

SKIPI

REVIEW



Skipjack Review

YEAR 2024

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Published by Skipjack Press

Revision 2

Printed in the United States of America

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Skipjack Review
Springfield, Missouri
www.skipjackreview.com

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From the Editors...

We honor this moment with our presence, for neither will last.

-Musteverything B. Aquote

But seriously, another year? So soon?

Here at Skipjack camp, we've got a whole bag of bad platitudes we could pull from about starting over and starting fresh, but, instead, this issue is as much about what came before as what lies ahead. We want to take this time to thank all our incredible contributors from Issues II and III, as well as everyone who submitted work to us this year. And we want to thank you, dear reader. After all, you're the guest of honor at this party. Making writing and art is no way to make a living, but we do it all for you, for the brief time we get to share together. Step inside our hearts and minds. Kick off your shoes and stay a while.

Cheers,

Em, MM, and Jim



Turnover

Cut to the bone with last year's blades
the grass as bare as the bark of a sycamore,
suddenly I'm five again, sitting on Dad's thigh as he guides
the John Deere, all Smiles and sweat. A Virginia summer day.

Robins still sing. Even now, as winter turns to spring,
bluebirds babble back and forth, paired blue and amber,
jays mocking them in the distance, mocking me,
my artificialness. When did I stray?

Reach down and smell the mulch,
earthiness, handfuls of home in my hands,
always reaching for more—
one more tomato popped in my mouth,

One more minute in the garden,
one more call from the songbird before hibernation,
coats and crutches to keep out the cold
and miraculously, it's still here,

Rolling down hills in frilly skirts,
oaks beginning to match evergreens,
my mother's daughter in the purgatory of turnover,
my father's child soaking in the warmth of the day.

Autumn Thomas

A Senryu

Eremozoic age
of loneliness, sweet like fat
falling off the bone.

Rachel Blume

A Texas Gulf Coast Baptism

is a momentous affair. Veneration
drives steaming bodies into revelrous,
unsurvivable throngs. Humidity compounds,
heat makes us suffer, and wind-whipped children
play house on the sand. I've walked
all the way here with a bag in my pocket
to collect washed up trash: bottle caps,
fishing line, wedding rings. A baby
cries and it sounds like a seagull calling
for french fries by the oil refinery chugging
behind the gathered masses. A teenager picks
at pimples and wipes the blood on a white
shirt bought just for this moment, to drown
sin and leave the smear in the water for dolphins
to drink. The fish of my childhood are gone. Nothing
is multiplying in the waves. How do I tell them—
laughing, bathing, soaked to the skin in salty droplets—
this water is poisoned?

Ed Ahern

Chipmunk Summer

Chipmunks have reentered my stone walls
and flutter-twitch across the open grass
deciding that a thing as grossly large as me
cannot be a healthy coexistence. They dart
into the spaces between rocks, suspicious
little sentinels intent on their anonymity.
I could with time and guile persuade them
to take peanuts from my fingers, but
that would cheapen our relationship.
Most won't survive the warm season,
cats and hawks and short lives culling
from the scurrying stripes on my lawn
and I must take comfort and pleasure
from the few seconds that we share.

James Croal Jackson

Texting/Driving

White dashes separate lanes— —
the heartbeat on a hospital monitor.

I'm talking to you. I love you.

And when the white van swerves
into my lane I am enraged— —

A bird screams
over my windshield wipers

immaterial screech at the red light
like the moment drivers take

to communicate to loved ones
they are safe— —continuing

into the busy chaos
through the green.

James Croal Jackson

Ozark

I'm watching television. There's a revolution
at the end of the street. I am in my house
bingeing Ozark, which wishes it was
art—which, said Nina Simone,
should reflect the times.

Chuck Rybak

No Word For It

All our talk takes quick off-ramps to the self
I know what you should watch
You should listen to this podcast
What you said reminds me of the time I...

Summaries of the internet count
as conversation smothering us
in dead language url's
a graveyard of IP addresses

The tactile excitement of birches and maples
beckons us the words *no trespassing* apply
only to man barriers for curiosity
invisible fence and a shock collar

Our messages small spheres of shade
these noon shadows that cover little tongues
twirl like seeds off trees spin to ground
where only a few will lodge in the earth's ears

The magnolias we fuss over
flower in our open mouths bloom
in brief a few bright pulses
of language between the blurring seasons

We cannot talk about matter and motion
for which we possess no vibration the forgotten
word-sound that teaches us
everything speaks all of it

Chuck Rybak

Multiverse

All the stories
and shows
are multiple universes breaking
into pieces one at a time like an ancient torture

The many yous
spin off in different directions to accomplish
equally mundane tasks

In one universe you buy coffee
in another you pat your pockets
looking for proof of yourself

Who needs these narratives
with our fractured minds already running
to a thousand broken places
a quick dinner one more message
the conversations never spoken

CLS Sandoval

The Burning of Troy in 1862
by Grandma Moses

This isn't Helen's Troy.
No ships are launched.
It's an equally losing battle, though.
They're running toward the flames
As suburbia sleeps in
Not knowing
That their last bridge is burning.

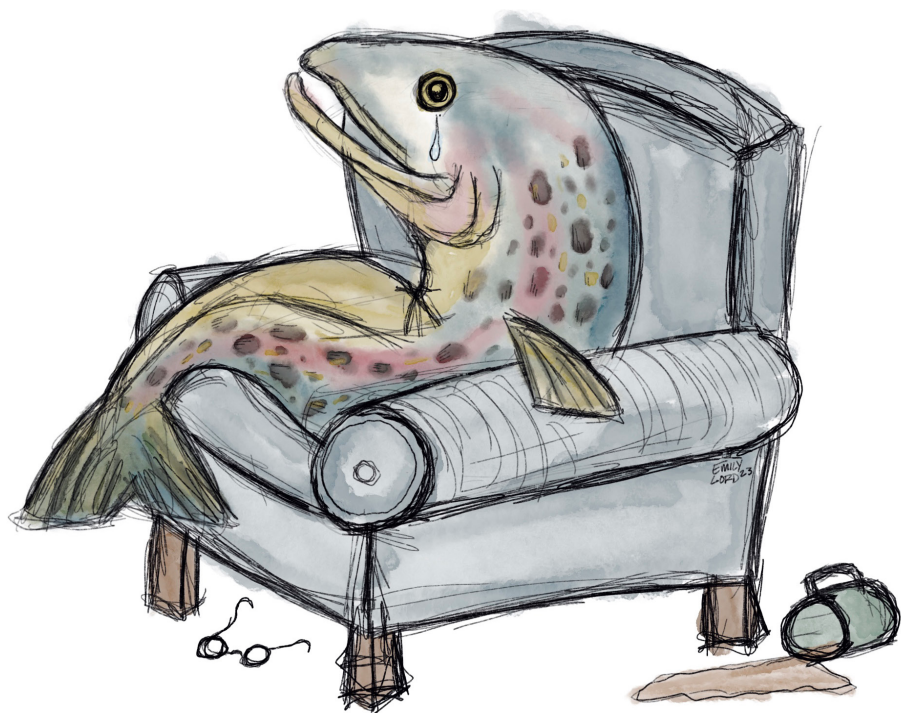
Glenis Moore

Wintery Wicken

Black and stark
against the winter's dawn,
the windmill stands silent
where bitterns once boomed,
like cannon blasts,
along the creeping lodes.
Reeds, burnt brown by the cold,
sway their stately stems
in the frigid air
while winter's hardier birds seek
sustenance amidst the mud-frozen grass.
But the children still come
to wonder at the water's life
while their parents,
swathed in coats and scarfs,
long for the tea shack
with its promise of soup
and steaming hot chocolate.
And, at the day's end,
the ponies gather in the growing dark,
their plumed breath echoing
the coming mist,
and all is quiet once more
except for the owl's hunting screech
and the mouse's final
heartfelt cry.

POUTING TROUT

EMILY LORD



Maddie Downie

Morning Matters

An erasure from Annie Dillard's *Heaven and Earth in Jest*

These are morning matters
the final wave heaves
up against soft
folded nothing.

It carries light,
and sweeps
the planet's roundness
between your feet.

Slowly crumple
sag, rumple, swaddling
against the inrush
of a hammered universe.

Deepen, hold, trembling
against that fierce plunder
of a dream being
dreamed.

These are morning matters, pictures you dream of the final wave
heaves you up on the sand to the bright light and drying air. You
remember pressure, and a curved sleep you rested against, soft, like
a scallop in its shell. But the air hardens your skin; you stand; you
leave the lighted shore to explore some dim headland, and soon
you're lost in the leafy interior, intent, remembering nothing.

I still think of that old tomcat, mornings, when I wake. Things
are tamer now; I sleep with the window shut. The cat and our
pies are gone and my life is changed, but the memory remains of
something powerful playing over me. I wake expectant, hoping
to see a new thing. If I'm lucky I might be jogged awake by a
strange bird call. I dress in a hurry, imagining the yard flapping
with auks, or flamingos. This morning it was a wood duck, down
at the creek. It flew away.

I live by a creek, Tinker Creek, in a valley in Virginia's Blue
Ridge. An anchorite's hermitage is called an anchor-hold; some
anchor-holds were simple sheds clamped to the side of a church
like a barnacle to a rock. I think of this house clamped to the side
of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold. It holds me at anchor to the
rock bottom of the creek itself and it keeps me steadied in the
current, as a sea anchor does, facing the stream of light pouring
down. It's a good place to live; there's a lot to think about. The
creeks—Tinker and Carvin's—are an active mystery, fresh every
minute. There's the mystery of the continuous creation and all

that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, the intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free, and the flawed nature of perfection. The mountains—Tinker and Brushy, McAfee's Knob and Dead Man—are a passive mystery, the oldest of all. Theirs is the one simple mystery of creation from nothing of matter itself, anything at all, the given. Mountains are giant, restful, absorbent. You can heave your spirit into a mountain and the mountain will keep it folded and not throw it back as some creeks will. The creeks are the world with all its stimulus and beauty; I live there. But the mountains are home.

The wood duck flew away. I caught only a glimpse of something like a bright torpedo that blasted the leaves where it flew. Back at the house I ate a bowl of oatmeal; much later in the day came the long slant of light that means good walking.

If the day is fine, any walk will do; it all looks good. Water in particular looks its best, reflecting blue sky in the flat, and chopping it into graveled shallows and white chure and foam in the ripples. On a dark day, or a hazy one, everything's washed-out and lackluster but the water. It carries its own light. I set out for the railroad tracks, for the hill the flocks fly over, for the woods where the white mare lives. But I go to the water.

Today is one of those excellent January partly cloudies in which light chooses an unexpected part of the landscape to pick out in gilt, and then shadow sweeps it away. You know you're alive. You take huge steps, trying to feel the planet's roundness between your feet. Kazantzakis says that when he was young he had a canary and a globe. When he freed the canary, it would perch on the globe and sing. All his life, wandering the earth, he felt as though he had a canary on top of his mind, singing.

West of the house, Tinker Creek makes a sharp loop, so

that the creek is both in back of the house, south of me, and also on the other side of the road, north of me. I like to go north. There the afternoon sun hits the creek just right, deepening the reflected blue and lighting the sides of trees on the banks. Steers from the pasture across the creek come down to drink. I always flush a rabbit or two there; I sit on a fallen trunk in the shade and watch the squirrels in the sun. There are two separate wooden fences suspended from cables that cross the creek just upstream from my tree-trunk bench. They keep the steers from escaping up or down the creek when they come to drink. Squirrels, the neighborhood children, and I use the downstream fence as a swaying bridge across the creek. But the steers are there today.

I sit on the downed tree and watch the black steers slip on the creek bottom. They are all bred beef: beef heart, beef hide, beef hocks. They're a human product like rayon. They're like a field of shoes. They have cast-iron shanks and tongues like foam insoles. You can't see through to their brains as you can with other animals; they have beef fat behind their eyes, beef stew.

I cross the fence six feet above the water, walking my hands down the rusty cable and lightropeing my feet along the narrow edge of the planks. When I hit the other bank and terra firma, some steers are bunched in a knot between me and the barbed-wire fence I want to cross. So I suddenly dash at them in an enthusiastic sprint, flailing my arms and hollering, "Lightning! Copperhead! Swedish meatballs!" They flee, still in a knot, stumbling across the flat pasture. I stand with the wind on my face.

When I slide under a barbed-wire fence, cross a field, and run over a sycamore trunk felled across the water, I'm on a little island shaped like a tear in the middle of Under Creek. On one side of the creek is a steep forested bank; the water is swift and deep on that side of the island. On the other side is the level field I walked

through next to the steers' pasture, the water between the field and the island is shallow and sluggish. In summer's low water, flags and bulrushes grow along a series of shallow pools cooled by the lazy current. Water skidders patrol the surface film, crayfish hump along the silt bottom eating filth, frogs shout and glare, and shiners and small breast hide among roots from the sulky green heron's eye. I come to this island every month of the year. I walk around it, stopping and staring, or I straddle the sycamore log over the creek, curling my legs out of the water in winter, trying to read. Today I sit on dry grass at the end of the island by the slower side of the creek. I'm drawn to this spot. I come to it as to an oracle; I return to it as a man years later will seek out the battlefield where he lost a leg or an arm.

A couple of summers ago I was walking along the edge of the island to see what I could see in the water, and mainly to scare frogs. Frogs have an inelegant way of taking off from invisible positions on the bank just ahead of your feet, in dire panic, emitting a froggy "Yike!" and splashing into the water. Incredibly, this amused me, and, incredibly, it amuses me still. As I walked along the grassy edge of the island, I got better and better at seeing frogs both in and out of the water. I learned to recognize, slowing down, the difference in texture of the light reflected from mud bank, water, grass, or frog. Frogs were flying all around me. At the end of the island I noticed a small green frog. He was exactly half in and half out of the water, looking like a schematic diagram of an amphibian, and he didn't jump.

He didn't jump. I crept closer. At last I knelt on the island's winter-killed grass, lost, dumbstruck, staring at the frog in the creek just four feet away. He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin

emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders rack, and rumple, and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. I gaped, bewildered, appalled. An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog, then the shadow glided away. The frog skin bag started to sink.

I had read about the giant water bug, but never seen one. "Giant water bug" is really the name of the creature, which is an enormous, heavy-bodied brown bug. It eats insects, tadpoles, fish, and frogs. Its grasping forelegs are mighty and hooked inward. It seizes a victim with these legs, hugs it tight, and paralyzes it with enzymes injected during a vicious bite. That one bite is the only bite it ever takes. Through the puncture shoot the poisons that dissolve the victim's muscles and bones and organs—all but the skin—and through it the giant water bug sucks out the victim's body, reduced to a juice. This event is quite common in warm fresh water. The frog I saw was being sucked by a giant water bug. I had been kneeling on the island grass, when the unrecognizable flap of frog skin settled on the creek bottom, swaying. I stood up and brushed the knees of my pants. I couldn't catch my breath.

Of course, many carnivorous animals devour their prey alive. The usual method seems to be to subdue the victim by downing or grasping it so it can't flee, then eating it whole or in a series of bloody bites. Frogs eat everything whole, stuffing prey into their mouths with their thumbs. People have seen frogs with their wide jaws so full of live dragonflies they couldn't close them. Ants don't even have to catch their prey: in the spring they swarm over newly hatched, featherless birds in the nest and eat them any bite by bite.

That it's rough out there and chancy is no surprise. Every live thing is a survivor on a kind of extended emergency bivouac. But at the same time we are also created. In the Koran, Allah asks: "The heaven and the earth and all in between, thinkest thou I made them *in jest*?" It's a good question. What do we think of the created universe, spanning an unthinkable void with an incredible profusion of forms? Or what do we think of nothingness, those sickening reaches of time in either direction? If the giant water bug was not made in jest, was it then made in earnest? Pascal uses a nice term to describe the notion of the creator's, once having called forth the universe, turning his back to it: *Dens Absconditus*. Is this what we think happened? Was the sense of it there, and God absconded with it, are it, like a wolf who disappears round the edge of the house with the Thanksgiving turkey? "God is subtle," Einstein said, "but not malicious." Again, Einstein said that "nature conceals her mystery by means of her essential grandeur, not by her cunning." It could be that God has not absconded but spread, as our vision and understanding of the universe have spread, to a fabric of spirit and sense so grand and subtle, so powerful in a new way, that we can only feel blindly of its hem. In making the thick darkness a swaddling band for the sea, God "set bars and doors" and said, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further." But have we come even that far? Have we rowed out to the thick darkness, or are we all playing pinochle in the bottom of the boat?

Cruelty is a mystery, and the waste of pain. But if we describe a world to compass these things, a world that is a long, brute game, then we bump against another mystery, the inrush of power and light, the canary that sings on the skull. Unless all ages and races of men have been deluded by the same mass hypnotist (who?), there seems to be such a thing as beauty, a grace wholly gratuitous. About five years ago I saw a mockingbird make a

straight vertical descent from the roof gutter of a four-story building. It was an act as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem or the kindling of a star.

The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when his insolent step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.

Another time I saw another wonder: sharks off the Atlantic coast of Florida. There is a way a wave rises above the ocean horizon, a triangular wedge against the sky. If you stand where the ocean breaks on a shallow beach, you see the raised water in a wave is translucent, shot with lights. One late afternoon at low tide a hundred big sharks passed the beach near the mouth of a tidal river in a feeding frenzy. As each green wave rose from the churning water, it illuminated within itself the six- or eight-foot-long bodies of twisting sharks. The sharks disappeared as each wave rolled toward me, then a new wave would swell above the horizon, containing in it, like scorpions in amber, sharks that roiled and heaved. The sight held awesome wonders: power and beauty, grace tangled in a rapture with violence.

We don't know what's going on here. If these tremendous events are random combinations of matter run amok, the yield of

millions of monkeys or millions of typewriters, then what is it that
hammered out of those same typewriters, that they ignore? We
don't know. Our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery,
like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf. We
must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape,
really see it, and describe what's going on here. Then we can at
least wall the right question into the swaddling band of darkness,
or, if it comes to that, choir the proper praise.

At the time of Lewis and Clark, setting the prairies on fire
was a well-known signal that meant, "Come down to the
water." It was an extravagant gesture, but we can't do less. If
the landscape reveals one certainty, it is that the extravagant
gesture is the very stuff of creation. After the one extravagant
gesture of creation in the first place, the universe has continued
to deal exclusively in extravagances, flinging intricacies and
colossal down aeons of emptiness, heaping profusions on profligacies
with ever-fresh vigor. The whole show has been on fire
from the word go: I come down to the water to cool my eyes.
But everywhere I look I see fire; that which isn't flint is tinder,
and the whole world sparks and flames.

I have come to the grassy island late in the day. The creek is icy,
icy water sweeps under the sycamore log bridge. The frog skin,
of course, is utterly gone. I have stared at that one spot on the
creek bottom for so long, focusing past the rush of water, that
when I stand, the opposite bank seems to stretch before my
eyes and flow grassily upstream. When the bank settles down I
cross the sycamore log and enter again the big plowed field
next to the steers' pasture.

The wind is ferning out of the west, the sun comes and
goes. I can see the shadow on the field before me deepen
uniformly and spread like a plague. Everything seems so dull I am

amazed I can even distinguish objects. And suddenly the light runs across the land like a comb, and up the trees, and goes again in a wink. I think I've gone blind or died. When it comes again, the light, you hold your breath, and if it stays you forget about it until it goes again.

It's the most beautiful day of the year. At four o'clock the eastern sky is a dead strains black flecked with low white clouds. The sun in the west illuminates the ground, the mountains, and especially the bare branches of trees, so that everywhere silver trees cut into the black sky like a photographer's negative of a landscape. The air and the ground are dry; the mountains are going on and off like neon signs. Clouds slide east as if pulled from the horizon, like a tablecloth whipped off a table. The hemlocks by the barbed-wire fence are flinging themselves east as though their backs would break. Purple shadows are racing east; the wind makes me face east, and again I feel the dizzying, drawn sensation I felt when the creek bank receded.

At four-thirty, the sky in the east is clear; how could that big blackness be blown? Fifteen minutes later another darkness is coming overhead from the northwest, and it's here. Everything is drained of its light as if sucked. Only at the horizon do inky black mountains give way to distant, lighted mountains—lighted not by direct illumination but rather paled by glowing sheets of mist hung before them. Now the blackness is in the east; everything is half in shadow, half in sun; every clod, tree, mountain, and hedge. I can't see Tinker Mountain through the line of hemlock, till it comes on like a streetlight, ping, *ex nihilo*. Its sandstone cliffs pink and swell. Suddenly the light goes, the cliffs recede as if pushed. The sun hits a clump of sycamores between me and the mountains; the sycamore arms light up, and I can't see the cliffs. They're gone. The pale network of sycamore arms, which a second ago was transparent as a screen, is suddenly

opaque, glowing with light. Now the sycamore arms snuff out, the mountains come on, and there are the cliffs again.

I walk home. By five-thirty the show has pulled out. Nothing is left but an unreal blue and a few banked clouds low in the north. Some sort of carnival magician has been here, some fast talking worker of wonders who has the act backwards. "Something in this hand," he says, "something in this hand, something up my sleeve, something behind my back . . ." and abracadabra, he snaps his fingers, and it's all gone. Only the bland, blank-faced magician remains, in his unfuffed coat, bare handed, acknowledging a smattering of baffled applause. When you look again the whole show has pulled up stakes and moved on down the road. It never stops. New shows roll in from over the mountains and the magician reappears unannounced from a fold in the curtain you never dreamed was an opening. Scarves of clouds, rabbits in plain view, disappear into the black hat forever. Presto chango. The audience, if there is an audience at all, is dizzy from head turning, dazed.

Like the bear who went over the mountain, I went out to see what I could see. And, I might as well warn you, like the bear, all that I could see was the other side of the mountain: more of same. On a good day I might catch a glimpse of another wooded ridge rolling under the sun like water, another bivouac. I propose to keep here what Thoreau called "a meteorological journal of the mind," telling some tales and describing some of the sights of this rather tamed valley, and explaining, in fear and trembling, some of the unmapped dim reaches and unholy fastnesses to which those tales and sights so dizzyingly lead.

I am no scientist. I explore the neighborhood. An infant who has just learned to hold his head up has a frank and forthright way of gazing about him in bewilderment. He hasn't the

faintest clue where he is, and he aims to learn. In a couple of years, what he will have learned instead is how to fake it: he'll have the cocksure air of a squatter who has come to feel he owns the place. Some unwanted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover at least *where* it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can't learn why.

So I think about the valley. It is my leisure as well as my work, a game. It is a fierce game I have joined because it is being played anyway, a game of both skill and chance, played against an unseen adversary—the conditions of time—in which the payoffs, which may suddenly arrive in a blast of light at any moment, might as well come to me as anyone else. I stake the time I'm grateful to have, the energies I'm glad to direct. I risk getting stuck on the board, so to speak, unable to move in any direction, which happens enough, God knows, and I risk the searing, exhausting nightmares that plunder rest and force me face down all night long in some muddy ditch seething with hatching insects and crustaceans.

But if I can bear the nights, the days are a pleasure. I walk out, I see something, some event that would otherwise have been utterly missed and lost, or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell.

I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself. Certain Indians used to carve long grooves along the wooden shafts of their arrows. They called the grooves "lightning marks," because they resembled the curved fissure lightning slices down the trunks of trees. The function of lightning marks is this: if the arrow fails to kill the game, blood from a deep wound will channel along the lightning mark, streak down the arrow shaft, and spatter to the ground, laying a trail

dripped on broad-leaves, on stones, that the barefoot and trembling archer can follow into whatever deep or rare wilderness it leads. I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood.

Something pummels us, something barely sheathed. Power broods and lights. We're played on like a pipe; our breath is not our own. James Houston describes two young Eskimo girls sitting cross-legged on the ground, mouth on mouth, blowing by turns each other's throat cords, making a low, unearthly music. When I cross again the bridge that is really the steers' fence, the wind has thinned to the delicate air of twilight; it crumples the water's skin. I watch the running sheets of light raised on the creek's surface. The sight has the appeal of the purely passive, like the racing of light under clouds or a field, the beautiful dream at the moment of being dreamed. The breeze is the merest puff, but you yourself sail headlong and breathless under the gale force of the spirit.

THE ORIGINAL BOOK IS *PILGRIM AT TINKER CREEK* BY ANNIE DILLARD
(HARPER PERENNIAL MODERN CLASSICS, 2007)

A CONVERSATION WITH MARCUS CAFAGÑA

Poet extraordinaire and all-around good guy, Marcus Cafagña, has seen his poetry published in hundreds of magazines across the country, including, *AGNI*, *Witness*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Ploughshares*, *American Poetry Review*, and on and on and on. His first book, *The Broken World*, was selected for the National Poetry Series. In a review of *The Broken World*, Edward Hirsch provided our favorite description of Marcus' work: "Marcus Cafagña is a poet who shies at nothing, who will not turn away from what he sees—ordinary people struggling against, and sometimes breaking on, the wheel of their fate." That pretty much sums it up. Where other poets might see and seek to elicit grandiose notions and ethereal concepts that pop like CGI in a big-budget blockbuster, Marcus reaches up from the page, places both his hands on the reader's face, and forces us to take a good look at the eternal truths that bind us to this veil of tears.



JW: *The thing about the writing process is that there's not a one-size-fits-all approach to writing anything. And what a relief that is. Sure, there are craft considerations we all tend to agree on, but, otherwise, anything goes—so long as it's done well. Myself, I tend to let an idea take off like an old hunting dog on the trail of something I haven't yet laid eyes on. From there, I follow along without any organizing principle in mind. Eventually, something with a heartbeat comes running out of the briar patch and confronts me, and, once it's in my sights, I know what I have to do. What's your writing process like?*

Marcus: I love your characterization of the writing process as “anything goes.” That certainly fits my process, which I would describe as an erratic form of discipline. By that I mean I don't sit down every day at a certain time and write. But when a subject for a poem crosses my mind, often when I'm driving or when I awake in the middle of the night, I write down whatever comes to mind. From the poet Sharon Olds I learned that I could receive a poem by listening for the sound of oncoming lines, like feeling the ground tremble when a train is approaching. I'm trying to gather language that possesses a sense of movement, that describes a dramatic situation or the memory of an experience that strikes me as surprising or ironic, a memory that might move me toward strong emotion. Once I have a subject and some of the language to propel it forward with, I work on the poem for as long as it takes to feel intact.

JW: *As we've just said, there's a zillion ways to approach writing something new; but, for you, when do you know a piece might have a pulse and is worth bringing to life? Does a zinger line tend to get the ball rolling? Or is it an image? When do you know? And, perhaps more importantly, how do you decide when to let an idea go?*

Marcus: Yeah, either a zinger line or a vivid image gets me going. I don't usually complete a poem in one day's writing, as I would in my youth in Michigan. At that time, I lived above a nightclub in East Lansing. I would toss my failed drafts into the trash compactor otherwise filled with the bar's empty liquor bottles that were crushed according to law each night at closing time. My process has changed over the years. Now, I'm more patient. Once I have some evocative lines and a feeling of progression, of movement, in what I have scrawled down, I move my handwritten draft to the computer screen for further revision. I'm hesitant to throw away what at first appear to be failed drafts.

JW: *You've somewhat recently retired but still teach a few poetry courses. Have you found this affords you more time to write? What about your process has changed?*

Marcus: Well, I'm still writing dramatic narrative poems. Since retiring to emeritus faculty at Missouri State, I've been writing poems toward a future book, raw, vivid stuff. I feel like I'm catching up with myself, if that makes any sense? I've even been trying my hand at writing prose poems. In my younger days I wrote both poetry and short stories. In college I was introduced to narrative poetry and realized that I could bring my love of storytelling to my poems, which in turn diminished my enthusiasm for writing fiction. Writing the occasional prose poem allows me a brief return to fiction since a prose poem must work both as a poem and as prose. The prose poem allows me to alter my poetic voice or to take on voices other than my own. I love the poetic line too much to abandon it for long, but it is fun to write poems in prose.

JW: *Years ago, I had the joy of hearing you read before having actually read any of your work (even as an adult, I still sometimes indulge in dessert before dinner), but one thing that struck me right away was your handling of form poetry. Up until then, form poetry seemed too much like a suit and tie endeavor for my taste. Nevertheless, at that moment the utility of the form poem as an organizing principle finally clicked for me. More recently, I was again treated to one of your readings at River Pretty Writers Retreat, and, once again, it was a form poem that stood out to me for some*

reason (“*Last Things*,” which features the title line of your latest, excellent book, *All the Rage in the Afterlife This Season*). Besides the obvious constraints of a given form, do you approach form poetry any differently than free verse work?

Marcus: Usually, I write the first draft of a poem with no attention to form. Then I write the poem over again, say as a pantoum. Since in a pantoum each line is repeated in a pattern it’s obvious if the lines are holding up under repetition, whether the rhythmic progression of the pantoum is enhancing the poem or exposing its shortcomings. Even though I generally write a draft in a traditional form, most of my poems are written in free verse, if verse is ever truly free. In his posthumous book on prosody, *The Orbit of Meter*, Springfield poet and editor Robert Wallace writes that “without our intending or noticing them...strings of iambs show up in speech, especially in passionate speech.”

“*Last Things*” was originally created by a Frankenstein-like piecing together of three unfinished poems. Rewriting it as a pantoum annealed it together and lent emotional impact to the original drafts. The pantoum format served the layered subject matter of my imagining my late wife Dianne’s ashes rising like a small cloud from her urn on the mantle, her ghostly presence revisiting her childhood, her abusive alcoholic parents, her shoplifting as a teenager, a series of scenes from her life leading to her suicide and to her being “trapped” inside an urn. I revised that poem for months until it brought me to tears every time I read it to myself. Often, reaching an involuntary emotional reaction is my measuring stick for a poem.

For me, writing about trauma is at once a painful and an intimate experience. There’s still such shame around the subject of suicide. I don’t think I would’ve had the nerve to write a poem like “*Last Things*”—let alone a book like *All the Rage in the Afterlife This Season*—had I not, as a teenager, read Anne Sexton—her fearlessly personal poems about her nervous breakdown, her time in the madhouse, her divorce, her suicide attempts, the trauma she endured written in whatever form served her subject matter.

The pantoum allows for dramatic effect and at times for humor as in my poem “Birds in the Breezeway” – poking fun at my being so afraid of two starlings caught indoors, circling the ceiling above my son’s head and mine. This is what comes of watching too many Hitchcock films.

JW: *This is sort of a part B to the previous question, but there’s a preamble: I recently attended a wonderful poetry workshop led by the poet Richard Jackson. It was a nice change of pace because I had been waist deep in prose for months prior and was badly in need of a change of scenery. Of all the pearls of wisdom offered at that workshop, Rick said one thing so seemingly bizarre that I felt a little swine-like. I might have laughed. What he said was this: “There is no such thing as inspiration. You must simply do the work.” I’m paraphrasing the second part, but the gist is that: we must simply put our butts in the chair and do the work, like putting one foot in front of the other when taking on any other task. So, there is such a thing as inspiration, but creative endeavors do not require it. If only I had received this message in my teens or twenties. I would have spared myself a lot of looking for inspiration and probably got a lot more done. Nevertheless, I’m pleased to report that, since this epiphany, I’ve been more productive than ever in terms of finishing writing projects. I’ve even strayed outside my comfort zone and developed two pantoums recently (and even “finished” one of them). At any rate, I guess my question is this: As a younger writer, I always had that inherent artsy-fartsy fear that if I tried to force something it would turn out to be shit. So, if I wasn’t inspired to do so, I wouldn’t. I’d give up without even trying. Or, when I did try, when I sat down and said something along the lines of, “I’m going to write a pantoum right now,” it often lacked that manic sort of high you get when working on a piece so inspired it basically writes itself. What’s your advice to writers as it pertains to reconciling inspirational drought and wanting to write?*

Marcus: Rick Jackson is right of course. I make myself write, especially when I don’t feel like it. One way I get myself going is to read a few poems I love from any book by Sharon Olds. Then, I close the book and wait to see if the energy of her language or emotion moves me to want to write. I find this method useful if I’ve been reading a writer whose subject

matter is different than my own so that I'm responding to the trajectory of their language, not imitating their subject matter. I have been fortunate to have lived an interesting, if at times a difficult, life. I'm seldom at a loss for ideas. For me, the challenge is to discover an approach to dramatizing experience that feels unexpected in some way. Portraying people at pivotal moments in their lives has made me aware that sometimes what blocks me from writing is my fear of revisiting unresolved feelings. In graduate school we would tease each other; if your life is a mess your poems will be amazing.

JW: *Maybe this is a throwaway question, but it really is something I've been wondering about:*

Every so often I unintentionally find myself churning out what I now know skeptics refer to as "shape poetry." Much like I described in Question 1, I never go into a poem thinking, "I'm going to write a poem that looks like a chicken head," but these things happen. However, I never realized the apparent ill repute of this form. As it turns out, many journals outright stipulate that they don't publish shape poetry. Every time I come across this, I like to imagine that journal's editor saying the words aloud with the malice of Mordor's gatekeeper in Lord of the Rings and looking like they've just sucked on a lemon. There seems to be a certain vehement seriousness to this that I just don't understand. Is it because form poetry can be or has been done so cheaply in the past? I have to assume that's it. At any rate, all this discovery has done to headstrong me is steel my resolve to finish the chapbook of shape poetry I'm now working on partly just to spite critics. What are your thoughts on shape poetry?

Marcus: Though it's not my bag, there's nothing inherently wrong with shaping the lines of a poem about a cat into the shape of a cat's head. Historically, concrete or shape poems were written by poets like George Herbert, Guillaume Appollinaire, and E. E. Cummings. The primary drawback of this approach is having to sacrifice some of the length, rhythm, or torque of a poetic line in favor of clipping the line to conform to the triangular shape of a cat's ear. The best contemporary shape poetry I've read was published in *Poetry East*, a literary journal worth checking out.

JW: *As a younger writer, it always felt like there were distinctive camps, and you were either a poet or a fiction writer or [insert other make-believe primogeniture]. For so long it hadn't occurred to me how useful it was to exercise a fair amount of overlap. After all, great writers steal, as the old adage goes. Personally, I find myself caught in an inescapable, interconnected web where, when working on an essay, for example, I'll be inspired by a Billy Collins poem; or, if I'm working on a new poem, a phrase from some Louis L'amour novel I'm reading causes the course of said poem to change. Such interplay between works has become a prime mover for me these days. One thing I love about your poetry is the way you weave outside influences into your work. In this moment, I'm thinking in particular about your truly killer poem, "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again." Tell us a little about how a poem like this comes about for you.*

Marcus: I was raised in a musical family, but after playing the violin badly for five years I stopped torturing my mother with my daily practicing and returned to writing poems. As a child, most of what I wrote rhymed. Then, as a teenager, I discovered the Beats and stopped rhyming. I know what you mean by outside influences. I have put down a novel I was reading and written a poem or written while listening to music, even titled a poem after the Bob Dylan song "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again." That's actually an older poem of mine that began as a detailed description of my frustrating encounter with a man who was camped out on a beanbag chair singing soulful songs for three days and nights in the alley below my apartment window in East Lansing, Michigan. After I wrote the poem and began to revise it, I listened to the Dylan song. Like my poem, his song narrates an encounter with a stranger, whom he calls the Ragman. He also sings the line: "Shakespeare he's in the alley." I related to those feelings of entrapment, of displacement expressed in Dylan's lyrics, since so much of the published poetry I'd read seemed stuffy and unapproachable.

JW: *For me, it's always seemed important to counterbalance creative endeavors with hands-on physical activities. I won't go so far as to suggest I'm exercising again, but I do find that getting out of my head is an outright necessity after a writing day. After a few days or, God willing, a few weeks of writing success, I like to take things a step further and go on some kind*

of adventure outside of my usual routine. Maybe it's a hike or a camping trip or a concert or even a nice quiet drive somewhere with a view, but the important thing, for me, is to not stray too far from my center, to recharge my batteries, so to speak. I've learned that you can get stoned, but you can't get blood from a stone. As with Question 3, inspiration may not be required to write, but rest, rehabilitation, and the occasional change of scenery go a long way. Do you have any advice for writers working on developing better writing habits and prewriting rituals?

Marcus: One ritual I developed over the years was to write poems in my car, preferably not while the car was actually moving. Growing up in Michigan, many of my poems were set in cars, many still are. My grandfather worked on the assembly line in Detroit. I would tape a pad of paper to the dashboard to jot down lines at red lights. I don't write in my car anymore and don't recommend it. It's too dangerous--though at times I still get ideas for poems while I'm driving, as I did for my poem "Changing Light." I'm thinking now, I should write a poem about writing a poem while driving.

JW: *Your poem "Mobile Home" is another favorite of mine. There's so much depth and it really hits home for me. Lines like, "wind that rattles a magazine's unread pages," and "hands reaching under beds," and finding "food jars stuffed with dollars we never found" make a case for the power of the unsaid in poems like this, highlighting a mysteriousness we're simultaneously perfectly familiar with. Like finding a shoebox time capsule under my grandmother's bed, old and held together by tape. The aroma is musty with a hint of mothballs. Finding these sorts of hidden treasures in such places—and in poems—leads to as many questions as answers. In poems like "Mobile Home" do you find yourself planning much of this mystery while you're drafting the piece? Or is it more discovery on your part—uncovering mysteries? In writing anything, we're often seeking answers to questions we have, but perhaps the greatest discovery is that sometimes there aren't any definitive answers.*

Marcus: As with “Mobile Home” most of my poems are portraits of people I’ve known, but I started that particular poem by describing in images the wreck of my late aunt’s mobile home as well as what furniture or belongings were found inside. I admire the way Ted Kooser writes poems about abandoned homesteads, so I thought I’ll write one about my aunt’s trailer. The elusiveness of her supposed wealth caught in that image of those baby food jars supposedly stuffed with dollar bills that were never found lent an air of mystery to the poem. So much of life seems shrouded by mystery, by chance occurrence.

I often discover subjects for poems by chance occurrence, by accident, by witnessing a dramatic moment in daily life. For example, “Changing Light” is a poem I wrote after happening upon a dramatic scene in an abandoned parking lot in Springfield. In that poem, I witnessed a woman being arrested by DEA agents and her little boy being taken from her—all while waiting in my car for the traffic light to change from red to green. When I drove away from this disturbing scene, I felt compelled to write the poem.

JW: *What are you currently reading?*

Marcus: One book I’m reading is *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrim of the Flesh* by John Lahr, the definitive biography of the playwright. My first wife was writing a dissertation on Williams before she died. His plays are another outside influence on my poetry, with their richly drawn characters emoting poetic dialogue ripe with the wisdom of lived experience. I’m also reading *Life on Earth* by Dorianne Laux, a poet I have long admired. A new book of poems I would like to recommend is *And Now, Nowhere but Here* by Andrea Hollander. In 1998, when I moved from Philadelphia to Springfield, Andrea sent me a postcard, on which she wrote “Welcome to the Ozarks, a deeper way of life.” It’s always a delight to encounter her poems. The simple pleasure of reading a good book is what led me to want to write in the first place.

Marcus Cafagña

Birds in the Breezeway

If they were looking for a couple of nuts, they found us.
The two starlings flying in mad circles inside our breezeway,
who sought shelter from the rainswept yard outside
through a hole my son tore in the mesh of a screen.

These two starlings flying in mad circles inside our breezeway
could be the same Shakespearean songbirds my son listens to
through a hole he tore one morning in the screen
to identify their purple sheen swooping over the yard.

The same Shakespearean songbirds my son listens to
so he could hear their iridescent wings wheel past,
with their purple-green plumage now so close to our heads
my boy and I must take cover, lie down on the floor.

Because we must duck beneath their iridescent wings,
I will mend the hole in the screen to keep them out—
so we won't have to duck, to shield us from harm—
so that nothing this wild can so easily swoop in.

I will stitch the screen closed to keep them out—
these birds seeking shelter from the rainswept yard—
so that nothing this wild can so easily swoop in
and find us face down on the floor like a couple of nuts.

Marcus Cafagña

Changing Light

I stop my car at a red light in Springfield. A young woman standing in the vacant lot to my left is wearing a pair of handcuffs. She has purple hair, a small silver stud piercing the right side of her nose. DEA agents move among us in their emblazoned jackets. But who's okay with taking a child from its mother? Her watery stare on the verge of breaking. One agent cheers and fist-bumps another before lifting her little boy to his breast pocket. The tyke lands a tiny punch on his chin, as if he could somehow set mommy free. The traffic light changes, red to green, and I step on it. I don't look back. I leave these two in chains.

ISSUE #2

BUGS

COVER BY EMILY LORD



The Demise of the Caelifera Family

As an admirer of Buddhism, I was conflicted. If a moth in my kitchen flings itself against a light fixture, mistaking it for starlight, I will grab a stool, capture it gently, and return it to the night—because all life is sacred.

Yet, I stood at my grill on a Tuesday, thick ribeye steaks on a ceramic plate. I chose to repress the knowledge that this steak was once a mooing, cud-chewing creature. I did not allow that it once had four hooves and a face. It was, simply, dinner.

I lit the three burners of my Super Weber and the gas exploded into flame with a delightful whoosh! Like Pavlov's dog, I salivated at the sound of my suburban dinner bell.

Pop. I started out of my reverie. Pop.

The gas line? I knelt to check the gauge. Pop. Snap. Pop. Pop. Level with my forehead. Pa-pop. Snap. Pop-pop-pop-pop.

I jumped to my feet, fearing a severe grill malfunction. Pop-Snap! Poppop-snap-pop. What the hell?

A large grasshopper flew up from the bowels of the grill, landing on the inside of the still cool lid. I looked down—dozens of small grasshoppers covered the bottom of the Super Weber, dots of gray and green. They were exploding like popcorn.

Snap. Crackle. Pop. Grasshopper Krispies. Horrified, I waved my tongs at Papa Caelifera. "Run away!" I screamed. "You're going to burn." I tried to chase him to the edge of the lid, but he would not flee. "GET OUT!"

Apparently, grasshoppers do not speak English.

Snap. Pop. Crackle. He dove between the slats of the grill straight into the heat.

After a few stray pops, the massacre was over. Tongs still in hand, I stood stunned on the now silent deck. There, in a moment of existential crisis, I wrestled with the mass murder I had committed.

Then, it dawned on me: Why didn't I just turn off the burners?

I shrugged and threw the first steak on the now-hot grill, wondering if roasted grasshoppers would affect its flavor.

Sara Burge

Satisfaction

Air in late July is lecherous,
licks our skin until
we're wet with desire.

Bees throng the sunflowers,
flashing their fat little asses.
Mosquitos flock to the rind of us

while air clings
like a child who refuses
all pleas for solitude.

Strange white bugs
chew at the garden's offerings
until every last hope lies limp.

We slap the mosquito's body
against our own. She bursts
into blood and communion.

Ed Ruzicka

Cleansed

after Blake

Within the gyre
of a squadron
of dragonflies
Inside the whirring
Constellation
they wove
For one
seizured instant
I saw
through
all their
diamond-faceted
Lenses
Multiple worlds.

The Hive

The bees saved her. She woke up one morning and there they were, swarmed on the front headlight of her small white pickup. Sally road her bike to work that day instead of driving, not sure what to do about a bee swarm on her car—but maybe if she left them alone they would collect themselves and move on to wherever bees go to set up their honey shops. She knew they were dying off—cell phones or insecticides or space rays or something like that. So she felt obliged to respect their role as pollinators.

She told people at work—Harry, who worked the phones next to her. They sold Paradise packages for a timeshare in Florida. Between calls, she would raise up in her chair and peek over the wall of her cubicle.

“What do I do with a bee swarm?”

“A fan,” said Harry, not looking up from his call list.

“What?”

“If you’re warm, get a fan.”

“Swarm. Not warm. I have a bee swarm on my truck.”

“Really?” said Harry. “That’s very cool. That’s a once in a lifetime thing.”

A voice rose up from the cubicle on the other side. “You should do something about that.” It was Trish. She was a know-it-all and also the number one seller on their team. Plus she had big beautiful brown eyes. Definitely hard to be around. “Call a beekeeper. They’ll come get the Queen.” Right at that moment, the Shift Manager Yolanda walked by. Everybody called her Yo, but not to her face. People got busy then and there wasn’t any more talk about the bees, but at the end of the shift, Trish dropped a list of beekeepers on her desk. Trish could multi-task. She could make her calls and research area beekeepers at the same time. She was probably next in line for Shift Manager after Yo.

About the same time the bees came, Sally was heading for her own personal collapse. Before Christmas, she and her boyfriend had drifted away

from one another. It was as if the ultraviolet rays of love had stopped drawing them together. One day, she came home from work to find a note on the kitchen counter. “I’m leaving,” it said. “We both know it has been over for a while.” She looked around their apartment and saw that everything of his was gone. He was a minimalist, so packing up and leaving was not hard to do. Perhaps she should have seen this as a red flag.

At work she pretended like they were still together. When people went out for drinks at the end of the day, she said she had to get home because her boyfriend was waiting. All this time she could have been making friends, but instead she was in her apartment watching old Star Trek episodes and eating take out. Then the bees came and swarmed her car, and she knew she had to do something. She was responsible for them. It was like the universe was calling to her. “Come out here and save these bees!”

When she got home, she called all the numbers on the list. Each time she dialed a number, her call went straight to voicemail and each one had the same message: “If you are calling about bees, we are not collecting now. Thanks and save the bees!” When she came to the last number on the list, she was almost ready to give up.

“Hello?” A man answered. He had a low voice, the kind of voice that would have been good on the radio.

“Hi,” she said. “A friend gave me your name. “I have bees on my car headlight. Like hundreds hanging there. I haven’t been able to drive to work. My friend said you pick up bees and find a new home for them.”

There was a pause. “I have been getting lots of calls,” he said. “I don’t really need more bees.”

She hadn’t considered this. That bee people might not be interested in collecting her bee swarm. “They—they’re not going off on their own. Can you please just come by and look?” She was embarrassed to realize she was pleading and sounded a little desperate.

She heard a sigh, then a shuffling sound, then “Okay, give me your address.”

“Can you come tonight?” she said. She felt an urgency. Like the bees were somehow related to her boyfriend dumping her, and she just wanted to get on with everything. He agreed to meet her later that afternoon.

Sally was waiting outside at the designated time when a man in a small truck pulled up, parked and got out. He was lean and young and good looking. Sally didn’t know what to expect when it came to beekeepers, but

she honestly didn't imagine a hottie.

"The first thing we have to do is find the queen," he said. He knelt down in front of her car and studied the swarm. "There," he said after a few moments. He was looking at the front fender. "See her? She right on the edge of the bumper."

And there at the center of a cluster of especially attentive bees, was the queen. "You have to capture the queen first," he said. "The rest of the bees just follow." He went to the back of the truck and pulled out a box. "You can almost scoop them up with your hands!" he said, smiling.

That is what she wanted after all. Someone who cared about the bees.

As these stories go, Sally and the beekeeper are supposed to fall in love. And they did have a nice moment, capturing the bees and loading up in the truck so the bees might establish a new hive. Sally was grateful and really glad to have her car back. But after they collected the bees, they said goodbye and never saw each other again. Sally would eventually meet a guy who would stick around long enough for them to build a home together. But that's a different story.

Here's how this one ends. The next day, when Sally went into work, Trish was waiting by her desk.

"Well," she said. "Did you call the numbers I gave you?"

"Yes," said Sally. "Thanks. Thanks for your help."

"I worried about them all night," Trish said. Her body visibly relaxed. "Did you know that bees take naps together in flowers. And they dance to communicate? They do a bee dance."

A few hours later, Sally went to lunch with Trish and told her all about capturing the bees with the bee guy. They became friends that day and stayed friends for the rest of their lives.

And that's its own kind of love story.

Marianne Gambaro

Ode to the Hummingbird Moth

Bane of my garden, horned emerald monsters
strike harvests at the height of promise,
devour eggplant and tomato,
though themselves often consumed

by ravenous spawn of braconid wasp.
Survivors sleep in Hades' fertile soil
awaiting sweet Persephone's return
to emerge transformed.

Transparent wings throb in fuchsia
butterfly bush and salmon milkweed.
Sirius' sun emblazons carmine bands
on segmented torso like some flying velvet lobster.

Who am I to destroy
such a splendid creation?



Sphinx and Afternoon Nectar
CJ Emerson

The Woman Who Loved Insects

If a wasp gets trapped inside and Zulaika finds it scrabbling against the window, tail end tucked toward the glass as if it could sting its way out, she cups it and releases it, watches it seize its freedom with a powerful launch of its wings.

She powders the baseboards with cinnamon to divert armies of ants. And though spiders aren't technically insects, she loves them too. She'll coax them onto a travel brochure, send them cruising out the window, willowy threads of silk trailing behind like lifelines.

It doesn't matter how many ewws, screams or horrified looks she's endured from siblings, roommates, and friends, she quietly releases each trapped creature as if it's her own kin.

When Zulaika was twelve, her aunt and uncle were babysitting her, watching TV, when her aunt said she was going out to get ice cream—mocha because it was Zulaika's favorite. Her uncle smelled of stale sweat and beer when he pulled her close to him on the sofa, slid his clammy hand along her thigh, said, Atta girl, give us a nice hug. Snug as a bug in a rug, eh? She held perfectly still when she saw a centipede shimmy along the sofa back and onto his arm, stinging him on the soft inside part of his elbow, making him bellow like he'd been hit by a shotgun blast. He stomped on the thing, beat it with a sofa cushion until all fifty thousand or so legs stopped moving.

Another time she was tossing an artfully folded note to her best friend, Alex, at the exact moment Mrs. Allison turned back from the blackboard. The teacher grabbed a ruler, headed towards Zulaika. Just then a bee flew in and stung Mrs. A in the space between thumb and forefinger that held the measuring-device-turned-weapon which skittered across the lacquered floor as Mrs. A sucked the soft flesh and ran out of the classroom, the doomed bee dropping to the ground.

Years later, Zulaika was walking back to her dorm room after dark, clutching her purse that contained five hundred dollars in cash she'd been saving up for two years to go on spring-break to Florida with her roomies.

She remembers scents of frying onions and weed co-mingling in the cool autumn air of the quad when a man leapt from behind the science building, grabbed her bag with one hand and with the other waved a knife that glinted in the moonlight. He hissed, keep your fucking mouth shut which she did as she watched a giant moth—perhaps attracted by the knife’s reflected light—hurtle into his eye and stick there. He dropped both knife and purse, and she fled, screaming He has a weapon! Get him! her words ricocheting across the quad, causing a chain reaction of windows flying open, lights going on, someone pulling an alarm in one of the buildings.

Zulaika loves the flying, crawling things most people loathe or fear. Beetles and braconids, termites and tarantulas, hornets and harvester ants, crickets and cockroaches, fire ants and flies, sow bugs and cicadas, all pals. And whenever she sees a centipede she nods appreciatively, hustles it back to the cool damp of the basement. She’s planted a bounty of bee-balm and wildflowers in her little urban garden, and always leaves the porch light on for whoever might seek refuge in its glow.

Will Falk

Crickets Provide Sex Advice

Horny Jerusalem crickets
beat their bodies on hollow ground
to hit on each other.

Entomologists explain that the crickets
listen through their bellies
pressed into the soil.
They only date the best drummers
and only fall in love
with someone who skillfully
fills the silence in their empty guts.

Listening to a cricket's
percussive seduction
after rolling in the soil,
on a hot and sweaty night,
with you,

I think of the rhythm we just shared
and become sad
because the entomologists also say
that insect habitat degradation
is leading to population collapse.

Concrete and asphalt, of course,
are bad for flirting,
are too dense for drumming,
and interfere with the crickets'

pick-up line transmissions.

It's hard to mate, it seems,
when you cannot communicate.
That makes sense to me
because I know
what we've been doing
would not work on blacktop.

You pull me closer
to drive away the hard realities
of being alive right now
with the tenderness of your touch.

We pick up again where we left off,
striving to create songs together
worthy of the crickets.

Our music crescendos.
The divisions between us,
the crickets, and the dirt
finally blur.

Then, my head rests on your chest
and only the rhythm
of our beating hearts remain.
They say: protect the Earth,
you cannot make love without Her.

Tricia Knoll

One is Silver and the Other is Gold

So true of fireflies' glow
on summer nights—spotlights
of luciferase broadcast who needs
a mate, flash code of dot and dash
to make new friends
and seek the old.

Dave Malone

Eastern Tiger Swallowtail

A cow-beating rain stopped
in mid-afternoon when I parked
the car sixty miles from home
at a fuel station.

On the pavement, the black
and yellow butterfly lay sideways,
fluttering when my door slammed,
and I bent down to see

if there was anything I could do.
Its neck bent, like the favorite
side of a pencil eraser, so I
took the creature into cupped hands,

and we climbed into the car
where I peeled an apple
and placed the swallowtail
against the wet flesh,

its paper wings quiet,
decorated in black moons
and striped highways,
while I drove ahead and hoped.

Paulette Guerin

Late September

The last cicada is sputtering out.
Probably a male calling for a mate
as autumn moves in. The buzz starts and stops
and pushes forward like an old crank car.
This year, no tidal wave of cicada song
as in the summers of my childhood.
This year, no water and only suburb grass.
The dragonflies have died and the mosquitoes with them.
Then a second cicada answers, tuning its violin
toward the first without breaking a single note.

Liv H. Scott

The inchworm and the buckeye

Fall drops like leaves,
paper craft animation,
all at once, around
the buckeye tree with poison
nuts like little butts in it's bare branches
Fall drops like tea
leaves in water, unfurling,
heady, heavy sinking
down, down, to the bottom of the cup.
An inchworm inching,
toward omen, depression or winter,
both – a cloud blowing wind gust
that you battle,
sketch yourself a medieval rabbit,
the meek inherit – the snail in it's shell
stalls at the buckeye
tree, bad directions,
miles away from
Osage orange- a
perfect feast, or acorn meal. The
dragon-snail gives
up, the book comes
to a close. The
teacup shatters,
rearranges itself
like falling leaves.
The inchworm sleeps

“The Spirit of Life in Your Nostrils” by Gaby Zabar

WINNER OF THE 2025 DEAD HERRING PRIZE

Well, lookie here! New year, new Skipjack! And, what’s that? Another zinger! We’ve got a live one on the line, and we’re thrilled to share it with you:

It’s not often that such a whale of a story comes along and Ahab’s you into full attention the way this one did. This story not only resonated with us on a personal level, but, thematically, it was love at first bite for us. We are still reeling. Thank you, Gaby!

The Dead Herring Prize highlights works by emerging writers that slay real-world red herrings in our day-to-day lives. Climate fiction like Gaby’s that reads between the lines and asks, “Will the future blame us?” Poetry of self-discovery. Essays interrogating worlds the “I” tends not to see. At the end of the day, we’d be just as happy—and just as honored—presenting this award to any of the incredible authors and artists featured in the pages of Skipjack Review this past year. But we aren’t! Here’s to you, Gaby! Thanks again.

Cheers,

Em
M.M.
Jim



The Spirit of Life in Your Nostrils

Halfway across the Manhattan Bridge, the Q rocked side to side as it slowed to a stop. A garbled warning hissed through the intercom. Waves crashed against the subway car's doors, and straphangers teemed back as water spilled in. With another burst of static from the intercom, the train's nighttime journey across the East River continued.

Talia and Lauren sat together. Lauren cradled a plain black backpack in her arms, while Talia gestured wildly. "We go in. I light the candle. You grab the garbage and run."

Lauren rested her chin on the top of her backpack and yawned. "The Yankee candle isn't going to work," she said.

"It's strong, really strong. Lavender vanilla." Talia nodded. Her colorful barrettes and piercings flashed under the train's fluorescent lights. "This time will be different, you'll see."

They waited for seven more stops as the train snaked under Brooklyn. When exiting, Lauren pushed her way out through the crowd, a continuous effort, while Talia followed effortlessly in the wake she had created. Crossing the station's growing puddles involved stepping on well-placed bricks and cinder blocks. Algae and unidentifiable slime coated the stairs to the street.

The distance from the station to their apartment building was a half mile, ten minutes spent walking through a fine, warm rain. A red-brick façade emerged through the trees that marked the southern end of the Parade Grounds. Those bricks enclosed their illegal three-bedroom basement setup, the one with a joke of a lease held by an existing tenant and sweet, sweet air conditioning. After seeing the apartment listing, which had been stapled to a rotting electric pole on Church Avenue, Lauren and Talia agreed to rent the remaining two bedrooms despite their reservations—it was the best deal they could manage.

Lauren sniffed as she stepped towards the side door that led to the basement. "Tonight's going to be bad."

Talia grimaced but didn't answer. In their situation, survival depended

on nose blindness, rapid acclimation. She produced the keys from her nylon fanny pack; they were bound on a keychain accessorized with a rose quartz crystal and plastic pony beads knotted into the shape of a lizard. With more wrist movement than necessary, she unlocked the door, and the two descended a damp staircase illuminated by a single, dim lightbulb.

Their steps echoed. Lauren peered around the corner into the apartment. “He’s not home. Do you think he’s avoiding us?”

“Well, we’ve been avoiding him,” Talia responded. “He probably doesn’t want to make things awkward.” As they entered the common area, the pillar of stench hit. The smell had weight to it, salt and rot, and it could be tasted. The intensity of the air would have been better suited to an abandoned cannery or failed aquarium.

Lauren flicked on the lights and headed straight to the small sliver of a window that was situated above ground level and below the ceiling. On tiptoes, she reached up and vented it open, pausing to notice the swirling rainbow of an oil slick on the asphalt outside. The reflection of a single flame flickered on the glass.

“I lit the candle,” Talia said.

Turning from the window, Lauren nodded towards the kitchenette. “Let’s get this over with.”

Talia frowned. She opened the cabinet under the sink and waited for Lauren. A black plastic trash bag tilted out, and Lauren dove to catch it. Fish bones spilled out. Talia shoved them back in and tied the knot. Lauren lifted up the bag up the stairs and through the door, throwing it onto the street near the dumpster. Their nightly routine was well-choreographed.

Lauren stopped to catch her breath. Then, slamming the door behind her, she rushed back down the stairs to wash her hands. Talia had already scrubbed hers, patting them dry on a hot pink kitchen towel.

“I’m tired of taking out his trash.” Fists clenched and jaw set, Lauren flopped onto the damp, threadbare couch. “Have you heard anything from Guy since this started?”

Talia’s eyes darted to the refrigerator. “You mean the fish?”

“Yes, the fish.”

“He hasn’t texted me in a while.” Talia produced her phone and scrolled through her messages. “The last thing he wrote me was from right after we moved in and right before all the fish.”

“What’d he say?”

Talia imitated a baritone. ““Hey sorry for being MIA while you were unpacking. Had a life-changing experience in the Rockaways.”” She turned the screen towards Lauren to show that she had read the message word-for-word. In her own voice, thinner and higher, Talia continued, “Forgive me for assuming the ‘life-changing experience’ was ayahuasca.”

“So what, he went on a retreat, and now he’s a super pescetarian?” Lauren stood up. “We have a right to know what he’s doing.”

“He might tell us if we just ask.”

“He’s not around to ask. And if he was going to tell us on his own, he already would have.” Lauren sat up. “We have to go into his room.”

Talia winced. “I don’t want to break any boundaries.”

“The fish are breaking my boundaries.”

“Let’s text him first. At least,” Talia said.

“Don’t—” Lauren reached for the phone.

Crouching down away from Lauren’s grasping arms, Talia completed and sent the message. Satisfied, she displayed her screen again. Two bright text bubbles had been sent back-to-back: hey me and lauren need to go into ur room to check smthng followed by sorry!!! its an emergency. Two siren emoji punctuated the last text.

Lauren groaned as she got up. She stepped into the hallway behind the kitchenette, hovering in front of the first door in a line of three. Her hand rested over the doorknob as she looked back at Talia. “Are we good?”

Talia set her phone down and picked up the candle’s glass jar, holding it to her chest. The door to Guy’s room swung open. Lauren pushed her way inside, Talia a few steps behind. The smell was worse, but the temperature was a few degrees cooler. His room was identical to theirs, a small box with concrete floors and brick walls. Guy had created a desk, bookcase, and nightstand out of assorted plastic milk crates and bungee cords. In the corner, cement blocks and plywood held up a box spring and a damp mattress.

Lauren gagged at the smell and pinched her nose shut. She flipped the light switch, but all the bulbs in the ceiling light fixture had burnt out.

Talia placed the candle on the desk and squeezed Lauren’s shoulder. “Breathe through it. In through your nose, out through your mouth. You’ll get used to it. It’s better to adapt right away.”

“We shouldn’t have to ‘adapt’ to this.”

Talia knelt on the floor. Beneath the bed was a minifridge, a humming black cube devoid of magnets or stickers or anything that could reveal a

personality. Curiosity overcoming any previous hesitation to trespass, she opened it.

Fish, whole, still-fresh fish, were piled on the minifridge's wire racks, eyes and mouths open and blank. Talia closed the door. "There's more fish." She pressed her head against the side of the mattress and recoiled. "Eesh."

"What?" Lauren asked.

"His bed, it's drenched."

Lauren approached and pressed her broad hands onto mattress. Guy's bed was unmade, wrinkled gray sheets swept to the side. Tilting forward, she then swiped at the brick wall the bed was pressed against. Her fingers traced grout paths. "There's a leak."

Talia remained on the floor. "I wonder if it's from all the rain."

Plastic flip flops flopped off, Lauren climbed onto the bed. "But this place has flooded before, and this isn't that. The floor is dry. It's coming from—" She sputtered. "—Oh, oh. It dripped in my mouth."

Talia rose to her feet. "Are you okay?"

"I really don't know."

As Talia waited for Lauren to recompose herself, she stretched her back and shoulders, examining the ceiling. Talia pointed above Lauren's head and cleared her throat. "Check the air vent."

Where the far wall met the ceiling, there was a large, two-by-two-foot vent, sealed with a rusted grate. Lauren gathered up all the pillows on Guy's bed and stepped on top of them to get closer. Drops of water pooled on the vent's lower side and ran down the grout. Cool air flowed through. Something silver flashed behind the metal. Lauren stepped back.

Talia snapped a hairclip to smooth her bangs back. "Is it the air conditioning?"

"Yeah." Lauren, crouched down and climbed off the bed, cautious. "We should call the super."

"Victor never responds."

"He likes me. I can tell." Lauren left the room and returned with her own phone. She tapped a contact labeled Victor (super) and paused long enough for three rings and the start of the default voicemail message to sound. "Mmm, he's not picking up. You think this is something we should report to 3-1-1?"

"Now? With everything? No." Talia held her hands up, long fingers with short nails painted red. "They're not going to care about air conditioning in

an illegal basement apartment. Not when the city is sinking.”

“New York isn’t sinking; the ocean is rising,” Lauren corrected.

Talia rolled her eyes and then directed them back up to the large vent.

Hopping off the bed, Lauren breezed past Talia, out of Guy’s room. “I’ll get my toolbox.” Her voice echoed through the hallway.

Talia, left alone, pressed her hip against Guy’s desk and contemplated the flickering Yankee candle. The milk crates, which were filled with organized stacks of water-warped books and plastic toy monsters, cast rippling shadows onto the floor. A large, steel bowl in one of the lower crates glinted in the candlelight, and Talia knelt to investigate. Cloudy water filled the bowl halfway. A small, live fish, an anchovy or guppy, floated in the few inches of water and stared back at her. “Holy shit.”

With the toolbox nestled under her armpit, Lauren re-entered the room, fussing with a plastic flashlight. “It’s not working, and it’s not the batteries, I already checked. Do you have one?”

“A flashlight? No.” Talia faced Lauren, away from the live-fish-in-a-bowl. “I need to get one.” A long sigh from Lauren followed Talia as she picked up the Yankee candle with both hands and clambered onto the bed, holding it near the metal grate. “See? I was right about the candle. It will help.”

“Isn’t it hot?” Lauren asked.

“I can take it.”

“If you say so.” Lauren opened the toolkit on Guy’s desk and took out a flathead screwdriver. Holding it out in front of her like a dagger, she hauled herself onto the bed and stood, braced for the unknown. “We’ll fix this.”

What the candle lacked in scent, it made up for in luminescence. Talia grasped the candle’s jar with comfort, the same way she would hold a large mug of coffee or soup. While the metal grate was coated in rust, it was clean otherwise. The grout and brick surrounding it had started to crumble, and someone, Guy or some other previous tenant or visitor, had drawn a smiley face in ink below the vent. Lauren’s hands trembled. She took the screwdriver and wedged it between the grate and the brick wall, prying it away. The grate fell away easily, landing onto Guy’s pillows along with grit and dust.

“Huh.” Lauren tapped the screwdriver against the brick. “It’s meant to come loose, I guess.”

“Maybe Guy was messing with it? To fix the air conditioning?”

Lauren judged the milk crates and cinder blocks. “If Guy was a successful HVAC technician, he would not be living like this.”

“Fair.” Talia moved the candle to illuminate the vent. “But he knows something about this place that we don’t.”

“That I can guarantee.” Lauren took a deep breath and poked her head through the big hole in the wall. The vent was rough, unfinished. Behind Lauren, Talia guided the candle from one side of the hole to the other, angling the light in the best way possible. In the darkness beyond the wall, silver flashed.

“Did you see that?” Lauren asked. “A cockroach? A rat?”

Talia shook her head. “It was shiny. Pretty.”

Squeezing in next to Lauren, Talia pushed the upper half of her body through the wall, leading the way by candlelight. Inside, just a few inches below the vent’s lower edge, inky water rose and fell in waves under a dark sky. The air was fresh and chilled. Conditioned. There was no floor. There was no ceiling. Before them was an ocean. More silver flashes appeared. They moved together then suddenly switched direction. Each flash had eyes.

“The fish,” Talia and Lauren said, together.

Lauren retreated from the sight, but Talia shushed her. “Wait.”

A bigger flash, a quarter among dimes, surfaced. A shining, messy amalgamation of limbs and tail and fin shot up from the water, and familiar laughter, Guy’s laughter, rang as he swam. His leg-tail arched, scales transitioning to flesh and back to scales again. Muscles and bones moved in the wrong-right places. Their roommate, lover of fish that he was, had become one.

Guy did not see Talia and Lauren, or, if he did, he didn’t acknowledge them. He continued on, catching fish and in a netted bag wrapped around his torso. As Talia and Lauren froze in revelation, a particularly large wave approached the vent and crested. As the Hudson River empties into the Atlantic Ocean in the Upper Bay, here the Upper Bay emptied into a basement in Flatbush.

Talia shielded the candle’s flame with her body and leaned in further, angling herself so that she could climb through the vent completely. Lauren recoiled and grabbed Talia’s free arm, pulling her away.

“Don’t touch me,” Talia said.

Lauren let go of Talia’s arm. “It’s not safe.”

Another wave crashed into them, extinguishing the candle. A single

silver fish spilled out of the vent along with gallons of water and stray tufts of seafoam. The fish got stuck and flapped in the narrow gap between Guy's mattress and the brick wall. Lauren coughed and wrung out her shirt. Talia set the candle jar down on Guy's milk-crate nightstand, and scooped up the struggling fish. She carried the fish off the bed and to the makeshift bookshelf, dropping it into the large steel bowl with the anchovy or guppy or whatever-it-was.

Lauren sighed. "He fucked with the forces of nature. He fucked with God."

Talia didn't look up from the bowl. "He should've told us."

"What do we do? Do we move?" Lauren ran her hands through her hair, detangling the knots that had formed.

Talia took a deep breath, in through her nostrils and out through her mouth. She didn't register the smell at all anymore. She sat on the floor, splaying her legs out. She mumbled. "We'd only have to move again."

"What do you mean?"

"Even if we moved—and we wouldn't get as good a deal ever again—we'd still have to move whenever the flooding gets worse." Talia reclined, lying down on the floor, stretching her arms behind her head. "It's not like we can control the ocean. It's going to go where it wants to go. It's already here."

Lauren frowned and perched on the edge of Guy's bed. "It's not too late. The city's still talking about building the walls, that dam. Or we can move out of the city. We can leave and go upstate with everybody else."

"Not everybody's leaving. People will stay. Some people have to stay."

"I can't stay, Talia."

"You don't have to." Bringing her hands in front of her face, Talia stretched her fingers far apart as if there was webbing between them. "I do."

"No. It's not worth it. Don't go have a 'life-changing experience' in the Rockaways too, if that's what it takes to stay." Guy's bed sagged around Lauren and creaked at her movement.

"Don't tell me what to do. I'm thinking about it."

Lauren walked out of the room without saying anything else. Talia remained on the floor, breathing deep, seafoam fading into thin veins around her.

Angela Townsend

Passing Whimsy

Appeared in Skipjack Review Online

Mullet has passed. Mullet was the color of a circus peanut and too shy to enjoy being enjoyed. Mullet's heart misfired. Mullet's death made eighteen people cry.

Mullet's name was a housewarming gift from the whimsy people. Animal shelter staff gnaw comedy like a protein bar. They name cats for ill-advised haircuts. They blow cool, bawdy air on death's feet. What they cannot outrun, they make outrageous. They weep for cats who never trusted them.

Mullet has passed, or this is what I catch myself writing. I am the shelter's fundraiser. I am paid to ensure we can afford insulin, kibble, and the whimsy people's payroll.

I am not paid to do my actual job. I am the shelter's narrator. I ask the world to uncross its arms. I ask the cats to break me off a bite of the divine, just enough to explain why this all matters.

I am the shelter's chaplain. I ask for money, and people I will meet answer in dollars and Psalms. They hide between the sunflowers on their checks and write me ten-paragraph emails. They feel around for ears that will not fold. They tell me about their cats' lymphoma. They tell me about the gout that burns their feet. They tell me about husbands. I pebble my calendar with sad people so I will not forget. I check in on a half-dozen before my coffee.

Mullet has passed, and dozens weep before the day is done. Mullet lived at the top of a starboard ramp, waiting for night to fall so all the people would leave. Mullet lived a second life on the shelter blog, where cats are jaunty and brave and, actually, people.

I am the shelter's simpleton. I write thousand-word meditations on the word "irrevocable" without using it a single time. People in other time zones call to confirm that they are Mullet. They feel seen because people in New Jersey did not look away from a cat who did not like them. They can face their day because a cat the color of a circus peanut did not need to earn love.

The uninterrupted adoration of Mullet ships daily bread across the country.

Mullet has passed, and it is my job to break the news. Distant prairies will burn with grief that is real. I catch myself never using the word “away.” Mullet has passed. He has made it. He has progressed to the next level. Mullet has passed, as though we were talking about Advanced Placement Physics rather than a cardiac event.

I am the shelter’s seminarian, but strictly of the first-year variety. I am excited. I am wearisome. I have yet to be tempered by higher-level caution. I carry a metal detector for buried resurrections. You do not want me to pray at Thanksgiving. The stuffing will go cold before I finish name-dropping prophets.

In the animal shelter, there are no minor prophets. I trip over parables on my way to the coffee pot. There is ludicrous enthusiasm for the hissing and ungrateful. A cat can be honest enough to communicate with rage-diarrhea. A person can still love him the best. A person can have resentment removed while she sleeps and wake to find whimsy standing on its own feet beside her. This is flesh of her flesh and bone of her bones.

Mullet has passed, and we will bury him in the Memorial Garden. The stray became a child. He has already had one resurrection. I will not use the word. Words usually fail. “Whimsy” sounds as light as a single whisker. You will find it three days later where the sunlight hits.

A CONVERSATION WITH TYLER BUENO

One of the most important aspects of developing a story is creating emotion. Tyler Bueno hones in on that emotion. It's what he seeks in each of his musicals; a connection with the audience beyond the page, something everyone can relate to on an individual level. His secret? He loves doing it.

Musician. Actor. Playwright. A jack-of-all-trades, one might call him, but if there is one thing that defines him, it's his creative drive. He has a knack for balancing energies, for trying on different hats when a project calls for it, and then seeing it through.

Tyler hails from Springfield, Missouri where he and his wife are constantly connecting with others and creating something in the heart of Downtown. Give him a microphone or a guitar, and he'll write lyrics on the spot. I've seen him do it. It's remarkable witnessing such creativity from the ground up. Let's take a look behind the curtain.



Michael: *As of right now, you've written and performed a handful of original musicals, acted in many media productions, and continue to write music and sing your heart out given the chance. All of this defines you. But what sparked your love of playwriting?*

Tyler: It's interesting, I never wanted to be a writer; I wanted to act and sing. But looking back on it now, even as a kid I loved playing with my action figures and telling stories. In college, I was met with my fair share of rejection from community theatres and decided I wanted to tell my own stories. Write the type of shows that I wanted to see. Jonathan Larson was a huge inspiration for me in branching out.

The first original show I wrote was loosely based on how my wife and I met, as a matter of fact!

Michael: *Writers are often inspired by a wide-variety of things; events, song lyrics, or paintings, to name a few. It seems like a no-brainer that music should be one of the first creative endeavors when writing a musical, but, then, where does story fit in? When it comes to writing musicals, where do you start?*

Tyler: Concept is key! I've heard it said that, when writing a musical, you need to ask yourself one thing: "Does this story need to happen and can it work in musical format?" My answer: YES! Music is like "The Force". It surrounds us and binds us together. It's a major player in human expression. But I digress. You must define what your concept is. Not just story. But the overarching feel. Example: the next musical we're producing for Spring 2025 is a parody/retelling of one of the stories from a galaxy far, far away centering around a defecting soldier.

The concept was inspired by a song I wrote called "The Runaway." It was written in a Shawn Mendes feel. So, when I began to craft the show, I knew the rest of the music needed to stay in that sound.

Or as in the case of our last show, “Behind the Line”, each character had a different genre surrounding them, respectfully. Luke, the main hero, was very pop rock/hip hop vs the Lawyer Dennis was very Slow Jams or R&B ballads. But either way you should have a musical concept before you even get going.

Michael: *What are the difficulties of developing a musical? How do you circumvent these potential roadblocks?*

Tyler: For each writer it’s different. For me specifically, it’s making sure the scene needs a musical moment and asking yourself, How do I make it happen the right way? It all goes back to concept. You have to know your characters and story before you can just write something. There are times I can plug a song I’ve written from a different project into the current show I’m writing and it works. But other times not so much. There are two important things I’ve learned to do, albeit they contradict each other. Number 1: look to your mentors or fellow writers for advice. Number 2: Throw all you know out the window and make something new. Or the way my father-in-law Bruce says, “Think outside of the box.” You are writing a musical where people sing their emotions; you have broken all reality, so break it some more! Basically, I’ve had to learn to take what I know and sometimes break it and get beyond myself to allow the story to tell itself!

Michael: *Tell us about the first time a musical inspired you. Was it a particular scene? What was it that ignited the theatrical embers?*

Tyler: *RENT* by Jonathan Larson. It was the first time I got to see rock music in a musical. And I mean roll-the-windows-down and jam rock! The scene I’ve always held on to was “What You Own.” The two heroes of the show, Mark and Roger, were at their ‘eleven o’clock moments.’ Mark had given up his dreams of being a film maker to work for TMZ, basically, and Roger had left for Santa Fe. The song was the power rock duet that

summed up the characters' journeys to that point. They were doing call and responses. Mark was speaking to his boss while Roger did a precursor to his next song. And then they come back together at the end and just rock the show. I had never seen a moment like that before. Anytime I write about a character turn around, I always refer to that moment.

Michael: *One thing we love about what you're doing is that you're not just writing plays; you're enlisting actors, directing, and producing these projects alongside your wife and a select team of close friends and creatives. While tackling a production with a small group, or even by yourself, can be a daunting experience, it must be quite rewarding as well. With the latest musical, "Behind the Line", what was the process like?*

Tyler: It's very difficult. We all have different beliefs and backgrounds but we come together for one goal: to tell a story and change the world. For "Behind the Line", we were met with several changes last minute—some script rewrites and venue change, to name the two biggest. And I won't lie, there were times where it felt as if we weren't going to see this thing through. But we stayed the course: tell a story and change the world.

Michael: *As mentioned earlier, you've created a theater troupe called Rebels Guild. Tell us a little bit more about this collective. Are you working on anything new?*

Tyler: Rebels Guild started as a media company with my pal Quintin Huckaby called Nerds4Entertainment. In 2021 we relaunched as Rebels Guild Theatre. But it wasn't until 2022 when we really started to find our footing. We wanted to tell personal stories of nerd culture but to do it in a way that would affect people the way our favorite shows, plays and movies had affected us.

Like I said earlier, our newest project is called "The Runaway" and retells Episode 7 of a popular franchise in a galaxy far far away. As a huge fan of that franchise it always bothered me that more wasn't done with the character Finn.

Michael: *What are some of your favorite musicals or theater productions?*

Tyler: *RENT* and *Tick Tick Boom* by Jonathan Larson. *In The Heights* by Lin Manuel Miranda. Not that I don't love *Hamilton* [which has become very popular], it's just not as personal to me. The musical *Memphis* by David Bryant. *Dear Evan Hansen* by Pasek and Paul.

There are so many that mean the world to me for different reasons.

Michael: *Many of our readers might not have much experience with this genre. With this in mind, what's a musical you recommend for people unfamiliar with theater productions, and why?*

Tyler: Honestly, I recommend *Tick Tick Boom* on Netflix. It's a bit different from the stage version, but any creative can pull from Jonathan's personal story of trying to be a writer and the effect on his relationships. His fear of turning thirty and having nothing to show for it. I believe that's a story many of us know all too well.

Eric Fisher Stone

Lofgeornost

Appeared in Skipjack Review Online

Beowulf's last word means most eager for glory,
though the gulf coast toad seeks anonymity
and crickets juicy as mangos. Warted
like some goblin dumpling, your soft stone

sits in moss-slick ditches, your eyelids
helming black mirrors to marsh grass
where Grendel might burble up
from salted Texas jetties. Teach us

your humility, jumping plum, rubbing
between streams without seeking power
beyond the kingdom of toads, delved
in worm-deep dirt, your mud throne

an empire of grubs, craving crawdads,
not fame. While Beowulf boasts
his slaughter of sea serpents, your midnight trill
rattles through gutters for a mate.

Alice Lowe

Sinking Feeling

Appeared in Skipjack Review Online

In an Ursula LeGuin story written in the seventies and set in an unspecified future time, Manhattan is under eleven feet of water at low tide, and oyster beds occupy San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square.

That's fiction, but it's a fact that New York City is sinking under its own weight. Relentless construction—the city's million-plus-and-ever-increasing buildings collectively weigh 1.68 trillion pounds—combine with rising sea levels (nine inches in New York since 1950) foretell eventual catastrophe. In California and globally sea levels rose six inches in that same period and are predicted to rise another six inches in just 20 more years. As many as three-quarters of California's beaches could be totally eroded, many completely submerged, by 2100.

When I was ten, my family spent two years as live-in caretakers of a cliffside mansion in the San Diego beach town where I grew up. There was no fence at the edge of the bluff, maybe ten yards from the back door. I suffered terrifying nightmares of earthquakes and landslides, the cliff breaking off, us plummeting over the edge. One night I arrived home in the early evening from a friend's house to find the house empty. I panicked, calling out as I ran from room to room, and finally onto the back patio, "Mom! Dad! Where are you!" Sobbing and fearing the worst, I cut through the trees and growth dividing us from the house next door to get help. And they were, sipping old-fashioned with the neighbor. They were surprised at my terror. They laughed: "Where did you think we'd be?" They assured me of our safety, of the baselessness of my fears. Now coastal erosion is a constant threat on those very cliffs. Houses slip and slide.

Last summer, my husband and I took the train from San Diego to Los Angeles to visit friends. We had to disembark in Oceanside and take a bus to Orange County to circumvent the area where the tracks are dangerously close to unstable cliffs and repairs were being made. In Irvine we boarded another train to complete our trip to L.A. The stretch of rail was repaired and

reopened, but it's experienced several landslides over the past year, each time closing for days, weeks, or months while the cliffside is reinforced—until the next one. The talk is to relocate this and another volatile stretch, seemingly inches from the cliff in Del Mar, further inland. That will take years and billions of dollars. In the meantime, I hold my breath and/or avert my eyes when passing these precarious spots. C'mon, I tell myself; the train's not going to just slip over the cliff. But then again, couldn't it?

Our house is on a San Diego canyon, a palm and several towering eucalyptus trees just beyond our patio and deck. Last year Adam, the arborist who trims the trees on our property, showed us where the soil embankment between our patio and the canyon was eroding. A worn and wobbly chain link fence was an eyesore and no protection; it didn't even deter the skunks, raccoons, and

possums that scuttle and sniff around our bird feeders and trash cans at night. Our new \$6,000 retaining wall is a work of art that assures the property's safety while still welcoming the wildlife. It also replaces the trip to England we'd planned for the fall.

Margaret Atwood's climate trilogy, *Maddaddam*, is set in a future where climate change has led to dead zones and lost lands, environmental degradation and civil unrest. The work is speculative fiction, she acknowledges in the second volume, *Year of the Flood*, but "general tendencies and many of the details in it are alarmingly close to fact." Evidence of climate change is widespread throughout the world today, in escalating earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, floods and droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, cyclones, blizzards, tsunamis, landslides, and wildfires. Ozone depletion causing global warming, causing melting polar ice, causing sea level rises, and so on. It gives me a sinking feeling.

Alice Lowe

Musings on Mockingbirds

“The mockingbird’s invention is limitless.

He strews newness about as casually as a god.”

– Annie Dillard

“There you are. At last.” I shout out loud, a cry of glee. Early each year I await the first songs from the mockingbirds that inhabit my San Diego neighborhood. This year, on a Wednesday morning in late January, the unmistakable cheeps and chirrups resound, crisp and clear, from high in a magnolia tree.

Mimus polyglottos, our Northern Mockingbird, means many-tongued mimic. Their presence is year-round throughout the U.S., but mostly in the south. They’re claimed as the state bird of Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas. After a cumulative decline of about 30% between 1966 and 2019, they’re now plentiful, with a global breeding population of 43 million, no longer of conservation concern.

From Albatross to Lark, a series of streets in my neighborhood are alphabetically named for birds. I live between Ibis and Jackdaw. The street after Lark, which by all rights should have been Mockingbird, is Randolph. I don’t know who Randolph was, but I suspect patronage, payback, greasing of wheels.

The Cherokees called the mockingbird cencontlatolly, “four hundred tongues.” In creation myths of the Hopi and other Pueblo tribes, the mockingbird taught the people to speak. Others considered the mockingbird a symbol of intelligence. Mockingbirds are said to be spiritual guides, bearing messages from the universe.

Mockingbirds are gray, with dark and white patches on their wings. They’re not showy, not noted for their looks, but I search treetops, poles,

and wires, often rewarded by the sight of their little bodies vibrating with big sounds. Silent during cold winter months, they burst into their seasonal repertoire at the first signs of spring weather—always early in Southern California—switching to a different songbook in fall, their collective refrains comprising several hundred different sounds. They whistle and screech, chatter and chirp, trill and rasp, mimicking other birds as well as frogs and crickets, cats and dogs, music and machines, sirens and alarms, doorbells and squeaking gates.

In To Kill a Mockingbird, Atticus Finch tells his son: “Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit ‘em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” The accepted interpretation is that mockingbirds symbolize innocence. The idea that it’s ok to kill any birds, misbehaving or not, gives the story a sinister edge. Fortunately, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 doesn’t set up a double standard, judging whether birds are naughty or nice. It protects all migratory birds from being harassed, hunted, captured, killed, eaten.

Every morning I fill terracotta saucers with birdseed for the finches, wrens, sparrows, towhees, and juncos, the crows and doves too, that forage and feed on my canyon-side patio. But mockingbirds rarely visit feeders or eat birdseed. Their diet of insects and berries comes from dense shrubs and fruit trees, or from lawns and open ground, none of which I can provide.

Two traditional songs feature mockingbirds, with numerous variations and adaptations of both over the years. “Listen to the Mockingbird” is a Civil War-era ballad, a bittersweet song about a lost love and the bird that sings at her grave. “Hush Little Baby” is a traditional lullaby that morphed in the sixties into “Mockingbird,” my all-time favorite duet, by Carly Simon and James Taylor.

A group of mockingbirds is an echo, an exactness, a ridicule, a plagiarism (as in plagiarists, word thieves). But whatever they’re called, they must be rare, as I’ve never seen a group of mockingbirds. Pairs keep to themselves during breeding and nesting seasons, sometimes stay together for life, sufficient unto themselves.

Closing windows and inserting earplugs doesn't help during the long spring nights when a mockingbird sings all night, night after night, from a nearby station audible from my bedroom window. These are generally young, unattached males or older ones who have lost their mate. I lie awake, hoping he finds true love soon so I can get a good night's sleep.

Annie Dillard wrote in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* about a mockingbird that she watched dive from a four-story building, opening its wings and flying off just before she thought it would crash to the ground. She recalls the scene to describe acts of grace and beauty in nature.

I don't pipe music, news or podcasts into my ears; the mockingbirds' melodies charm and cheer me; they bring joy, peace, and hope to my daily walks.

ISSUE #3

COVER BY EMILY LORD



Jim Daniels

Growing Garlic

requires no skill. Like imagining wings.
Each fall, I crumble dried seed heads
and fling them casually across the garden

and forget until spring when they rise
tall/thick/green/relentless. Their stalks curl
in on themselves to create another seed pod.

Etcetera! Oh Etcetera, obscure, forgotten
goddess of imaginary wings and real garlic,
you taught me to love stink's eruption

in a backyard the size of the devil's snow angel
in Pittsburgh where we once loved the stink
of money from the mills even though we knew

most of it was not ours and that we'd end up
singing a cappella, jiggling fistfuls of change
at a cigarette machine while the fat-cat choir

laughed all the way, yes, to the bank. Etcetera,
I rub your stink against my own. Etcetera,
the never-ending garlic, impossible to kill.

Pulling apart your cloves, I feel like I'm handling
my own brains. Etcetera, the never-ending sadness.
Stoic of the onion family, strong enough to inhabit

me—breath, pores. Like me, you burrow down.
Unlike you, I'm not coming back, so do your stuff.
Spread your stinky wings.

Jim Daniels

Ode to an Arbousier Tree in Autumn

lights its brilliant red fruit
in surreal haze like the first
slow drops of blood
from your favorite cut.

Resist the impulse to say
they don't belong here.
You just didn't notice
the delicate white flowers

in spring. So tender,
you can't buy them in stores.
They don't travel far.
Those without imagination
call it the strawberry tree.

I have gorged on them for years
but don't even know how
to spell it. Sure, the outside's
dry, tasteless, impossible to peel.

But the inside spills in sweet luscious
sin. One at a time like red punctuation,
momentary gift, spontaneous
stolen kisses.

Brandon Funk

In the Oxbow

Even though there is already too much, this too
is about suffering. Maybe it won't be
about that in time, and this creek will erode
enough of its clay bank to form an oxbow
independent of the riparian plain,
and in that bent, shallow, eutrophic
basin will emerge seemingly new life,
frantic spells of paramecium, tadpoles
among the milfoil and alligator weed,
little mudcats a kid catches and thinks
he's caught a tiny flathead, but in truth
a grown fish that subsists in a kid's world;
and surely there will be eels, slab-sided fellows
unable to reach the Sargasso, living
out their days on the crescent depths
eating silversides with the tacit yellow
pinstripe, schools of green sunfish
evading the eel who the bream have known
as one they could trust, unwavering predator
in the gray-green of the oxbow, mistaken
for a watersnake or cusk, the toothy finless
one northern people call dogfish, and when
a fisherman catches one he craters its skull
or wedges a stick in its jaw to drown it,
all without irony, as no death of a bowfin
ever made a midwesterner feel shame,
who casts back to the weeds for walleye
or specks that live out the August heat
in the oxbow sheltering under plagues

of lily pads wide as dinner jackets, blooming
above their leathery floats back to the mudline;
cattails from the litoral depths in the rear
erect their familiar toasted bulbs,
jutting, they catch currents that stir
the blackbirds with a dash of heart-paint
superior to the trailing wing; how other birds
must revel in their sheer numbers and how
the shot-red patch makes their black reflect
even less than it really does while they flout
themselves about lustily in every wetland,
there above the sandpiper
that emerges carefully onto the mudbank,
gaping at waterbugs and slippery swimmers
with a prominent nib and then slips away
silently like heat into the bush, leaving only
its little tri-pointed tracks in the moister silt;
on some years the oxbow floods
at the rate of its mother flowage, and she
spills new milk into it, and along with it
a few mooneye or pumpkinseed,
a few pernicious wingnuts from a maple,
trees that sprout with the vigor of sperm
in the abiogenic epoch of the satellite,
themselves not so different from frogspawn,
a broad number of them dying in the interest
of the narrow few, chosen only by natural law,
or as rumor would have it, by circumstance.

Michelle Cacho-Negrete

Hallie and Jane

They met in 1968 at The Ripple Natural Foods store and Café and were soon inseparable, the path between their rented cabins at the foot of a Maine mountain trampled flat by their footsteps. Hallie had a three-year-old son nicknamed Punch because he punched things gently as if to test their solidarity. Jane had two sons: five-year-old Aden, a sprite of boundless energy, and seven-year-old Willy as curious as a squirrel. Both women were twenty-four and had transformed living on the financial edge into a virtue; sharing food, clothes from the thrift shops that dotted the area, and sometimes stealing without compunction. Jane sold woven items she made from jute, linen and beads. Hallie sang obscure folk songs at festivals and bars and coffee shops. There was never quite enough to make it, but they always did.

Years later Jane would remember their lives together as though they were myth, the certainty of their relationship to the mountain where they lived, to the trees, to million-year-old boulders that rose around them, but especially the carelessness with which they handled their youth. She envied the absolute rhythm and flow of their lives as though they had belonged to other people she'd known, even understanding that memory can be transform the past into what we wished it to be.

From early spring until Christmas they worked craft shows in played-out little mill towns. Jane reined in her tangled blonde curls with silver-starred bobby pins and wore long velvet dresses whose bodices shimmered with tiny mirrors. Hallie wore tight jeans, scuffed brown boots and embroidered blouses. Her wavy black hair flowed down her back. The solemnity of her closed eyes, quiet face and rich voice endowed every song with importance; Jane believed that Hallie, in her purest musical moments, lifted them both above who they were, two young hippies in a town filled with them. After each show they went to the local pizza parlor to count their earnings.

They spent nearly all their time together: food shopping, clothes washing, cooking. Jane crafted her jewelry to the strum of Hallie's guitar. At night

when the kids slept they burned patchouli incense and smoked dope, the thin sweet smell of both suffusing hair and clothes and the Indian print tapestries thrown over everything. They lit dozens of candles on end tables of crates. In the shadowy fingers of the blue flames they reminisced about growing up; fathers who worked long days, mothers who nagged them, embarrassing moments in high school, minimum-wage jobs they'd hated. They listened to Jefferson Airplane, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, the Grateful Dead, Nick Drake, Janis. They made lists of bourgeois things they'd never ever do: marry for security, treasure a boyfriend more than a girlfriend, eat meat, shop at malls. They sighed about ex-husbands they'd married too early and divorced too late who rarely sent money or saw their children.

They lived seasonally in love with the natural world around them, certain that their lives were made sweeter and more authentic by that world and by each other's companionship; they seemed to agree on everything. In October they picked apples, ironed leaves between wax paper sheets that the kids then strung into mobiles that stained light scarlet and gold, wound smooth river stones in linen thread for necklaces. They made miso soup, grainy bread, stir-fried vegetables, fermented yogurt in jars. At Christmas shows, they handed out cookies they baked and flirted with men they later rebuffed. They gave the kids quarters for chocolates, believing their sons the best things they'd ever created, loving them with an aching awareness of their bodies lengthening and their questions growing wiser

In January they dressed the kids in oversized snowsuits, mismatched mittens, and waterproof boots and dressed snowmen in peace-sign tee shirts, with yarn for dreadlocks. They built snow forts that the setting sun blazed into labyrinths of amethyst and indigo before darkness enveloped the day.

It snowed all of one day in late March, great trembling veils that wrapped everything in white. The kids filled bowls for sugar on snow. They twirled and caught flakes on their tongues, eyelashes cottony and cheeks red. Jane made soup on the woodstove while Hallie boiled down maple syrup in a big iron pot, the rich dramatic scent leaving them ravenous. They trailed thickened amber syrup over frozen white, ate obscene amounts of the brittle sweet strands. They played Candyland and go-fish and read to the kids until they slept. Jane wondered how her life could be so complete. At midnight the snow finally stopped. A full moon hung long shadows over the frosted landscape. They shared a joint, checked the kids, banked the stove, pulled on snowshoes and heavy sweaters and went out to the mountain.

The world was new and dreamy, rising up out of yesterday. Jane's snowshoe caught in a buried root and she fell, trapped until Hallie tugged her to her feet. With the translucent depth of that after-smoking state, when everything is outrageously funny and time is magically suspended, they doubled over in hilarity then continued climbing. The snow muffled an owl's feathery swoop onto some scrambling prey and hollowed the whoosh of their snowshoes. On the hilltop, they looked down at rivers of white-shrouded pine and spruce and balsam. The air was luminous and peaceful and carried the poignant scent of wood-smoke.

"Grace," Hallie whispered, moved by their intimacy with the mountain.

Jane repeated, "Grace." They smiled at each other in the conspiracy of those who travel the wilderness by night. On the way home fine floating mist of breath froze on their faces.

Late April brought impatient buds, little hopeful pockets on the rough thin twigs of the trees. Fields of blue Quaker-Ladies blurred into the horizon. Sometimes one brought a man home while the other baby-sat. They broke each winter's celibacy with the casualness of eating a cheap meal, labeling these men "The one with two gold hoops," or "The one who wore old hiking boots," or "The one with the funny voice," conferring an anonymity upon them that supported the importance of their own relationship.

One afternoon, at an early June craft show, in a field flooded with clover, a man with thick graying hair, tiny gold stud in his ear, Grateful Dead tee-shirt and patched jeans swayed and harmonized with Hallie in a fine tenor voice. She asked him to join her for the final song and tipped her head toward him as she strummed and hit the final high note. He matched her range and they finished with closed eyes. After they were done he took her hand introduced himself as Mesa, asked what they were doing next and if he could join them. Jane was astonished and a little wounded when Hallie agreed, but she smiled and shook his hand as well.

Later in the truck, disquieted by Hallie agreeing he could join them, Jane said lightly, "The one who knew all the obscure songs," but the tone of her voice couldn't conceal her uneasiness.

Hallie laughed and nodded, but there was something in her eyes Jane hadn't seen before.

At the pizza parlor Mesa balanced his chair on two legs.

"I'm thirty-six." He laughed, "But I'm still not an adult. I do odd jobs

like teenagers do, split and haul wood, repair furniture, sand floors, paint.”

Jane thought Mesa’s hands were surprisingly delicate for somebody doing that type of things, fingernails scrupulously clean, and she wondered how much work he actually did. He downed beer after beer, gave the kids quarters for the jukebox, spoke about learning Hallie’s obscure songs in Greenwich Village and Haight-Ashbury and insisted on paying.

“I’m in between jobs and I could give you a hand with anything you need done.” He spoke mostly to Hallie who immediately agreed, “We’ve got a load of firewood to be split,” and avoided Jane’s eyes as she told him where they lived. The next day he drank a six-pack while splitting their wood, telling stories about life in the southwest, attempts to find Che in Cuba, work as a bit player in off-Broadway theatre. The kids played around him noisily, picking up wood chips they glued together to make houses and barns. Jane watched him warily as he spoke mostly to Hallie, making sure to glance at her so she was included. The tilt of his head and slump of his shoulders suggested a weary wisdom about the world that she felt was seductive to Hallie, whose eyes shimmered as she listened, bewitched by his nomadic lifestyle.

The kids slept at Jane’s cabin for three nights.

Jane, voice light, told Hallie, “If he stays a few nights more, he’ll be the one whose name you remember.”

Hallie shrugged but looked away. “No, he’ll be the one who stayed an extra few nights.”

By the end of the week, Mesa was still there and Punch, missing his own bed, went home. Soon Hallie, Masa and Punch spent most of the time together. The dusty windows, frayed tapestries and half-burnt candles of Jane’s cabin seemed poor and sad rather than festive and defiant. Mesa left early each morning to hunt out carpenter work, but his restless presence hovered in empty bottles and dirty shirts on the floor of Hallie’s bedroom when Jane came by.

“The one who never left,” she said and Hallie had no response.

Two weeks later, Jane arrived to find Mesa stashing clothes from a duffel bag into a Salvation Army bureau. “I’m going to set up a workshop in that rundown storage shack, and hook an extension cord to the house for my power tools,” he said and leaned over to kiss Hallie.

While Mesa moved cartons from truck to garage, Jane said, “So he really is the one who never left?”

Hallie shrugged. “He showed up with his stuff. I didn’t know what to say.”

“You say, I’m not ready to do this. I’m not ever going to do this, actually. It’s time for you to go.”

Hallie looked at her then turned away when Mesa called to her, asking for some help in moving a few things.

Jane shouted on her way out, “I’m leaving to get some things done.”

Neither Jane nor Mesa seemed to hear her but Punch asked to come along and the three kids piled into Jane’s old car.

In September, when milkweed blossoms turned to white silk, a man in a crisp cotton shirt and soft wool sports jacket bought a weaving from Jane. His name was Eric and he joined them for pizza, treating the kids to ice cream sundaes. The brusque way Mesa and Eric shook hands suggested an instant mutual contempt. Over dinner, Eric’s mouth twitched impatiently at Mesa’s stories and he glanced often at his watch. Mesa’s shoulders stiffened.

Jane decided to let Eric drive the kids and her home in his truck, telling Hallie with some uncertainty, “See you tomorrow?” Hallie nodded and hugged her, but Jane felt her eyes follow them as they left. Eric’s truck was large, clean and comfortable with leather seats. The kids bounced around on the back seat and he drove up the narrow road. Trees were ragged silhouettes in the bright night and the mountains bit into a creamy moon. The road glistened with pale frost. Eric shyly took her hand, his face stippled in light and shadow from passing cars. She felt lightheaded at his touch. His headlights caught a moose lumbering into the thick woods and they laughed at the kids’ excitement and beamed at each other as though they’d always been together. Jane wondered at her sudden comfort with him, a man who certainly bourgeois, but the kid’s pleasure at the truck and the sheer pleasure of being in a vehicle where her back didn’t hurt was consoling.

Eric drew architectural blueprints for a living. He constructed sturdy new racks for Jane’s displays, drove the four of them to shows, while Hallie and her son went in Mesa’s pick-up. He took Jane and her sons to the movies and dinner, a luxury she’d rarely had money for. His quiet presence was soothing. He moved in a month later, placing folded clothes from two suitcases into a bureau he brought with him.

“The rest of my furniture is in storage for our future,” he told her.

Jane tasted the words “our future” in her mind over and over the next few

weeks, taking tiny bites of it as though it were a bar of chocolate she needed to make last.

Eric worked noon to eight, and mornings after the kids left for school they went back to bed, the sweet rotting scent of fallen apples from the nearby orchard mingling with wood smoke from their fire. They talked about the civil rights movement and Vietnam and how they were different than their parents. They agreed not to smoke dope. Jane heard Mesa's hammer outside accompanying Hallie's strumming like a drum, until the frost no longer melted in the sun and they were forced inside. In the ensuing silence, Jane's conversations with Eric seemed more intense, vibrant as blue silk.

In November, after a show, Mesa said he was tired of pizza and wanted Chinese food. The can of beer in his hand and tilt of his hips as he leaned against the wall of the church where they'd exhibited seemed somehow threatening.

"The kids love pizza," Eric said sharply.

The kids glanced back and forth between the two men puzzled and uneasy. Jane felt disembodied, watching Hallie's lips tremble, her uncertain step towards Mesa as Eric stared steadily at him.

Mesa straightened, tossed his beer can in the trash bucket, glared at Eric and took a step toward him.

Hallie took his arm. "Let's get Chinese food. The kids can go with us or with Jane and Eric."

Mesa nodded, but his backwards glance at Eric was victorious. Jane thought the only people he'd defeated were she and Hallie.

Hallie and Jane continued to do shows together, but often she and Eric went out to eat with either themselves or with the kids.

At the end of winter they filled out entrance forms for the biggest summer shows over breakfast at The Ripple. So much was different in Jane's life, but not The Ripple, an unchanging, beloved monument in this small town. Jane loved being there, the peaceful, steady rhythm of it: James Taylor, The Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan on the phonograph, diners in flannel-lined jeans, triangles of sliced fruit pies and chocolate cake with maple syrup icing. The rich, garlicky scent of bean soup, the Ripple's specialty, dominated the thick steamy air, even in summer. She loved seeing people she knew, exchanging stories about neighbors, talking about rumors that the war was

nearly over.

Jane took a bite of her muffin. "I can barely afford these rising entrance fees," she said, brushing muffin crumbs from her hands.

Hallie nodded, buttered her toast, and said in a very low voice, "I've been thinking I need a part-time job."

Jane looked at her and said in a voice equally low, "Actually, I signed up for a couple of classes at the community college. The kids need so much more than I earn at shows. Eric will switch his hours to take care of the kids when I'm in school. Getting a degree in something seems like the only solution." She signaled the waitress for more coffee.

Hallie was silent a moment then said, "You don't need to convince me it's the best solution, only yourself, and Eric's already done that."

Jane looked at her in astonishment. "I made up my own mind. I could feel the same way about you taking a job." She hesitated a moment, then plunged on, "Or pretending to be surprised about Mesa moving in last year."

Hallie flushed. "At least he's not talking me into doing something as bourgeois as going to college."

"You think taking a part-time job isn't bourgeois?" Jane snapped.

They stared at each other.

"What's happening?" Jane asked very quietly.

"I don't know," Hallie whispered. "But let's stop it."

They clasped hands across the table.

"Grace," Hallie said.

"Grace," Jane whispered, but something in her tilted crazily.

By 1973, their days were filled. Hallie waitressed at the Ripple and Jane interned as a student teacher, though whenever possible they met for lunch. Jane was involved in a peace group, Hallie composing protest songs. Coming in from teaching one afternoon, knowing she'd have to go to the school library and finish a paper, Jane thought that The Ripple seemed the last remnant of her old fading life, a small fragrant outpost of the past she visited whenever possible. Something in her ached and her eyes filled with tears. She spotted Hallie at their usual table, slid into a booth and then reached across the table and took Hallie's hand. "I miss you."

Hallie squeezed her fingers and said quietly, "Me too." She shook her head. "It's Eric and Mesa, isn't it? Mesa keeps saying Eric is pretentious, imagining he's better than Mesa just because he has a job." Her face, chalky

in the shaft of hard winter sun was mournful, her eyes filling with tears.

Jane stared through the filmy white frost coating the windows. “And Eric says Mesa is a drunk who lives off you.”

Her stomach felt queasy, yet some burden seemed lifted, some caution that had grown between Hallie and her so that their words seemed always measured, carefully thought out. She wasn’t sure, however, it was only Eric and Mesa. They seemed to have ignited something in the two of them that had been embers; they were both behaving in a way that their parents might consider responsible and appropriate for two women with children. Indeed, her mother had been thrilled when she said she was going back to school. She sighed; she had once had such a surety about their lives, and now she felt uncertain about everything.

“I don’t know what to do.” She looked at Hallie bleakly.

“I don’t know either,” Hallie whispered. “It just happened.

“No,” Jane told her. “We let it.”

“Let’s take the kids out of school next Thursday morning and do something fun,” Hallie said.

“I can’t,” Jane said. “I have an exam to study for.” She thought of the three women she was meeting at the library. “Next Saturday?” she asked.

“I’m working,” Hallie said.

They were silent then Hallie said, “When school is over and you have more time I’ll take a few days off and we’ll do it then.”

Jane nodded, then lifted her mug of tea and touched it to Hallie’s. “Grace.”

“Grace,” Hallie said.

It barely snowed in February that year, not at all in March. Mud season came early. By April buds had broken on the maple trees. Hallie and Jane, on a rare day off at the same time, paused at the small stream in the woods to watch last fall’s leaves raft the water beneath the newly splintered ice. Jane caught a large, still-scarlet maple leaf and held it up, delicate veins glowing in the chilly white sun. “Winter vanished this year,” she said. “It used to go on till you wanted to get in your car and go somewhere you could see wild flowers growing.”

Hallie nodded then took the leaf and held it over her eyes like a mask. “The world is rose-colored,” she said.

Her hair was carelessly braided, her eyes, when she lowered the leaf,

darkly rimmed. A particular tightness around Hallie's mouth, a weariness to her walk, made Jane sure that there were problems connected to Mesa's drinking. We used to know everything about each other's lives, she thought.

Hallie dropped the leaf into the stream and they watched it float away. "Race you to the park," Jane said.

Hallie took off instantly. Jane laughing, began running and yelled, "No fair. We didn't say ready, set go."

Hallie looked behind and laughed also.

They dropped, panting, onto a bench beside a stand of oaks. Excited toddlers on swings screamed "higher, higher," while chatting mothers complied. A woman they knew from The Ripple nursed her baby on a bench and waved at them. A five or six year old fell off the seesaw and wailing while his mother picked him up and rocked back and forth with him. Jane experienced a particular melancholia in the restless gypsy scent of impending spring. Hallie lit a cigarette she pulled from a crumpled pack and inhaled deeply, then pursed her lips and blew the match out. She offered the pack. Jane, although wanting one, shook her head. They spoke about inconsequential things, laughed about the thick mud on their boots. The spoke then about My Lai, talk of the massacre unavoidable it seemed.

"It's all everyone talks about at The Ripple." Hallie sighed. "Isn't this ever going to end?"

"It has to," Jane said.

They were silent for a while, watching the children swing, the busy mothers wiping noses and zippering jackets their children had opened. Hallie said quietly, "I'm going back to school for a nursing degree. I can get a really good student loan, and some work-study money, and can go part-time and still waitress at the Ripple. The college has a day care center I can count on when Mesa isn't around."

Jane shook her head and said in an equally low voice, "Eric is planning to enroll in graduate school and become an architect. He's been saving for a long time. He says that he's waited long enough and wants me to do my senior year in Boston. He wants to get married."

Hallie crossed her legs and rubbed at the mud on her boot with a twig, then asked, "Do you love him? Truly?" She looked at Jane who, after a moment, nodded.

"Then go." Hallie took a final drag on the cigarette and ground it out under her boot.

"I guess," Jane said. Everything seemed swirling and blurry and in rapid motion.

"OK then," Hallie said.

"OK then," Jane repeated, and felt a deepening sorrow.

Jane and Eric rented a small apartment in a Boston suburb. She felt no let-up from the muggy heat each summer, the blue shade of trees too riddled with lacunae to provide relief. Winters seemed claustrophobic with the high walls of snow and brownstones and narrow streets. Eric graduated and got a position at a well-respected firm. Jane got a social work degree and a job at a public school, timing the birth of their daughter Rachel with summer, when school was out. They bought a large house and took advantage of Boston's cultural scene: concerts, museums, movies, book signings, sculpture gardens, days melting into each other. Jane sometimes felt displaced from her life, wondering where she was, although the feeling came less and less often as she threw herself into work and family.

At first Jane and Hallie spoke every week. Hallie was enjoying school, enjoying the work, happy with both her work-study job at a small hospital in rural Maine, and with the center Punch went to after school.

"We both needed a degree," she said. "Waitressing and craft shows would never help us pay for our sons' college." She laughed. "Remember when that thought would never occur to either of us?"

"I remember," Jane said quietly.

Hallie continued, "I really can't count on either his father or Mesa to help out."

There was a moment of silence then Hallie said, "He's drinking a lot more, can't seem to find any work, but then, he's the town drunk."

"For God's sake Hallie, why are you still living with him?" she blurted.

"I guess I love him," Hallie whispered.

"I'm sorry," Jane said, knowing that there was nothing she could do.

"Listen, when you graduate, why don't you look for a job here in Boston. There are tons of hospitals. You can stay with us."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Hallie.

Their phone calls dropped to once a month and there were times when it went longer than that.

One morning Jane picked up the phone to hear Hallie's Hello. She was about to tell Hallie how happy she was to hear from her and to apologize

for not calling, to say she wouldn't let that happen again, but something in Hallie's voice silenced that. "What's happened?" she asked.

"Mesa's gone. He joined AA last year. I thought it would be great, no more drinking, maybe even a steady job." She paused. "He met a woman there and said that I'd enabled him for years to be a drunk and he couldn't live with me anymore. He wanted to be called by his real name, Ed." Her laugh turned into a sob.

"Come here. Come stay with us for a while," Jane said.

"I can't. Not right now. When I get my finances together I'll come."

"Promise," Jane asked.

"Promise," Hallie agreed, but it never happened.

The blaze of autumn became the wrecked traffic of winter streets and soiled snow, then the spring eruption of azaleas and gliding swan boats in the Boston Common melting into the humid heat of city-summer soon swallowed by the crisp air of yet another fall. The few notes and phone calls between Hallie and Jane had grown hurried, shorter, further apart, then petered out. One afternoon when leaves outside her window-stained light like the kid's long-ago mobiles Jane realized how long it had been and called Hallie's number. A stranger answered. She felt dizzy as she hung up the phone, and dropped to the couch. How could this have happened, she thought, she was once the most important person in my life after the kids. She sat quietly, memories flowing through her, climbing the mountain that snowy night, counting money over pizza dinners, Hallie's truck coughing its way up the mountain.

She finally sighed and stood up. She needed to go to an after school meeting. As she bent to get her purse and jacket she caught sight of herself in the mirror and for a moment was startled. She then stepped closer to her reflection. Her eyes were rimmed with crow's feet, her hair flecked with gray, a certain weariness to her mouth. She thought of a lyric from one of Hallie's songs.

"You'll always be my best friend, Hallie," she whispered, desperately wishing it was still true and believing that in some way it was.

Elisabeth Harrahy

Down in the Bog

On a bed of moss
I long for you, here beside
pink lady slippers

Heather Sager

A Different Street

I let myself look
down a different street.
Clanging spoons
dangle on a tree bough.
A little house with pinkish trim
stands in sundown glow and I see
a brick side of a house,
the warm orange light flickering
on the orange and brown bricks,
shadow shapes moving
from trees blowing in the wind.
I notice a yard's overturned
basketball hoop, painted happy
stones formed in a circle,
and a toppled flower pot
with ages of dirt growing inside.
Pink flowers beam
out of a rusty grate near
someone's lush yard. Two houses
face a stony path between them.
A boy is selling chocolate door-to-door.

C.D. Albin

Ivorybill

Extinct, they say,
despite the folderol
that descended
on swampy Arkansas
some twenty years ago,
reporters hyping the return
of the Lord God Bird.
I envisioned a lonely fowl
secreting among cypress
several counties south,
well back in the Big Woods.
Avian Mohican, I thought,
beautiful bird of doom,
although Audubon sketched
three birds on one trunk,
all pounding staccatos
in common purpose,
every movement
chorused to survival.

April Tierney

Something Ancient

The first autumn of our daughter's life,
my husband shot a deer and an elk,
we were bewildered by our good fortune.
We spent days butchering in the kitchen
while our six month old baby played at our feet,
while friends and neighbors came over to hold her,
play with her, to help wrap the meat, cut the bones,
cradle the heart and liver, sing, tell stories and
shed tears over the two blessed animals/ancestors
that would grant us life for the following year.
I watched the ordinariness of such a thing
as it landed in my daughter's being, how obvious
it was to her that we would participate in the making
of life and death, the offerings, the stripping of hide
from sinew encased flesh, the pungent aroma and
deep red blood on the counter, on her parent's hands
and clothes, the piles of bones, the endless hours of work
and exhaustion, the way grief and gratitude were cousins
chasing one another around the kitchen and falling down
in fits of breathlessness, of wonder, of the truest kind
of ceremony she had ever seen. If we want to eat meat,
this is how it is done, said her tiny, primal body.
If we want to know our humanity, this is also how
it is done. We will not outsource the killing,
we will not pretend death does not exist
when it is the reason we exist.
I saw all of this in the easy way she moved through
those laborious days and I learned something
ancient about my capacity as a Mother.

So, in the second autumn of our daughter's life,
I carried her on my back up and down hills
to the place where my husband knelt
beside the doe he had recently shot—
our friends were standing around the deer's
fallen body too, making offerings and heaving
their sorrow, their praise into the frosty air.
Our daughter watched as her daddy slid his knife
along the length of the doe's soft, brown belly,
as he found a puddle of milk waiting inside,
as dusk settled deeper into that late-November sky,
as he steadied his hands and worked with tears
streaming down his cheeks, as the world stopped
for a time so we could remember our place within it.
And much later on, after we ground the meat,
after we scrubbed the counters and carried the hooves
back out onto the land, after we prayed over those hooves,
after we watched grief and gratitude, those wild cousins,
make a wreckage of our days, we grilled steaks
and sat together at the table, our daughter
eagerly reaching for the plate, her hands so open,
so new, reaching over and over again from the plate
to her mouth, like a ritual, like she understood
what all the sorrow and effort was for
like she had seen the body of this animal,
the bones and the blood, like she would not
stop eating until she felt our ancestor
stand up and leap inside of her.

Mary Ellen Shaughan

January 1st , 47°, sunny, with a breeze

My old dog, Zeke, and I often
walk along our rural road.
Even without motor traffic, it is never silent.
Today 100-foot trees on either side of the
road bend and sway, brushing fingertips,
whispering to each other like a circle
of old women at a sewing bee.
Every few minutes, someone drops
a needle, which lands silently
on the plush carpet far below.

Mary Ellen Shaughan

Summer Leaves Us

grieving for lost light, lost sun, lost heat,
wanting to curl into ourselves
like the fiddleheads we found
at the edge of the woods
all those many months ago,
or like the unborn child
you carried before the deluge, the flood, the blood,
before the universe re-claimed him,
leaving us with empty arms, empty hearts, empty hands
opening and closing, grasping, swimming
through the vacuum he was meant to fill,
passing each other time after time,
unrecognized and unrecognizable,
strangers on the leaf-strewn path leading to winter.

A CONVERSATION WITH D.D. JOHNSON

It's funny, the details that shine through remembering days gone by. Simple truths and oddities others involved have long forgotten, details that seem trivial, even to you—but there they are. I like to believe I can recall the important details, but I think the truth of it is what we remember most vividly are the times we were most present. The fact is, we aren't always present, and that's too bad because how quickly the moment is gone.

Carroll Johnson was a local legend, a World War II Purple Heart recipient who survived the Battle of the Bulge and returned to White Church, Missouri a bonafide hero. He didn't have the biggest farm around, but it was quite a sprawling operation as far as family farms go. He was a hard worker who farmed well into his nineties, a man who demanded respect by his actions alone—a lost art, if you ask me. I had the pleasure of knowing him on a personal basis. He was a dear family friend. Hell, he was family. When I think of Carroll, I remember his laugh. His Cardinals baseball cap. Driving past the farm and seeing him and his trusty border collie sidekick doing chores, a never-ending line of cows following them to the feeding troughs. Or seeing Carroll and his entire family working all those cattle together, running them through the chute and giving them shots and what have you. Carroll was always out there doing something.

Coincidentally, he and I shared the same birthday. We even celebrated birthdays together on many occasions. Probably my fondest memory is my twenty-fifth. I was born in '91. Carroll was born in '25. In 2016, when I turned 25, Carroll turned 91. Cue the Twilight Zone music. There was an odd continuity. Most recently, I had the pleasure of sharing number 33 with Carroll, who turned 99 that day. Once again, I didn't and don't know what to make of the synchronicity in that, but I do know one thing: already that memory has begun to get away from me, too. Again: how quickly. My eyes must be playing tricks on me, because out across the field I can see 34 in a clearing on the hill, and for the first time I won't have the option of celebrating with my birthday buddy. Rest in peace, old friend. Your work is finally over.



JW: *Your father, Carroll Johnson, was a farmer and naturalist all his life, a hardworking man who never took a day off and continued farming until he was ninety-five years old. What was it like growing up cattle farming?*

DD: I could say it was a lot of hard work, but for me it wasn't. I mean, I did my share, don't get me wrong, but mom and dad, they took care of the "hard" work. [And the thing was,] the "farm" was more of an extra income. Most of the family had day jobs, but farming was a way of life. By the time I was old enough to really take part, yeah, our operation was a little larger scale, but we had better equipment and the whole process was easier on everybody's backs. And my mom and dad built it up to that. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was learning. That's all I've ever done. And that's what every parent's goal is. I owe it all to them.

JW: *Farming must be incredibly rewarding. In many ways, it's a lost art. Maybe I read too many science fiction books, but I foresee a not-so-far-off future where the average American will be forced to relearn such skills or go hungry, or go without. Heck, already groceries are borderline unaffordable for people who work full-time jobs, and that's just wrong. And yet, taking up farming isn't exactly a viable alternative for most people—and even if it was, it can't be easy. You can't call in sick. I imagine you don't really get days off. What's a day in the life like?*

DD: It's hard to explain. You can be raised on a farm and not be a "farmer." You've got to want it. Some people would think going out in January and

February when the wind is blowing thirty miles an hour and it's twenty degrees outside, a lot of people would think that sounds like a horrible morning. But it ain't that bad. And that's the hardest thing about it: a lot of the time the hardest work is when the weather is the worst. You're putting out hay in the winter and putting it away in the summer when it's a hundred degrees and eighty percent humidity. [Laughs.] I'm not saying I ever get all fired up and say, "Let's go work hay today! Woo!"—but it's just one of those things you've got to do. It's part of it.

But, yeah, like everything, it's got its good and bad. Like, you know, say a cow has a stillborn; one reaction might be to get all down about it. But, at the end of the day, that's part of farming. A few days later, a cow will be having trouble and you'll have to pull a calf, and it'll all work out fine that time. That's one thing about farming: you get to see it all, life and death. It gives you a sense of pride to pull a calf and save a cow. Or to give a sick cow a shot and come back the next day and see it's doing better.

[As for the point about groceries:] It might be kind of a conspiracy theory, but I worry about the government wanting to control and get rid of the small farmers, to make people dependent on the Tysons and Cargills of the world. What better way to control the people than to control the food. How many people could survive without grocery stores? Even if it was possible to go out and find food in the wild every day like it used to be, the majority of people couldn't.

JW: *In one of my favorite novels, Valis by Philip K. Dick, the point is made that the English word "idiot" is derived from the Greek root meaning "private" and PKD goes on to suggest that a major problem with the world is how private we've become in the modern age, cut off from others. And this was before the internet. Nowadays, the cutting off has become more or less complete, and not only do we not know how to grow our own food; the average person doesn't know how to do much of anything on their own. You mentioned how your father, Carroll, and pretty much every one of that generation, back then, people had to know how to do everything that might come up in day-to-day life themselves, and to be able to think on their feet. It seems to me a bad omen that, nowadays, not only do people not know how to grow their own food or change a tire or pay their taxes, (etc., etc.), but, these*

days, we don't even have to ask anybody about it; we just ask good ol' Google. Tell us a little bit about life before the internet and cell phones.

DD: Life was slower. There was a lot more sitting on the front porch and talking face-to-face. Driving five miles-an-hour down the dirt road. You and me, you know, we'll drive down the dirt road twenty-five, thirty miles an hour or faster, getting where we're going... We've got to get to the store. We've got to get back. We've got places to be, and we're getting there, you know? But back then, old timers would be rolling down the road five miles-an-hour, not in any kind of a hurry, and they'd see everything. If you saw somebody at home sitting on the porch, you'd stop in and see them, sit and talk. Get the news, the latest. Shoot the breeze. It was a slower pace, but it was easier to be in the present. You don't see a lot of that anymore.

Back then it was more like Paul Harvey's "God Made a Farmer". You know, you'd get up before dawn, do all the chores, put in a day's work, and then, at night, you'd go to a school board meeting or something. Not anymore. At least, not me. [Laughs.] But, yeah, there was more involvement on everybody's part, for one thing.

I don't know if everybody's more private, but there's definitely a lot more hate. That's the problem with the world: there's so much hate. Funny how it's so much easier to hate than to love.

JW: *That's a super interesting point: that it's so much easier to hate than to love. I can't help drawing comparisons to how it's so much easier, nutritionally, to eat poorly, or to passively take in bad ideas than to think for one's self. It's sort of a universal truth that the right thing to do is often the harder thing to do. Speaking of, it's no stretch of the imagination to consider how much harder living was only fifty years ago, especially country living. Living so far out of town with or without landline phones and so many other amenities, I imagine there was a lot more dependency on neighbors and good will back then, as well as bartering and trading?*

DD: I got in on trading labor. A certain group of men—dad, Lee Dixon, Elmer Holloway, Uncle Darrel; there were some others, but anyway—if somebody ever got down and out, these guys would always get together and do whatever

had to be done. Like, you know, back in those days everybody burned wood. If something happened in the wintertime, somebody got hurt or sick and couldn't provide for themselves or their family, these guys would get together and go cut a winter's worth of wood for them. I mean, it sounds like a lot, but get enough guys together and it could be done in a day or two. Anyway, I got in on a lot of that. And yeah, we'd trade beef for pork or services for labor. And so on.

There were a lot of parties in the fall, after harvest time. Before my time, there were a lot of dances, but when I was growing up it was card parties. We'd go to somebody's house every weekend on Saturday nights. All the kids would be more or less the same age. Randy, Rexel, Anthony... And all the families, they'd bring whatever they had to pitch in. You know, we were a community.

JW: *You're an avid hunter, too. How does that factor into farming? I imagine there's kind of an overall sense of conservation involved that maybe other farmers who don't hunt don't think about?*

DD: You see a lot of people nowadays overstocking their farms, for one thing. Or they want it all cleared off and looking pretty and to have their fence rows perfect [and that seems to take precedence for them]. Probably a lot of people riding by my place think I could do a little more. [I could spend tons of time fixing fence, God knows I have,] but the rabbits and quail and all thank me. Most farmers have gotten away from the conservation aspect of it. But you can have both. And many people do. You see it. Maybe not as often, but you see it. And it's encouraging when you do.

AUTHORS

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had about 500 stories and poems published so far, and ten books. Ed works the other side of writing at *Bewildering Stories* where he manages a posse of seven review editors, and as lead editor at *Scribes Micro*.

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Ed Ruzicka's most recent book of poems *My Life in Cars* investigates the rocky marriage of desire to the American highway. His next book, *Squalls* (Kelsay Books) is due out early next year. Ed's poems have appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, *Rattle*, *Canary*, the *Xavier Review* and many other literary publications. Ed lives with his wife, Renee, in Baton Rouge, LA.

Chuck Rybak lives in Wisconsin and is currently a Professor of English, Writing, and Humanities at the University of Wisconsin—Green Bay. He is the author of two chapbooks and two full-length collections of poetry. Chuck also writes on Substack as The Declining Academic.

Heather Sager lives in Illinois where she writes poetry and fiction. Most recently, she has contributed poetry to *The Dawntreader*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Bending Genres*, *Does It Have Pockets?*, *The Stray Branch*, *The Nature of Things* (Lone Mountain Literary Society), and more journals.

CLS Sandoval, PhD (she/her) is a pushcart nominated writer and communication professor with accolades in film, academia, and creative writing who speaks, signs, acts, publishes, sings, performs, writes, paints, teaches and rarely relaxes. She's presented at communication conferences, served as a poetry and flash editor, published 15 academic articles, two academic books, three full-length literary collections, three chapbooks, and both flash and poetry pieces in literary journals, recently including *Opiate Magazine*, *The Journal of Radical Wonder*, and *A Moon of One's Own*. She is raising her daughter, son, and dog with her husband in Walnut, CA.

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 wishes 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.

Mary Ellen Shaughan is a transplanted Iowan who now lives in the hills of Western Massachusetts. She writes fiction, memoir and poetry, and is nearly always surprised – sometimes happily – by what comes out of her pen. Her writing has appeared in numerous journals, and her first book of poetry, *Home Grown*, is available on Amazon.

Eric Fisher Stone is a poet and writing tutor from Fort Worth, Texas. He received an MFA in writing and the environment from Iowa State University. His publications include three full-length collections of poetry: *The Providence of Grass*, from Chatter House Press, *Animal Joy*, from WordTech Editions, and *Bear Lexicon*, from Clare Songbirds Publishing House.

Autumn Thomas (she/they) is a young queer poet from the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. After receiving her Bachelor's from Hollins University, they travelled 3,000 miles to Skull Valley, Arizona. There, she is working as a cowgirl while writing and continuing the art of observation. Their most recent work can be read in *Active Muse*, *Exist Otherwise*, *Belt Magazine*, *The Hunger*, and *Cleaver Magazine*.

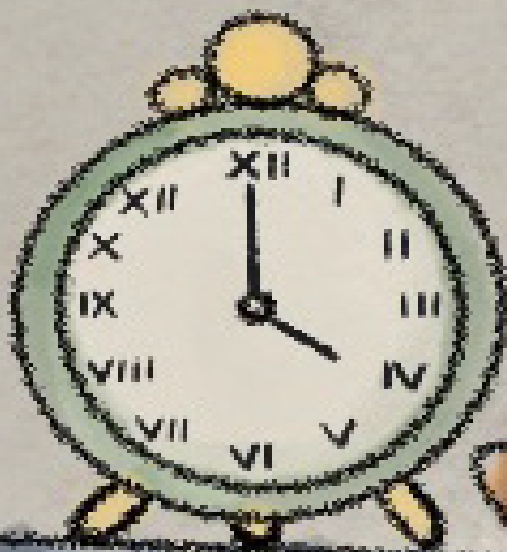
April Tierney is a poet, activist, craftswoman, mother, and lover of stories. She is the author of three full length collections of poetry, including *Memory Keeper* (Wayfarer Books 2022), and a contributor to several anthologies. She has been featured in *Orion*, *Deep Times: A Journal of the Work that Reconnects*, *The Wayfarer Magazine*, and *Real Ground Journal*, among others. April lives in Lyons, Colorado with her husband, young daughter, mischievous dog, and wide web of kin. For more information visit www.apriltierney.com.

Angela Townsend is the Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary. She graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Chautauqua*, *Paris Lit Up*, *The Penn Review*, *The Razor*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and *The Westchester Review*, among others. She is a Best Spiritual Literature nominee. Angie has lived with Type 1 diabetes for 33 years, laughs with her poet mother every morning, and loves life affectionately. She lives just outside Philadelphia with two shaggy comets disguised as cats.

Gaby Zabar is a writer who lives in Southern California. Find her on the internet at gabyzabar.com.

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Maddie Downie
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CLS Sandoval
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Tyler Bueno
D.D. Johnson



THE
WATER
AND THE
GILLS

