She left him

the first aid kit with the bottle of Advil, the remaining food and water, and an emergency blanket.

“I’ll be back for you in a day and a half,” she told him. Her voice trembled. “You said I can get back to town by tomorrow if I make good time, and I’ll call the forest service. We’ll find you.”

“Yes,” he said, but he didn’t look at her. He looked past her into the trees. She sat next to him, touching his chest, his shoulders, his face. She kissed him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She said it again, but he didn’t answer. Finally, she got up and climbed into the canoe and pushed off onto the lake.

Randy Minnich

The Immense Journey

I'd realized I wasn't Christian anymore.
Hard for a fervent Methodist to say
but now I couldn't pray or sing a hymn.
Couldn't step across the narthex sill.
Had become a twenty year old...what?

November rattled my window, hissed
through the willows the news: Kennedy dead.
How now to walk the murderous land with Easter
far away? Read Loren Eiseley, said my mentor.
His stony path led him to miracles.

Library in hand, I climbed with Eiseley into
limestone quarries, shaley canyons, following
the unrelenting surge of life from trilobites
long petrified to Cretaceous proto-rats
who burrowed to survive the meteor—

to me. To one old man, museum of ancient artifacts:
medulla born of a Cambrian jawless fish—
it stubbornly urges this tired heart to beat—
Australopithecine Lucy's canines; and her thumb—
mine turns pages, hers fondled rocks with edges.

To me: a droplet in the torrent of determined DNA
that sprang from rocks and waters eons past,
that rushes on to carve new canyons in tomorrow.
Why? Droplets can't know why. We swell the buds
of April, we glisten in the sunshine. Enough to know

that a Hadean sea now flows in sparrow song,
tree frog trills and poetry. Enough to wonder
that the birds, the frogs and I are eyes
of the Great Unknown, gazing in a mirror.

Kait Boers

Every Song Ends

one summer my grandpa told me about swans
mute and trumpeter

there were swans on white lake
mostly in the river connecting the lakes we would canoe

but that summer we didn't
because of the mute swans

grandpa claims he was attacked by one
his fishing stories are not unlike Shakespearean epics

mute swans moved in and threw out the trumpeters
then hunters threw out the mutes

there aren't swans anymore

less capulets and montagues
more hatfields and mccoys

less hatfields and mccoys
more jock and nerd

less jock and nerd
a cycle of violence with innocents caught in the middle

AUTHORS

Kait Boers is an aspiring author from Grand Rapids who is studying English, Communication, and Theater. In her free time, Kait can be found playing dungeons and dragons, hanging out with friends, or ignoring her cat allergy.

Rebecca Callahan holds an MFA in creative writing from Brigham Young University. Originally from the Pacific Northwest, Rebecca has lived all over the United States, including California, Washington, Texas, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Utah. When she is not busy writing and making things out of fabric, she loves to travel anywhere near the ocean.

Peter Cashorali is a neurodiverse queer writer living at the intersection of rivers, farmland and civil war. He practices a contemplative life.

Debbie Cutler, a writer of more than 30 years, has been published in numerous mainstream and literary magazines, including *Cirque*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Journal of Expressive Writing*, *The Dewdrop*, *Pure Slush*, *Shanti Arts* (Still Point Arts Quarterly), *Sweetycat Press*, *The MockingOwl Roost*, *Prime*, *Of Rust and Glass*, *Paddler Press*, *Red Wolf Journal*, *Columbia Business Times*, *Editor and Publisher*, *Independent Living*, *Wanderlust*, *IHRAF Publishes*, *eMerge*, *WayWords Literary Magazine*, *Paper Dragon*, *MasticadoresUSA*, among others. She is retired and lives in Columbia, Missouri.

Colleen S. Harris earned her MFA in Writing from Spalding University. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her poetry collections include *The Light Becomes Us* (*Main Street Rag*, forthcoming), *Babylon Songs* (*First Bite Press*, forthcoming), *These Terrible Sacraments* (Bellowing Ark, 2010; Doubleback, 2019), *The Kentucky Vein* (Punkin House, 2011), *God in My Throat: The Lilith Poems* (Bellowing Ark, 2009), and chapbooks *That Reckless Sound* and *Some Assembly Required* (Pork Belly Press, 2014).

Mojaffor Hossain is an acclaimed and well-awarded author from Dhaka, Bangladesh. He has authored eight books till date. His works have been translated into several languages including English, Spanish, Italian, Hindi, Gujarati and Nepali. His distinctive approach involves utilizing local realities as backdrops, infusing them with magic realism or surrealism. seven of his stories have been adapted for stage performances in Dhaka, Kolkata and New York.

Peycho Kanev is the author of 12 poetry collections and three chapbooks, published in the USA and Europe. His poems have appeared in many literary magazines, such as: *Rattle*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Evergreen Review*, *Front Porch Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Off the Coast*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *The Cleveland Review* and many others.

Hamish Kavanagh is a New Zealand born writer. He grew up in the hills of rural central north island where nature, animals and farm life helped feed an active imagination. Hamish writes in a range of genres though errs towards a literary style focussing on themes of isolation and philosophy. His academic background is in English Literature and history. His short fiction has featured in multiple anthologies and journals. Among them, *the Well's Street Journal* and the soon to be published hardcover release by Xpress Publishing, *Take a breath*.

Native New Yorker and award-winner, **LindaAnn LoSchiavo** is a member of British Fantasy Society, HWA, SFPA, and The Dramatists Guild. Titles published in 2024: *Always Haunted: Hallowe'en Poems* [Wild Ink], *Apprenticed to the Night* [UniVerse Press], and *Felones de Se: Poems about Suicide* [Ukiyoto]. Forthcoming: *Cancer Courts My Mother* [Prolific Pulse Press, 2025]. Book Accolades earned: Elgin Award for *A Route Obscure and Lonely* and Chrysalis BREW Project's Award for Excellence for *Always Haunted: Hallowe'en Poems*.

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Odin Meadows is a first-generation graduate with a BA in English from Yale University currently living and working in Central Illinois with his husband and two dogs, not too far from the rural town where he grew up. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Dark Holme's Ethereal Nightmares*, *SFWG's Nightmare Fuel Anthology*, *Litmora*, *Breath & Shadow*, and more.

Randy Minnich is a retired research chemist and chemistry professor. He now focuses on writing, environmental issues, birdwatching, and grandchildren. He is a member of the Squirrel Hill Poetry Workshop and has published two books, *Wildness in a Small Place* and *Pavlov's Cats: Their Story*. His poetry has appeared in *U.S. 1 Worksheets*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Uppagus*, *Blueline*, and other journals.

Rituparna Mukherjee teaches English and Communication Studies at Jogamaya Devi College, Kolkata. She enjoys writing short fiction and flashes. A multilingual translator, translating Bengali and Hindi fiction and poetry into English, her work has been published in many international journals. Her debut translation, *The One-Legged*, translated from Sakyajit Bhattacharya's *Ekanore*, has been shortlisted for JCB Prize in Literature 2024. She has also been shortlisted for the Pioneer Literary Awards 2025 for two of her works.

Lilia Mahfouz began her career in comedy, collaborating with Les Vamps' producer and Gilbert Rozon, and performing at festivals like Liège, Just for Laughs in Montreal, and Avignon Off. Known for her fearless humor, the Frenchie writer appeared on Patrick Sébastien's shows and TF1's *Envoyé Spécial*, earning acclaim for a bold sketch on sexual harassment. Josiane Balasko cast her in *Les Keufs*, alongside Ticky Holgado and Isaach de Bankolé. A SACD Writing Prize winner, Lilia's work has appeared in *Zone Critique*, *Marginales*, *L'Encrier Renversé*, *Ink In Thirds*, *Fiction On The Web*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *In Parentheses* and *Literary Revelations*. Her novel, *La Sarabande des Fêlés*, cements her place as a literary force.

Josh Mahler lives and writes in Virginia. His poems have appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Quarter After Eight*, *South Dakota Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Potomac Review*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, from Texas Review Press, and elsewhere.

Basil Rosa has published novels that include *Witness Marks*, *Eightball At Grady's Palace East*, and *God Wore Denim*.

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Emma Galloway Stephens is a neurodivergent poet and professor from the Appalachian foothills of South Carolina. Her poems have appeared in *The Windhover*, *Red Branch Review*, and *Door is a Jar Literary Magazine* among others, with work upcoming in *Salvation South*, *The MacGuffin*, *J Journal*, and *The Christian Century*. You can read more at egstephenspoetry.com.