



# **INSCAPE**

**FALL 2023**

**INSCAPE #43.2**  
**Fall 2023**

*Front cover by James Reade Venable*  
*“Blood Chapel”*  
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Inscape is the inward quality of objects and events as they are perceived by the joined observation and introspection of a poet, who in turn embodies them in unique poetic forms.

—*Gerard Manley Hopkins*



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

"All things are possible to him that believeth." —Mark 9:23

"The questions of the meaning of living and the cosmos are just that, true questions, posed by . . . the linguistic, 'moral, believing animal,' who consciously and in reality encounters and raises them. These true questions inescapably entail dialogue with others and creative engagement with their experiences and with one's existential experiences. This is the way in which meaning is made and is artful and poetic." —Lori Branch, "Beauty and Belief"

We all believe in something, we have to believe in something, otherwise what keeps us going, really, at the end of the day, in the twists and turns and ups and downs and heartbreaks and heart stops of day-to-day living; this is what I tell myself, what you tell yourself, what he or she and they and we all tell ourselves, whenever the clock stops, or the eyes close, or the screen turns black. What keeps us going? Well, the answer might be the blood chapel at the end of the drive, or the weeping Jesus when the baby's heart stops, or the hope of a baby when none seem to grow, or a collection of hearts, or the flowers in the garden, or an eerie view of a mountain shelf, or a day of reckoning when the newspaper hits the front stoop, or a grandmother's gift, or the chance of getting out, or the hope of a man, his arms spread over a gilded cross, the hope of Him.



What is belief? What do we—you and I and me and they—believe in?

That's what this issue of Inscape's about.

—Mikayla Johnson, December 2023

## **EVEN JESUS ASKED WHERE GOD WAS**

*by* Renee Emerson

Each week the technician presses the wand across my womb. I know better than to ask for interpretations, the half-heart still flickering, a bird's wing caught in a trap. Cells multiply slowly, turn aside docile as winter leaves. I throw away my harp, no longer interested in what God knows. If I would just be more grateful, says the pastor's wife, tears in her heaven-blue eyes, for what I have. Measured footsteps of doctors stalk the off-white halls. The fetal echo lights up red and blue where there should be nothing, but no one speaks to me, no longer a woman who has never had anything happen, who can rest her hands on herself, and expect nothing but goodness and mercy all the days of her life.



## BUCK FEVER

by

William Musgrove

Terry shook. In the distance, the imaginary image of his first buck grazed on the top of whiskey bottles. Beer foam covered his top lip like a milk mustache, making him look older. His trembling hands brought up an imaginary rifle, and he closed one eye. As I wished for my own story, he pulled the trigger.

Boom.

The sound of a pretend gunshot.

Terry tapped the side of his neck, signifying where the round entered the buck, which was now fleeing past the neon Budweiser sign.

“When it’s your first, you get the shakes,” Terry said before taking another sip of his beer. “It was at least a ten-pointer, but we never found it.”

I didn’t have a story. You weren’t anyone without a story. Not any story. No, you needed a story that killed something while also killing a part of yourself. Where I come from, life’s a hell of a lot easier if you kill a part of yourself, so everyone walks around with pieces missing.

Otherwise, you can’t trudge through the mud. You realize you’re standing in mud and sink to the bottom, stuck.

I excused myself and followed Terry’s buck through the exit, thought if I saw how it ended I’d be able to begin. Ten-pointer,

ten-pointer, ten-pointer, my boots said as they kissed the concrete floor. Outside, I smelled freshly cut grass, the sweet, nostalgic scent of nowhere, a distress signal to the surrounding vegetation.

Terry's buck sprinted across the dive bar's parking lot, and I formed fleshy antlers with my fingers. As a kid, I thought deer were modern-day dragons. Stories upon stories of orange-vested knights thinning the herd of white-tailed monsters. Now, watching Terry's buck gallop across the street, I understood why they were hunted: Dragons could fly.

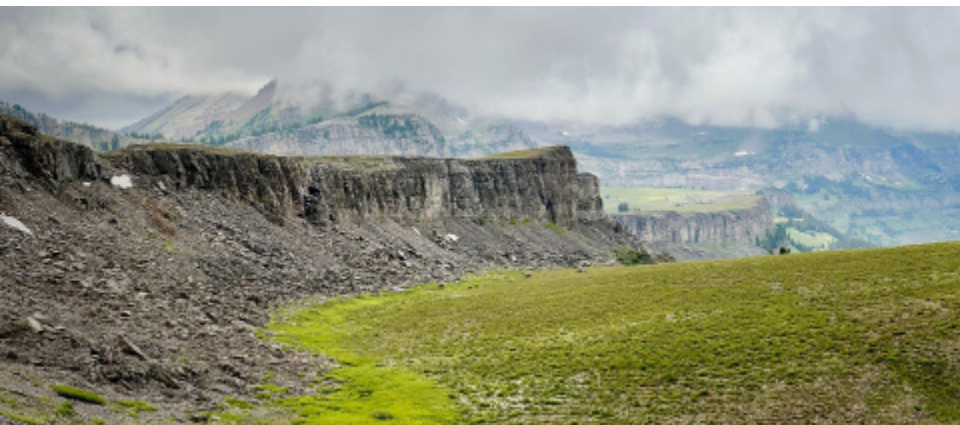
Terry's buck collapsed in front of the out-of-business hardware store. It looked so far away. By the time I made it to the other side of the pavement, I'd be old and frail. Here always seems so large, and there always seems so small, like a pinpoint holding up a mountain range.

I stepped off the curb, and Terry's buck, curled up like a croissant, started breathing hard.

Ten-pointer, ten-pointer, ten-pointer, his snout said, snot oozing from his nostrils. I took another step, and Terry's buck popped up, took aim at this place, and dashed into the sky. He kept going and going, a piece missing from his neck but still whole enough to shrink into a tan speck rounding the horizon and disappear.

Boom.

The sound of another step.









## **A BLEEDING BODY**

*by*

**Natalie Serber**

### **one**

The ponytailed girl runs through a green park in white jeans. The camera focuses on her backside. She can wear white even that time of the month. She winks and turns a cartwheel. I don't yet have that time of the month, but I ask my mother to buy me kotex to keep in my drawer, so I'll be armed when the day comes. The kotex remains in my drawer for two years, unopened.

### **two**

The driver swung open the door and we tramped off the bus. Me, Alice, the Queen of Hearts, and the Caterpillar with her hookah. First graders sat on the gym floor in front of the risers. I was the white rabbit, scurrying across the stage, checking a cardboard pocket watch, muttering, "I'm late."

I twitched my whiskers in the trial scene, when cramps, like an umbrella flaring open again and again, were suddenly real. My fretting was real. The gush was real. My white costume bloomed scarlet.

Because the stain down my leg had to be disguised, the Cheshire Cat and I devised a plan backstage. A fake fight in the parking lot. We screamed at each other. She pushed me into the mud. At fourteen,

I believed cruelty, jealousy and pettiness were less shameful than having a body that bled.

### **three**

He snuck me in, drunk, late, sloppily shushing through the dark living room, past his mother's plastic-covered sofa to his bedroom. I think we had sex. And then slept hard. In the morning, the sheets ... I said nothing.

I slithered into my clothes and reverse-crept toward the front door. This time past his mother, home from the canning factory, her hair still in a net, cigarette jammed between her beet-stained fingers, black coffee, a cup and saucer. My smile was feeble. Her non-smile a force.

As if the smear on his sheets were not enough, my lipstick, hairbrush, French vocabulary cards, diaphragm case, and tampons—the contents of my purse, were strewn across the lawn like a comet tail. Apparently I'd spilled it when we traipsed in the night before. I liked this boy. But I quit him before his mom, who watched me from the window, could call me a tramp.

### **four**

I was late again. Five days. Seven days. Ten days. At Planned Parenthood I waited in an orange chair bolted to the floor. All my friends had been at least once. Soon we'd go to Longs Drugs and pee on a stick, but not yet. Now we filled a cup with a clean catch and waited, reading the pamphlet titles, *Herpes*, *Prenatal Care*, *Breast Health*.

Her face seemed too kind when she called my name, as if she needed to soften a blow. “Negative.” I exhaled. “I see by your chart this is the third time you’ve been in for a test. Are you using protection?” It broke, I lied. I forgot the spermicide, I lied. “Sweetheart,” the woman leaning her hip against the exam table said to me, “are you sure you’re ready to be sexually active? Are you afraid to say no?” I didn’t understand. Weren’t all women afraid to say no?

**five**

There was turbulence and the fasten seatbelt light flicked on. I was twenty-three and somehow confident in my pencil skirt, on my first business trip. I had to pee. When the flight attendant told me to return to my seat, I stared him down. “I’m having a menstrual emergency,” I lied, and he stepped aside.

**six**

After babies ... a long and happy pause.

**seven**

From our bedroom floor I told him, No, I’ll be fine. Let’s wait. The kids are asleep.

The menstrual pains ripped me in half again. I was quartered, eighthed, sixteenthed, made into confetti. I clutched a worthless heating pad until light finally cracked the horizon and my husband pulled me up. We left a note on the kitchen table for our kids to call us when they woke.

Before the relief the nurse examined my prescription record. He asked my husband, “Does she regularly use drugs?”

“You mean Advil?” my husband said.

The nurse asked me, “Could I assign a number to my pain?”

Thirty-three times twelve, the number of years I’d had my period multiplied by once a month, minus two pregnancies.

He gave me a gown, a bed, and started an IV just in case. He spurted my abdomen with warm goo and ran the ultrasound transducer over my skin like a vacuum cleaner. He slicked goo on a wand. I flinched when he probed my vagina, another stranger’s hand gripped my knee, holding me still. Finally, after three hours, satisfied that I was not lying, that I had no twisted ovary, he hovered inches from my face while he injected morphine into my IV line. My entire body calmed. My face stilled. “Well,” he said as if he’d invented pain killers, “she’s not in pain anymore.”

## **eight**

After my first chemo infusion, the bloody noses were robust, bright as a good cut of raw steak, seeping all the way through my pillow. In the morning, in the mirror, I looked like a crime scene. The hair I still had matted, my skin crusty with dried blood.

During my second infusion, I dragged the IV pole into the bathroom

and found a meek smear in my underpants. It felt like another joke from my body. I'd done my part, exercised, eaten well, nursed my babies ... and yet I had breast cancer and now my period too?

But the trickle of rusty blood was inconsequential, nearly transparent, a second thought. It appeared like a dusty stray from beneath a hedge, ribs showing, meow faint, dragging a reluctant tail. I felt an overwhelming tenderness. I wanted to hug my poor, exhausted reproductive system. This was a feeble last stand. A wisp.

### **nine**

Skin on my knees sags. My upper arms crepe. Fat from here relocates to a less flattering there. Suddenly I'm not *\*hot\** but simply hot. I yank off my sweater. I am no longer dewy with youth, but I'm moist, sweat on my upper lip, beneath my eyes. I wake in the night and can't go back to sleep.

Also I no longer worry I'll stain my pants or the bedding (accept with coffee). I won't suffer the discomfort of a tampon, half in and half out, won't accidentally clog the plumbing with feminine hygiene products. I won't swallow Advil at six-hour intervals four days a month.

Because my hair is gray, I am invisible in the world. I am free—to say no, to say yes. I'm sorry, what's a tramp? Wait, I'm not sorry. I refuse to apologize for myself. I refuse to be embarrassed for having a body that no longer bleeds. Every day belongs to me. It is like being seven again. I can wear white pants any day of the month, turn as many cartwheels as I wish.





## TEENY TINY

by

Jessica Mohsen-Crellin

I have teeny, tiny plants that sit on my crooked windowsill. Speckled in sunlight and basking in the dirt, these teeny, tiny plants never seem to grow. They never seem to stretch their neck or widen their reach. They just sit there, remaining teeny and tiny, and on my crooked windowsill.

One day, I moved one of the teeny, tiny plants. I pulled it away from the crooked windowsill, away from the speckled sunlight, and everything I thought it needed, to fill a space on the shelf above my television. Within a few weeks, that teeny, tiny plant had doubled in size. A single stem had shot upwards and slowly unfurled, revealing dozens of new leaves, and ceasing this teeny, tiny plant from remaining teeny, tiny.

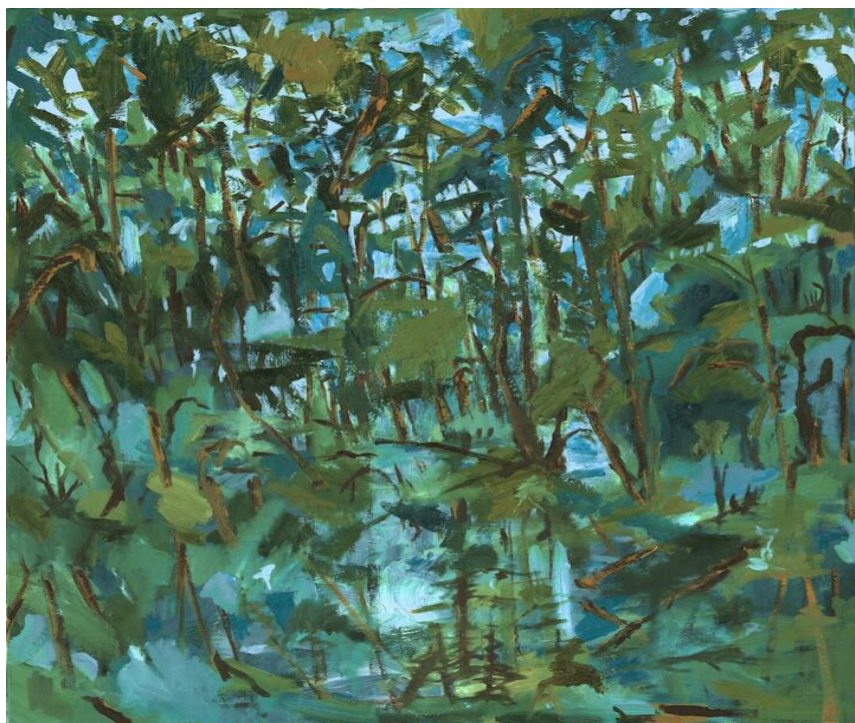
Apparently not all plants need all the sunshine all the time. Apparently, the absence of sunshine can force some plants to grow even faster in order to expand themselves to be more capable of absorbing the limited sunshine they do receive.

I resist the urge to make a metaphor, to compare myself—my empty, swollen stomach, the unnecessary stretch marks that pucker across my lower abdomen, the ache in my back that reaches up into my

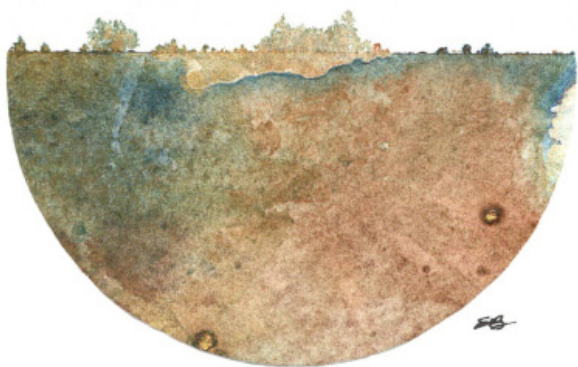


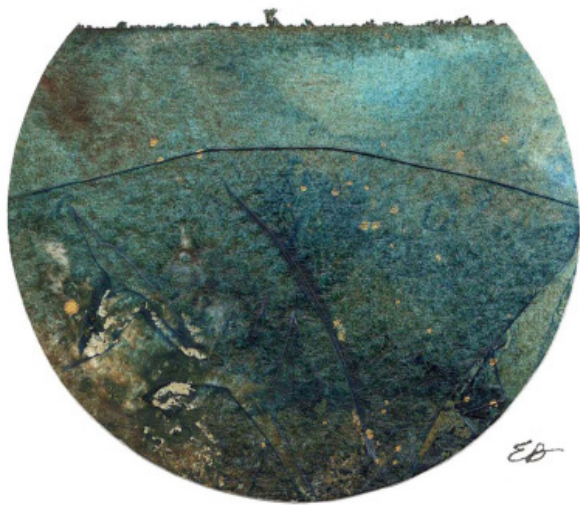
throat, grasping for its life and choking out the breath, the pooling of thick, clotted blood between my legs—to a plant, to tell myself that perhaps the darkness is ok, that my body is just becoming more prepared to let in the light.

.









## TRESTLES

by Jared Swensen

The sun melts into sea, painting  
hills of warm poppies  
on open sky.

Gulls glide through color in strings  
of silhouetted wings  
half-spread.

While Hope sings Halah in my head, waves  
churn white and then extend  
too thin over sand.

She kneels by the shore and she breaks  
a branch of smooth driftwood  
in a worn hand.

I think it will always be like this. I think God  
will give us nothing but nets  
and pure water.







## **BONE MAGIC**

*by*

**Ilse Eskelsen**

Magic lived in my grandmother's hip. Her left hip, deep down in the bone, in the bit that bordered her thigh.

She said she felt it like a hot pulse. Like a smoldering drum. Bum pah pah, bum pah pah. That was magic.

Other grandmothers knew in their knee joints or their wrist bones or their ankles when it was going to rain. My grandmother knew in her hip when the next-door neighbor was going to get diagnosed with liver cancer. She knew what the ladybugs were whispering as they roamed over the pot of alfalfa that sat on her windowsill. She knew how to use the alfalfa to cure the liver cancer, and she knew the neighbor wasn't going to be interested.

She made the poultice anyway and left it on his porch with a nice note and a plate of brownies. The neighbor returned both the poultice and the brownies with an equally nice note and a hotel Bible.

I always thought that part was funny because my grandmother was quite possibly the most God-fearing person I knew. John and Susannah sometimes attended one of those churches that came with a drum kit and a youth pastor, mostly because they felt that children ought to grow up with a moral system. My grandmother, however, was a proper Baptist. She went twice a week, every week.

I wasn't even sure if Baptists could go twice a week, but she did. Sometimes, I imagined her in the little chapel with the pale wood pews and the pale wood walls and the pale wood cross at the front, sitting alone in the stained-glass dimness, one hand tracing a verse in her red leather Bible, the other on her hip. Her left hip, the bit that bordered her thigh.

I joined her at church most Sundays, bicycling over in the mornings while the rest of my house drowsed. My grandmother fed me turkey bacon breakfasts with poppyseed muffins the size of both my fists, then shooed me upstairs to shower and put on one of my mother's old dresses. The whole day, I would smell like her homemade shampoo and hard soap—lemon and ginger and something faintly vegetable—and look like an eighties-style pioneer girl, two wet French braids flopping down my back. My mother had done her hair that way when she was my age. Sometimes I thought my grandmother forgot I was my own and not a newer, younger version of my mother.

After church, we tended to the garden. My grandmother always called it "tending," which had something to do with her romantic vocabulary and something to do with the way she would press two fingers to her hip after watering the azaleas. Her left hip. The bit that bordered her thigh.

I did what she termed the "back-breaking work," which for a long time meant mainly weeding and wrangling the hose. Later, though, as I got bigger and she got smaller, she had me doing the little things, too, until she would sit in a plastic lawn chair and watch me tend her garden for hours at a time.

It was possible she was getting weaker. But part of me thought it might be punishment for no longer fitting into most of my mother's

dresses.

In the evenings, while John flipped vegan burgers for the kids back home and Susannah assembled delicate salads, my grandmother drew warm strings of meat from the crock pot and served them with thick buttered bread. While we ate, she would tell me about her life, cities she'd lived in and jobs she'd worked and children she'd buried. And sometimes, sometimes, if I was lucky, she'd tell me about the magic. The logic of a potion, the framework of a spell, the architecture of a curse. Dreams she'd had and runes she'd cast and miracles she'd made.

Most things, though, I learned from implication. From experience.

Magic was a faint scent of fennel drifting from the locked-up master bathroom. It was strange chalked shapes she made me draw on the cellar floor. It was cold wind against a candle that refused to go out, soft frost on green grass in the middle of summer, the vital, never-ending throb in my grandmother's hip. Bum pah pah, bum pah pah. Hot pulse and smoldering drum.

It was how she knew she was dying.

I was washing the dishes after dinner, looking out the window at the six o'clock dusk, putting off the bike ride home. My grandmother sat at the table, head bowed over her clasped hands.

I thought she was praying, but then she said, "Oh, let that alone. Come. I'll paint your nails."

Relieved, I joined her at the table and extended my hands. She had a pot of pearl-pink polish set out already and the glossy topcoat, too. My grandmother drew the brush from the pot with intense caution. Her fingers shook. I flinched as drops of polish stained the tablecloth and the skin of my fingers like bubblegum blood.

"Your mother loved this color," she murmured.

I watched her paint my fingers pink and made a noncommittal sound deep in my throat.

"Your mother was a witch, you know."

"Like you?"

She reached my pinkie finger, striped it with color, and sighed. "Better."

I frowned. "John says the two of you didn't get along."

My grandmother replied, "Well, your father's always been a liar."

She did not say that that particular comment had been a lie.

"Why do you always bring her up?" I asked, a little annoyed at what she'd said, though I knew she wasn't wrong.

My grandmother moved to my other hand. "Because you were supposed to be like her."

I snatched back my hand. The interrupted brush trailed polish on the tablecloth. "Grandma, I'm my own person."

Calmly, she replied, "I know. You didn't let me finish."

I waited.

"You were supposed to be like her," she repeated. "Better than me."

Oh.

I thought about the potions, the spells, the curses. The dreams and the miracles. The burn in her bone.

Magic lived in my grandmother's hip, but it didn't live in her only granddaughter at all.

"I should go home," I said, so conscious of my mundane self, my common-made flesh. "John and Susannah will be getting worried."

This was a lie, a lie because despite everything she'd taught me and everything I wanted to be, I couldn't help but take after my father.

“Let me finish your nails,” my grandmother said.

I let her because I loved her and because I knew she forgave me for never being the thing she’d lost. When I left, I kissed her cheek and waved goodbye to the ladybugs on the alfalfa.

The next day, we learned she’d had a heart attack and died on her bedroom carpet.

I sat at the end of a pale wood pew at her funeral, a red leather Bible on my lap. I wore a black dress that had belonged to my mother. My nails were painted a pearly pink.

A week later, I let myself into her house to tend the garden. The bottles of nail polish still sat on the kitchen table beside a candle that had not gone out. I put the polish in my pocket and saw, with some surprise, a package wrapped in brown paper, labeled with my name. It had been left in the spot where I usually set my plate.

I unwrapped the package with intense caution. My fingers shook.

Inside was a hip bone, bleached white and all clean. It smelled like lemon and ginger and something faintly vegetable.

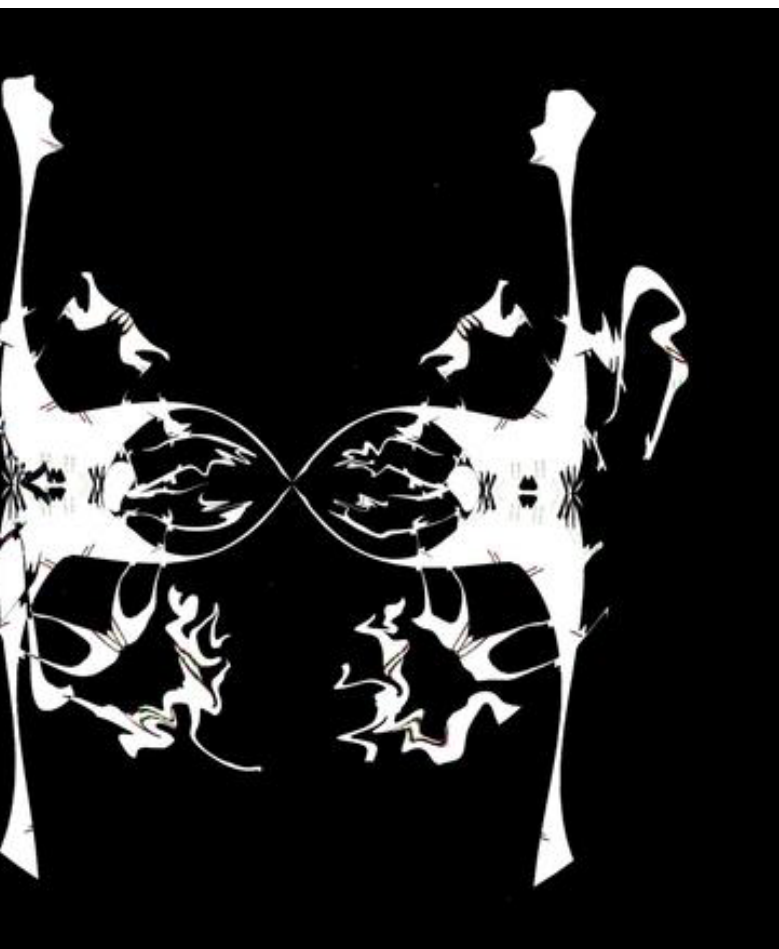
It was a left hip, and deep down in the bone, in the bit that would’ve bordered the thigh, I heard or felt or knew a throb. A hot pulse. A smoldering drumbeat.

Bum pah pah, bum pah pah.

Magic.









## POEM FOR MY WIFE, CHRISTINA, ON OUR EIGHTH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

by Dante Di Stefano

You're awake in the kitchen  
and I've just gotten up in  
the bedroom. The children are  
sleeping still in their separate  
rooms. Soon, we'll all start our day

together. Our daughter will  
scribble fire on looseleaf as  
our son crawls across the floor,  
which our daughter will say is  
lava, but which doesn't burn

her brother because he is  
a fireproof baby-vampire,  
she says, and I'm a daddy-  
vampire, and you're a mommy-  
witch, and the dog's a werewolf.

And everything is magic  
on this ordinary day  
in early August, although we  
don't note it. And toward dark,  
I will plant a tree for you.

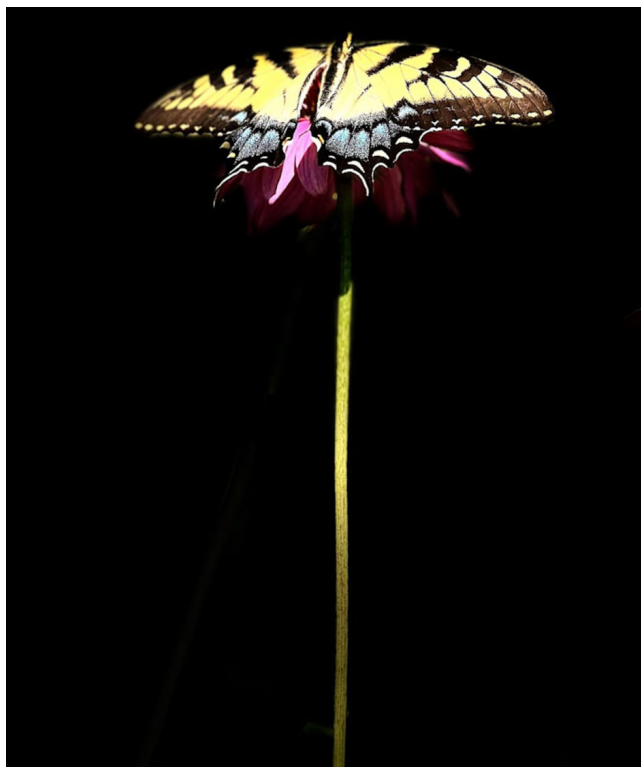
We're like everybody else  
outside of poems: so much  
eddies around us each day,  
but here in this poem I  
am a stone and you are a

stone and we are enjambed so  
imperfectly under the  
soil of this maple sapling,  
our son laughing, our daughter  
crayoning at the table,

the dog dreaming a blood moon,  
our hands become hummingbirds,  
our hands become stone statues  
of hummingbirds, become roots,  
Tuesdays, Augusts of their own.

*Inscape*





## **TO THE SHOPKEEPER ON THE CORNER IN EAST JERUSALEM**

*by*

**Flavia Brunetti Proietti**

From the first day I moved into the neighborhood until the day I left in a hurry, I went to your shop. Your brother was always the only one there, serving the neighborhood kids who would come with their mother's money clutched tightly in one hand, reciting the list of things they'd memorized. The first time I walked in, I was clutching a laundry list of my own—cleaning supplies painstakingly written out in Arabic by my friend, armed with Google Translate in one hand and an already-memorized apology for my lack of the right language. Then, he spoke perfect English, and in my relief, I immediately forgot every word of my apology.

That dusty August, I took to stopping in on my walk home—the shop a point of reference in a place still unfamiliar, the feel of the wall of air conditioning when I'd first walk in a greeting immediately followed by the muted, jovial colors of the inside of the shop. I'd wait in line behind the kids, trying to pick out the words in their echoed lists, watching as your brother inevitably slid a piece of candy into bags full of bread and sauces. I think that's why your shop was always full of kids, peeking over the counter, waiting.

In the third week, your brother and I bonded over my reliable Ben & Jerry's flavor purchase (I always go back to Chocolate Chip

Cookie Dough), and that was the day he discovered I'm Italian, and I discovered his name. *I'm going to leave*, Salem announced to me that day with a sweeping arm gesture that could encompass the shop, the neighborhood, all of Palestine, *and see Rome. My brother loves it here, he would never leave. But I will.*

I didn't want to tell him that even though my heart bleeds the color of the Colosseum in the falling sunlight, it's not always what it's cracked up to be. But I couldn't disappoint him, so I told him only the very best true stories—the ones that touched both of us: the way our cities mingled the old with the new in a chaotic symphony, the way people tended to love each other fiercely, loudly, the colors of the ancient centers at dawn, at dusk, the family-owned businesses. *Like this one!* he said, triumphant, and I answered, *Yes!* And though I told him that there are less and less of them in Italy, that we are losing our artisanship, I made it sound funny, because don't we do that? This thick coating of humor over loss. I told him about the stickiness of Rome in the warm months and the freedom of walking through the summer pop-up cafés down by the Tiber River, a whisper of wind nudging at the cotton of clothing tucked over cooling skin. We told stories behind the wall of air conditioning that would blow your hair straight back.

Salem taught me one word of Arabic every time I went in. I want to tell you I remember every one, but even though I held them in my mind in those moments, illuminated, transfixed, the day I ran into your shop, expecting your brother but finding you, I couldn't remember a single one of those words.

That day, I needed directions to a street in the Old City, and Ben & Jerry's, and fully assumed he'd be there. Instead, it was you,

disinterested and more than a little full of sneer that I couldn't make myself understood. And you were right, you know, though I wish I could have told you how Arabic is a language I wish seeped into my skin, that I plan to wash myself with it until it sticks one day, but what mattered right then were words I did not have.

The next time I walked up the hill and stopped, Salem was back, and I never thought about you again. We went right back to talking about the heat, how the winter would be rainy, and the streets would flood, heavy with muddy water. We talked about leaving, and Gaza, and Rome, and San Francisco, and I bought candy that wasn't good for me, and cleaning supplies for an apartment I'd grown to love in very little time. I learned one new word a day. Every time I traveled, when I left the shop, he'd wave at me from behind the counter, wish me safe travels. The days were hot, and then they were rainy, and I thought there'd be time.

So, I know it's even worse that when I knew I wasn't going to come back at all, I did not say goodbye to Salem. I see how you're looking at me—the same way you did the day I ran into a shop that was suddenly yours and not ours—and you're right again, but it was sudden, and I planned to come back. I didn't factor in that sometimes we don't know when it's the last time we'll do something, be somewhere, see someone, so even though that whole week I told myself I planned to stop by and tell him, I didn't. And then I was seeing your home disappear from a plane window.

A friend of mine was in your neighborhood recently and sent me a happy message. *I'm right by where you lived last year!* I asked him to go and see if you or Salem were there (because isn't goodbye via proxy just easier, after all?), outlined exactly where the minute

building was, scrunched between the pizza place and the fruit market, turn left at the end of my road and it's halfway down the hill. But it wasn't, so you weren't.

*Places don't always last long here, you know,* my friend said into the phone, at my silence.

*But it had always been there,* I said. I had asked Salem, hadn't I? How long his family had been there? I hadn't. I just assumed it had been there always, halfway down the hill.

*Sometimes they get damaged in the revolts, or families no longer feel safe,* my friend continued when I didn't answer.

*Can you send me a picture?* I finally said. *Just to be sure you're in the right spot?*

He was.

So anyway, Salem's brother, I hope you both got what you wanted. You wanted to stay home. I wish very much that you are still there, that you've opened a new, bigger shop, just somewhere else. I hope there are kids, and that you give two pieces to the shyest ones.

But Salem. Salem, I hope is in Rome, San Francisco, Venice, Amman, Cairo. I hope he's in Tunis and Valparaíso and Moltrasio and all the places he's talked about and some he hadn't yet thought of when we met, in a dusty shop halfway down the hill, in a neighborhood of East Jerusalem. Safe travels.



MUS

POPPERS

HIP

AND R&B

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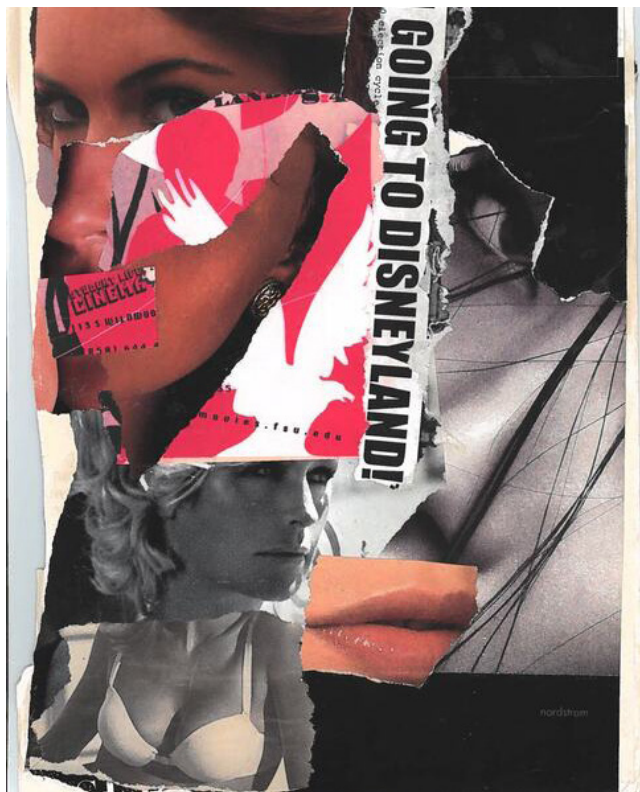
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## CONNOISSEUR OF HEARTS

by Hollie Dugas

I discover them in all types  
and in the strangest of places,  
muddled grapes at the bottom  
of wine, barnacles in oceans—  
independent from body,  
they flop with impulse  
like fat snappers. And with  
each scarlet kernel I collect  
in net, I lick salty tears  
from wounds, and check  
for pulse, pushing my fingers  
into electricity—the meaty  
organ spittling its broken  
messages. I hug every wild  
quivering core near my ear,  
the carmine shells, to locate  
the buffalo's thunder  
that is my match—each pith  
stampeding to be part  
of something bigger.  
Last night, I sat on the love-  
seat, trying to warm  
myself. I did not fill any  
voids but I practiced heart,  
clasped together my smaller

than average hands,  
an unfamiliar arthropod,  
and squeezed 115,000  
times over, studying  
the gaps in my heartline,  
how much space was left  
open—the thread breaking  
and unbreaking, a web  
too difficult to climb.



## LA CRUCIFIXIÓN BY ANTONI CLAVÉ

by Patrick Pfister

Holy Week in Spain and we linger  
before a painting of Christ crucified.

In the heart of blended brushwork,  
I behold pain, Carmen sees tenderness.

“His grandchildren say it needs more  
light,” the docent tells us.  
“The gallery, not the painting.”

We follow her round the room,  
but return to the Lamb of God,  
nailed to wood.

His stigmata hands.  
His thorn-pricked head.  
His spear-punctured ribs.  
The bold bold stroke of  
His luminous gaze.

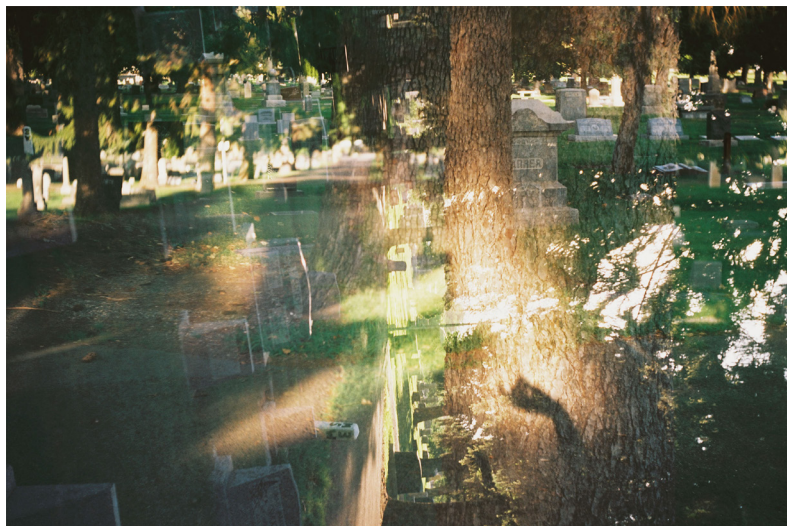
Tenderness, pain, light.  
Two days to Resurrection.

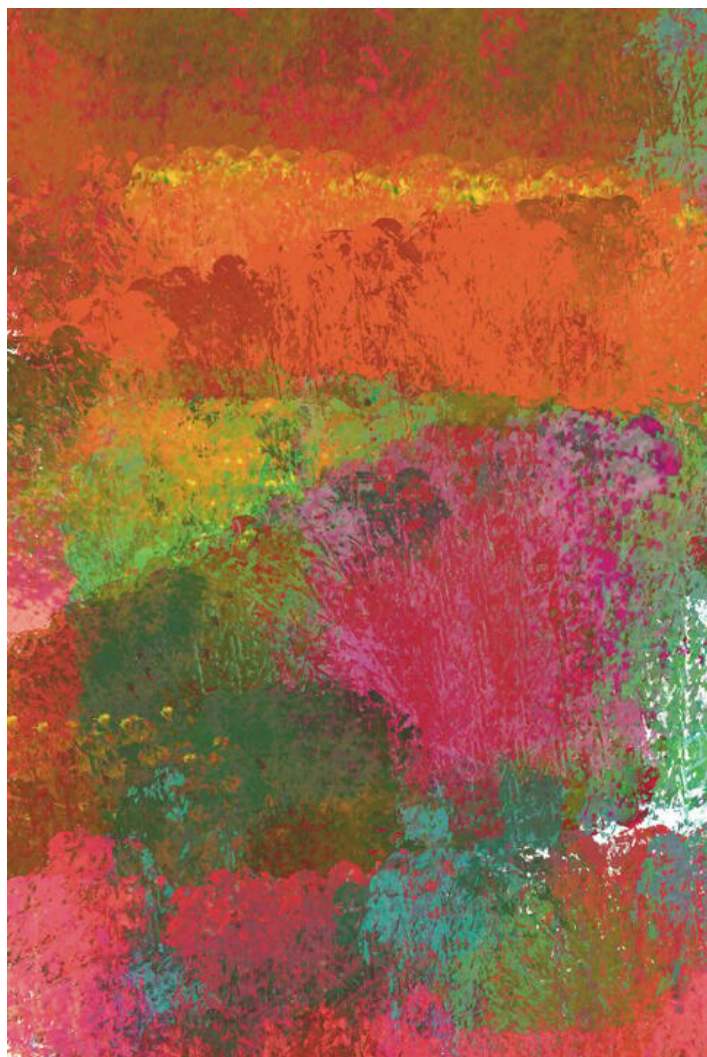












## THE CONFESSIONAL DOOR

by

Tighe Flatley

Tommy knew that he would lie to the priest, even before he opened the confessional door.

He was 10 years old to the day. Tommy's birthday lined up his First Reconciliation, as if God Himself were ushering him through two gates at once. The fourth-grade class from Bishop Fitzpatrick Catholic was in the front of the church, their families behind them, wearing suits and dresses as stiff as the wooden pews in which they sat.

His older sister, Catherine, had gone through Reconciliation the prior spring. Since then, men had landed on the moon, the calendar switched into a new decade, and Tommy's two front teeth had fallen out.

"Confession is easy," Catherine had said the ressed into the floor of his own home.

In the church, when it was Tommy's turn, he opened the left door of the large, wooden box with a creak that echoed from the back wall. He heard giggles shushed by the teachers as the door swept shut.

The floor beneath him groaned. There was no light, only a silhouette of a face on the other side of a screen. As he felt for his place to sit, Tommy smelled dust and pine; it reminded him of taking the Christmas decorations out of the basement, when his parents would

let him hang the last ornament on the tree for being so good that year.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” Tommy said, just as he practiced with Catherine. “I kicked my sister.”

“And why did you kick your sister?” the familiar voice on the other side of the screen asked.

Tommy felt heat rise in his chest. He hadn’t anticipated this part—Catherine said the priest assigned prayers. He didn’t expect in-depth questioning.

“She made fun of me,” Tommy said, hoping that a general enough response would hurry the conversation along.

“How so?”

“She said that I have big teeth.”

Tommy thought of his missing front teeth, still waiting to come in. Now he was lying about the lie, his tongue whistling in that open air, surely giving him away. If it wasn’t that, Tommy was sure the father recognized his voice, perhaps even saw him coming in from behind the screen. He had to change the subject.

“Also, it’s my birthday,” Tommy said, hearing his small voice crack.

“How old are you now?” asked the voice.

“Ten.”

“Ten is a very important age.”

Tommy heard a sigh and then a long, quiet pause. The confession booth creaked under the weight of whoever was on the other side. The man’s breathing was heavy, as if he were trying to catch his breath, like his dad did when shoveling snow in the driveway. Tommy imagined those dry hands, folded in the lap of the robes, clasped in prayer over his sins.

“That’s enough,” the father said. “Don’t talk.”

Tommy felt his heart leap, his throat close. Catherine had told him that everyone gets prayers to recite based on the weight of their sins; Tommy received no such assignment.

There could only be one reason: the priest knew he lied. Tommy wasn't forgiven; he was banished. His time in the confessional didn't count—it would be like crossing your fingers during the vows of Holy Matrimony.

I'll have to ask for forgiveness for the rest of my life, Tommy thought, speechless, still sitting in the confessional booth. He listened to the wood whine, feeling it shift back and forth, his family outside, falsely proud.

It was this moment he remembered most, years later, when the Boston Globe landed on his porch one cold winter morning. Thomas read the front-page report, still standing outside, the wet cold of snow soaking into his slippers. It burst open that confessional door, ripping the wood from its hinges, splintering with a crash. The dark, creaking box collapsed into a pile of kindling. For light, for warmth. For a blaze.

## INTERVIEW WITH JOANI ELLIOTT

by Ian Curtis

*Joani Elliott believes in the magic of stories, a good cup of tea, and the power of living a creative life. She has taught writing at the University of Maryland and Brigham Young University. She lives with her husband and two daughters near Salt Lake City, Utah. For book club resources, virtual author chats, and more, visit [joanielliott.com](http://joanielliott.com).*

**Inscape:** What made you decide to write a book about writing and the writing process?

**Joani Elliott:** Well, you know, it's interesting because I didn't decide that I wanted to write a book about the writing process. It's just the story that came to me. I received my master's in English with an emphasis in creative writing. During that time, I wrote my first novel. Then I just really got busy with other things. It wasn't like I ignored that part of myself, I just didn't feel like it was my time to write. Then, I was teaching writing at the University of Maryland, but not even creative writing. I was teaching English 101 and I just felt like this was my time to go back to that part of myself. Now creativity has always been a part of myself. I taught piano. I was teaching, but I hadn't done real creative writing for a long time.

A lot of my colleagues were good at writing while teaching, but I wasn't. Maybe because I'm such an angsty writer. I don't know, but I felt like if I was going to go for this, I needed to go all in. And so, I was talking to my husband, and I told him, "I think this is my time. I think I should go for this. I should just step away for a couple of years from my job and just put everything into this. We looked at our budget and we're like, "Okay, I think we can do this. Let's just go for it." In September of 2015, that's when I went to my computer instead of the classroom. I was super excited and thought I would be writing young adult literature again, too. And then, nothing came to me. I went back to that YA novel I'd written before. I tried a little bit with that. I tried new ideas. I had a lot of good starts and stops, but it just went from bad to worse. I felt really frustrated. That's when I started procrastinating everything in my house and doing pretty much everything but focusing on writing. I started feeling sorry for myself. I thought, well, at least nobody cares that I'm writing this because I didn't even tell a lot of people what I was doing.

That's one day when I thought, "What would it be like to have a hundred people waiting for my book? Hundreds? Or thousands?" What if you had a million people waiting for you to fulfill this agreement to write a book? That's when I imagined this sad sort of pathetic person with the weight of the writing world on her shoulders and that's when Sara Grayson was born in my bathroom. I guess it was a home birth. I knew very quickly that it was her mother that had left this book to her. That it was her mother who was the iconic writer. That it was her mother who believed that she had this in her and that it was Sara who was plagued with self-doubt and believed

that she couldn't. I just thought, oh, this is the story that I want to write. After that, I became a much more disciplined writer, things really began to come together for me.

I never set out to write a book about writing. It just began with an interesting what-if question that happened to be about a writer. What was interesting is that it was the perfect book for me to write because I was diving back into the world of creative writing and because it had been a while, I felt like I needed to do this deep dive with Sara. I needed to go back to craft books like *On Writing* by Stephen King and I needed to read all these books that I hadn't read before. I felt like I needed to rediscover the craft. I needed to listen to writers again. And so, I was doing that along with Sara Grayson, and that's when I started collecting all these writing quotes because initially, they were for me. Then many of them ended up in the book as epigraphs.

**Inscape:** I was wondering about how your writing experience lined up with Sara Grayson's. Were there any similarities? Differences?

**JE:** Well, I wish that I had a great editor like she did to help me along. But there were similarities in facing the kind of self-doubt that I think we all face as creatives. It's funny, now and again I'll have people tell me, "I just wanted to slap her sometimes. Like just get over it and write the book." And I'm like, "Me too." That's why I gave her Phil and Bernie and other people to tell her, "Will you get over yourself and write the book?" I resonated with that. There were times that I just needed to write the book. I needed to be patient with the process of writing the book, but I also wanted it to go faster.



It was an interesting thing because Sara was against her deadline and I had self-imposed deadlines, but everything always ended up taking longer. I needed to just trust my process, that it was going to take time. I wanted to write a good book and good novels that take time.

It's easy to look in the other lanes, right or left, to be looking sideways. You'll see other people who say, "Yeah, I just finished like 5,000 words just last night. It wasn't very hard. I don't know what's wrong with you." I think we fall into comparison, and self-doubt, and wondering if we can really do it.

I'm in revisions for my next book and even today, I was writing a pep talk to myself, reminding myself that I can do this and to look straight ahead instead of sideways. It's a constant practice and that's okay.

**Inscape:** I love that answer. It brings me to this question. How do you think beginning writers can focus on our believers rather than get lost in their doubts?

**JE:** I just listened to a conversation between Oprah Winfrey and Arthur Brooks. So, Arthur Brooks said that we're hardwired to remember the negative over the positive. It traces back to our biology as protection. You know, if there's somebody dangerous in the crowd, somebody who's looking at you that's scary, your focus goes right to it, you're alerted to it. I'd never heard this, but I've always wondered why we always remember the one negative comment when we've had twenty good ones.

So, I don't have all those answers, but, first of all, knowing that we're wired to do that is helpful. Then I can counteract this with practices that will help me. One of the things that I do every day is I have prayer and meditation which helps me to focus on what I'm doing, what my intention is, and the voices that I listen to. I'm sure everybody has different things that they do, but for me, I begin any session, any writing session that I do with prayer and meditation because it helps me remember what I'm doing. I also begin every writing session with a short journal entry of sorts, that helps me to focus on what I'm doing that day and write through any concerns that I have. I also just keep notes of affirmation from the believers in my life.

I'll just add this quickly. When I first began pitching my book to New York editors and agents, we had a coach who was working with us. When we started pitching, she was there so she would listen and give us feedback. After a pitch, I could only remember what the editor or agent didn't like. But once I sat down with my coach and she showed me her notes, I was reminded of all the positive things the editor/agent had said as well. Once again, my mind had focused on the negative.

So it's imperative that we keep all the good offered to ourselves and gift ourselves great self-compassion in our creative journeys. This can be our antidote to all the negative voices, including our own. We need prayer, we need meditation, we need written reminders. We need a practice that reminds us of the things that are true about ourselves.

**Inscape:** One of the quotes in your novel talks about how successful writers must accept looking stupid for a long time. Did you ever feel silly during the writing process? How did you overcome those feelings?

**JE:** Yes, and sometimes I thought, “Why did I leave a good job where I was teaching students how to write, and now, I’m writing this silly book. Does anybody get to read it? Does this matter?”

But I felt from a spiritual standpoint that I knew through prayer that this was exactly what I needed to be doing at that moment. That helped me to move forward. You know in your gut and in your heart when it’s the right time and that helps you move past moments when you feel like this is silly or it doesn’t matter. I guarantee anybody as a writer, anybody who wants to do this incredible thing of trying to tell stories, that will feel dumb sometimes and you will feel inadequate. It’s just guaranteed. And so, you just plan on it, and then you keep writing all the way through it.

Elizabeth Gilbert, in her book, *Big Magic*, says, “Every job has a [crap] sandwich.” You choose a job that you love doing, and you’re going to be willing to eat the sandwich that comes along with it. Writing has its own sandwich. Part of that is rejection, having other people read your work and telling you it’s not good.

Sometimes I look at some of my colleagues at this conference and think “We must be insane to keep trying to do this. At the same time, it’s work that makes me feel totally alive. And so, I’m willing to eat the sandwich. And Elizabeth Gilbert had a friend who decided,

I don't want to do that anymore and that's okay. It's your choice. But the sandwich is in any job: A teacher, a doctor, an attorney, an accountant. There's no good job you're going to love that isn't going to have a sandwich. So, you pick something you love, and be willing to eat the sandwich that goes along with it.

The other thing I'll just add is that when it comes to creative work part of success is knowing which wave to catch. You're kind of judging it, you're watching it. In the movie *Soul Surfer* with Bethany Hamilton, there's this conversation with her dad where he's telling her about judging the waves. That's part of the creative work we do, too. It's knowing the timing of what to do and when to catch a certain wave. So, trust your heart when it is the right time for you to being your creative work forward.

**Inscape:** Can I ask a follow-up to the previous answer about the sandwich? What makes the writing sandwich worth it for you?

**JE:** There are two parts to that. I love the actual work of creating a story that is meaningful and powerful, a story that says something about what it is to be human. To me, that is some of the deepest kind of magic. It's stories that connect us all.

I was standing in a Disney store in Times Square, and it was crazy full of people. I was thinking, "This is an empire that's built on stories. That's what it is. It's a shared story. So, getting to come to my computer every day and create something out of nothing. That is a beautiful and remarkable thing to get to be a part of.

It's also sharing the story with the reader that makes it worth it. I had never experienced that until *The Audacity of Sara Grayson*. It becomes my readers' story, but I'm connected to them now, too. I think that's in any art form, whether we're walking to an art museum or seeing amazing architecture. I feel like anything that the artist has put their heart into has the potential to connect to us and human connection and learning what it is to be human is, that's everything. Those are the two main things.

**Inscape:** Throughout the novel, we read about this idea of having audacity as a writer. Why do you think for Sara and then for other writers it's so important to have audacity?

**JE:** That's a great question. I believe that part of the often-told advice, "write what you know," is true, but we also need to write about what we don't know. That is part of the fun as well. At the same time, writing is ultimately writing about emotional truths. Doing that takes courage and audacity, to tell those emotional truths.

Robert Frost said, "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader." There's a point in the *Audacity of Sara Grayson* where both Nick and Phil are telling her that you've got to go deeper, if you're not willing to go to those hard places, Sara, then your writing is going to remain shallow, and you need to go deeper. I think in that part of the book they were talking about finding those emotional truths. We'll be writing about people and topics that we've never truly experienced, but we all know something about the overarching emotions: loss, pain, and friendship. Going to those places takes courage.

The other piece of that is that by doing anything creative, we risk emotional exposure ourselves. We put something out there that is a piece of us out into the world and other people then respond to it. There is no great art and not even okay art that we can put out into the world that doesn't require some vulnerability on our part. Sometimes we might have vulnerability fatigue and that is okay, but if you want to live this life, if you want to pursue the life of the creative, you must be willing to expose yourself.

## INTERVIEW WITH ROB CARNEY

by Whitnee Forest

*Rob Carney is the author of eight books of poems, including Call and Response (Black Lawrence Press, 2021) and The Book of Sharks (Black Lawrence Press, 2018), which was named a finalist for the Washington State Book Award. Additionally, he is the author of Accidental Gardens (Stormbird Press, 2021), a collection of 42 flash essays about the environment, politics, and poetics; and the children's book How the Baby Seal Was Born and Other Fables (Little Nomad, forthcoming). In 2014 he received the Robinson Jeffers/Tor House Foundation Award for Poetry. His work has appeared in Cave Wall, Columbia Journal, The Dark Mountain Project, and many others, and he writes a regularly featured series called "Old Roads, New Stories" for Terrain.org. He has a BA in English from Pacific Lutheran University (Tacoma, WA), an MFA: Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University (Spokane, WA), and a PhD from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette (Lafayette, LA). His teaching emphases include Modern American Literature, American Literature from 1865-to-Present, the Study of Drama, Poetry Writing, Modern Legacies for the Honors Program, as well as Special Topics and Eminent Authors courses.*

**Inscape:** In the “Origin” section of *The Book of Sharks*, you write,

*There is no body called Carcharias we point to in the sky.*

*They are not our heaven.*

*We don’t pray, “Forgive us our trespasses.”*

*Few of us praise.*

*But we could if we wanted to. We could draw from star to star,*

To me, this felt like an invitation to reevaluate the metaphors that organize my life and the ones I place at the center of it. I was wondering, what do you think about what is lost or gained by the metaphors we choose or don’t choose? And what is the value of meditating on or creating from new or different metaphors?

**RC:** Oh, well, I think there’s always value in meditating on new metaphors. I couldn’t be a poet if I didn’t believe that. I mean, that is sort of our M.O. when we write poems. Otherwise, why work so hard to come up with them?

I’ll just pick, for instance, those things that we have inherited as myths, as origin stories from the time we were little. Adults tell them to us and we just accept them without question and then stop examining them and stop thinking about how they apply to our lives. So if somebody introduces a new one, well, then we have to start thinking again. We can’t do it habitually. We can’t go on autopilot or just take some adult’s point of view. New metaphors are good because they cause us to think for ourselves.



Now, the other thing is that once we know a story and we've known it well from the time we were young, chances are we don't ever really think about it again. So, for example, there's the origin story from the Greeks, Pandora. There's the origin story about the Garden of Eden, Eve. In both stories, they're both bad and it's their fault [they're both blamed for things going wrong with humanity]. Now, I think that's wrong. And it saddled a whole world of people with wrongness. So if you can come along and change that, then you're doing a good thing. And I did once in a poem that predates *The Book of Sharks* called "In the Beginning Was a Girl." Now, that's totally subversive right from the title. And it's in my book, *Story Problems*. It says,

*In the old songs about Washington, a girl woke up with feathers  
instead of hair, woke up with silver eyes  
and saw behind the moon, which was where the future tried to hide  
himself till it was time.*

And it goes on from there. By the end of it, we have a totally different story. And it's one that's, I think, woman-centered and restorative instead of interested in laying blame on women for things falling apart.

**Inscape:** I also loved some of the creation myths that you introduced in *New Fables, Old Songs*.

**RC:** *New Fables, Old Songs* has that. Yeah, I'm surprised you were able to find that because that's been out of print for ages. That

was my very first published chapbook. It was done by Dream Horse Press and the publisher and editor, JP Dancing Bear (thank you for getting me started). Those poems roll over into the book I was just mentioning, *Story Problems*. So you can find them there still, even if you can't find the chapbook.

**Inscape:** A recurring thread throughout *The Book of Sharks* shows up in the following phrase: “the best explanation I know was offered by a boy. / His father had died, and his mother couldn't hear.” And some of the most gorgeous lines in the entire volume, I thought, were attributed to this boy. In “Origins,” the boy said that “Sharks are the ocean's way of talking. / Like talking with your hands.” I'm curious about whether this boy was at all based on someone you know in real life. And if not, why did you introduce this character and give him the words that he speaks?

**RC:** Well, I think one of the things that's different about being a fiction writer—and I'm just guessing because I'm not that, I'm an essayist and a poet—is that people believe from the beginning that all of the characters are invented. Whereas it seems that when you are a poet, people think that it's all first-person and fact. So no, there was no particular boy in my own boyhood who said those things. In fact, one of the things I'm trying to do is create a sort of speaker who isn't me, and a kind of universality. I don't ever nail down, for instance, what coast, what ocean, what place, what harbor, what cliff. Wherever anybody's reading it, they can imagine the coastline themselves, right? They don't have to look it up on a map. So that boy is more, I would say, me imagining what I might have been like had

I grown up in whatever coastal place with my best friend, Jay Taylor. And I could imagine the two of us going through that. But Jay is a real person and his mom, Desta Taylor, is not deaf. She did not speak through sign. In the poem, that's just invented. But it seemed to me like something was needed—that the primary speaker couldn't be the only voice. Allowing for dialogue changes everything, I think, in a play, in a story, and hopefully in poems, too.

When you switch to dialogue, all of a sudden there's a new energy, a new direction. It has the same power, I think, as a turn does in a sonnet or another type of poem. It has as much power as the conjunction “but” that tells us something's going to happen—some redirect. So I did that because I thought it gave the flow a new direction and a bigger kick.

**Inscape:** So, again, in *The Book of Sharks*, you say, “I have no stories or rituals, but maps to them, so I begin.” And that's the very kind of last line of the book.

**RC:** Right, right.

**Inscape:** And I was wondering: what are our maps to ritual? In *Weather Report*, I think you talk about creating a sort of ritual on the first snow of the year where everybody just stops in silence and gathers. How do we create those types of rituals?

**RC:** I think that ritual is just automatic. But over time—I think probably throughout the 20th century, starting with radio—the

“ritual” changed. People would gather to listen to somebody else tell a story, which was still a kind of active listening.

But you don’t really have a fire going anymore. Or people gathered around listening to the storyteller. You kind of do. But TV, I think, is different—you could consider TV like theater, but not really. I don’t want to say TV’s an induced trance, because I don’t think that happens. I think we sort of turn it on and let it wash over us. And we’re passive rather than actively engaged in listening. And a part of that is, we’re not doing it communally and collectively. When you go to a movie theater, you’re at least not there alone and there is some sort of connection to others that happens whether we’re really aware of it or not. There are people who will cheer at a screening of a movie, and I don’t think they would do that at home. There’s something about being in the presence of other people when *story* is happening. And I also think that there’s something about having to listen and not having the images—that’s a powerful hook in storytelling. I think radio really is better at that than television.

So what are the maps? The maps are back to story. And that means that whatever it is, it’s got to be long enough to hook us and then follow through and resolve. And little tiny videos aren’t that. They’re distractions, but they’re not a type of ritual. I mean, hypothetically, you could decree, “Every day at ten o’clock we shall gather together and have a flash mob.” Fine for the people who are at home watching. It’s kind of neat. But for the people who are doing it, it’s participatory. It’s a thing. It’s an event. And so what your personal map would be, I don’t know.

But I do think that you have to get out of habits. So whether it's to pick up books again or go to hear readings from people, those maps have to direct us towards some kind of engagement. And the thing that doesn't seem to engage people (because they sort of zone out or zombie off) is thumb scrolling through a telephone. So I would say, you know, first map: don't do that. Second: re-engage in some of these older things that were always archetypal and powerful.

**Inscape:** I was hoping to tie together *The Book of Sharks* and *Call and Response* with this question. In *The Book of Sharks*, you say, "Let's say I'm a gatherer in the same way clouds are gatherers." And in "Art is Such a Good Journey," from *Call and Response*, you talk about Kari's grandmother, "who could make you young-eyed when teaching you to paint." So I was wondering, what advice would you have for young writers about seeing, hearing, and gathering? And how does creating art impact the way you personally see, listen to, and engage with the world?

**RC:** Oh, well, what advice do I have? That's a heavy one. My advice is that many people talk more than they listen, and that's probably not the best way to do it, especially if you want to learn things, and especially if you want to find your own voice. I mean, one of the things that I think people need when they're writers is to find their own voice. And if they're always talking, talking, talking and not listening, then they can't hear what other people are saying and have that inform their understanding of regionalism and voice. They also can't hear their own thoughts as they're happening. If you're talking all the time, you can't ever be quiet. And then you can't hear your

own voice. When that happens, you've already missed. And you've lost the enthusiasm to discover something and write it down because you already blurted it out, right? It's just done.

There's a writer named Rick Bass who talks about holding on to, and protecting, and keeping that magic. He means you've got to be still and quiet—writers probably more than other people. It's tough to be a writer if you're always out talking, socializing, and being performative because you've already expressed yourself. To come home and try again might feel tiring or even redundant. I don't know if that's advice, and I don't know if that works for everybody, but I do think it works for me.

Regarding the second question: creativity, art—both of them, I think, are a way of engaging with the world. Maybe not the world as it is ordinarily, just going about its chores, getting in its traffic jams, but the world that you could imagine being ideal, right? So it gives you a chance to engage with the world in the way that you wish the world really were. And sometimes we might say, “Oh, that's just nostalgia for a past time when things were simpler”; that's not what I mean. I know, for instance, that my home state, Washington, where I grew up, is not there anymore. There's something else on top of it now. But that doesn't mean that I can't still feel moved about the way it used to be and then use that as setting or put characters in a setting like that and have them, you know, play out their story. Because you want things to be better than they are.

I mean, I don't want to just nag about problems. Nobody wants to listen to somebody nag about problems. Instead, I think they would rather have a different vision, maybe a better vision, so that they can incorporate that and think, "I like that, I would like that vision to be real," and then do what they can to act in ways that make it real.

**Inscape:** I really appreciated what you said at the beginning about talking less and listening more as a way of finding your voice. It seems counterintuitive compared to cultural messages I've received about that, but it really rings true.

**RC:** Do you have an example? What do you mean about a cultural message that told you to talk more?

**Inscape:** I guess social media, since we've talked about that a bit. I don't have a specific example, but just the general idea that it's really important to be expressing your opinions all the time. That something's wrong if you're not doing that, you know? And so I guess that's where my mind went.

**RC:** I think that maybe as a kid when that was going on, I was one of the people who sort of hung back for a while and maybe I would make some smart-alec remark to the person next to me, like I wasn't part of this giant group. Find the other person who seemed sort of like me or whatever, and if they laughed, I thought, "OK, that's good."

Now, there are other times I can't help it. I just jump right in and argue the same as all other human beings. But, you know, I went to

grad school twice. And I've got to say, there is no way I could have ever blasted through as the opinionator in a realm of those people, because my goodness, graduate students talk and talk and talk and talk. So sometimes it was better just to listen. And then you could say, "Well, wait a minute," and undercut that. Because a lot of times people—in graduate school, at least—get awfully full of their own opinions, so for somebody to come along and, you know, stick a needle in that sometimes, is probably a social service.

**Inscape:** In your volume, *Weather Report*, you write that "questions climb higher than answers." I love that idea. And I was wondering, what are some poems or poets that have led you to bigger and better questions?

**RC:** Oh, wow. Well, there's an American poet that not enough people read named Robinson Jeffers. He's probably first because he's the first poet I ever encountered whose work wasn't on somebody's syllabus. I wasn't assigned to read it. It was a discovery.

The other person who was great with questions is the poet Theodore Roethke. I think Anne Sexton is overlooked. And I think that she caused me to think a whole bunch, and differently than I used to.

And then there are two Eastern European poets who, when I was assigned to read them, I just couldn't believe what I was reading. It just seemed like a miracle. I didn't know this kind of writing was possible or allowed. They're Eastern European poets named Tomaž Šalamun and Vasko Popa. And I suppose the translator makes a



difference. The translator of the volume by Šalamun is Charles Simic, and the translator I liked of Vasco Popa was also Charles Simic. So I think those five, for sure, made me ask questions.

As a high school student, T.S. Eliot made me ask a lot of questions. And it wasn't just, "What is this guy saying?" but "Why do I like this, even if I don't necessarily understand it?" And I think that's good, you know. I'm not saying I'm a huge Eliot fan still. But that was pretty cool.

And I love E.E. Cummings. And I think that that guy has totally turned upside down what people think of as the "life force" and the "death force" and in good ways and important ways. So I don't know if he was causing me to ask questions as much as go, "Right on, man. I'm with you." And Walt Whitman, you can't you can't forget him. That guy's the ocean.

**Inscape:** A related question I have is, do you start writing poems with a question in mind, or do you write poems to figure out or better articulate what your questions actually are?

**RC:** Well, a dumb answer is that it depends, right? And it's not always the same. The better answer is that I like to find out what I'm thinking as I go. So I don't usually start with the answer in advance. Sometimes I'm just prompted by something surprising. You mentioned *Weather Report* earlier. And you even quoted a line, thank you, from "The Mother of the Mountains," which is a seven-part epic origin-story kind of poem. And that started because somebody that I

had met said she didn't approve of skiing. And I asked, "Why not?" And she said, "Because it's bad for the mountains." My answer was, "What are you, the mother of the mountains?" And then I thought, "Go away, go away, because I want to write now about the Mother of the Mountains."

Toward the end of writing the poem, I felt like—"I really liked that. Where did that come from?" And I knew I wasn't done. The other six parts happened incrementally over the next year, but it started with, "Who's the Mother of the Mountains? That would be fun to find out." So in that case, I accidentally invented a character, which caused me to ask a question, which caused me to write.

**Inscape:** Another quote from *Call and Response* about questions:

*You'll have to ask in a foreign language, not Dutch, not Spanish or Bulgarian.*

*I mean, on a drum.*

*I mean, with your lifeblood thumping.*

And I loved that so much. But I was thinking, are there any questions at the core of your poems that might be nonverbal, or too difficult to articulate with words, as this poem describes?

**RC:** Oh, wow. That's a... I think the word for that is "paradox"—asking a writer if there are any nonverbal questions in their writing.

I might not be the best person to answer that. It might just need to be somebody who is an astute reader, a good and accessible kind of critic, somebody with those kinds of abilities to concisely zero in and make my writings and intentions clear to other people.

I don't know if there are nonverbal questions in the settings I choose, but maybe. I think *place* is humongously important and absolutely instrumental, and I am 100% a poet of the West. How come? Because this is where I'm from, and you too, unless you're moved here from somewhere else. And it's the best. The American West is just astonishing. Huge, incredible, impressive. You want some trees? Take a look at Northern California or Alaska or Washington. Or we could throw Canada in there too and include British Columbia. You want some mountains? Try growing up by Mount Rainier or here along the Wasatch.

I think in some ways, maybe the question is, can you live where you live if it isn't a place you love? Can you live where you live if it doesn't seem to you beautiful? And if you can't, then why aren't you moving?

**Inscape:** I love the way your volumes are organized. I found that aspect of each work very interesting—all of them seemed uniquely organized. And in *Call and Response*, I was especially drawn to sections one, three, six and eight, which are all stand-alone poems. Specifically, “Poetic Justice,” “In the Beginning was a River,” “North and West of Winnemucca,” and “Call and Response,” the title poem. In all of those poems, I saw themes of both welcoming and loss (loss being

especially pronounced in “North and West of Winnemucca”). And I was curious about whether you could speak to the common threads that connect those stand-alone poems in the context of that volume.

**RC:** Well, “Poetic Justice” is a throw down. That’s a big gesture to open with. It’s about payback because of cruelty that went on, locally and nationally. It’s like wish fulfillment, you know—a ghost story, a revenge story. But it starts with perspective. You have to start by journeying back and realize there are a whole lot of things that have been on this planet a lot longer than we have, so where do we get off thinking that we’re so important, especially about, oh, I don’t know, the result of that 2016 election?

“North and West of Winnemucca” is a journey also, but it’s not a journey in which you’re having somebody righteously dispatched only to be resurrected and dispatched again and again and again in new and inventive ways. It’s different in that it’s much more of a cross-country journey, going from where we are out to the coast, and discovering all along the way a kind of lonesomeness.

I mean, my dad did die. That is factual. And, you know, I think that when you’re heading out to the ocean, somehow you start to reconcile with that because you’ve got all this time to think and feel, but also you’re arriving at a place that is absolutely... you know, the ocean is kind of a Heaven on Earth, isn’t it? At least it is to me.

And so that feels very different. It’s no longer about visiting justice upon the unjust as a corrective. It’s about, how do you correct your own inner imbalance when you’re dealing with a huge loss?

And then “Call and Response,” the fourth of those, actually works more like a mirror, I think, to “Poetic Justice.” “Poetic Justice” shows what’s wrong. “Call and Response,” through the assembling of verses by literary giants—Langston Hughes, Wallace Stevens, Richard Hugo, Anne Sexton—is like the answer to that, right? You start with what’s wrong, then you finish with the thing that’s restorative, and the last word is “Amen.”

In between “Poetic Justice” and “North and West of Winnemucca” is a different kind of journey called “In the Beginning Was a River.” That one is also political because that one is about how people in New Zealand got it right, and we need to follow that. That’s the model.

And I love the first line, which surprised me. And I knew that if I was surprised, then I should keep writing: “People who know me know this. I don’t pretend to be an expert on the legal codes of New Zealand.” But then I’m in, and along the way, I get to just sort of river along because it’s about rivers, and what does a river do? It widens, deepens, slows down, speeds up, discovers, and sustains. And I think that, you know, I want human rights to be doing all of those same things, to find a way to fuse them.

So I go from something that’s opening in kind of anger, and with a sense of purpose and justice, to something that is hopeful as a model, and then to something that’s more personal as a journey, and then something that, by the end of it, reconciles. It’s the same way that, when you lose somebody, a lot of people go to church; the book ends in a kind of literary church in this case. It ends on a Langston

Hughes, Walt Whitman, Anne Sexton-esque kind of “Amen.” I like that. I don’t know if that poem really works, though, because you have to jump back and forth between the text and the footnotes.

**Inscape:** I loved the footnotes.

**RC:** Oh, thank you. I wasn’t sure about it. But the publisher seemed to like it, too. So I guess I hit on—at least for that one book—the right kind of closure.

**Inscape:** That’s actually related to the last question I have for you. There are so many ending lines that I loved in *Call and Response*. In “For Your Essay, Describe Nature,” you said, “You can lovetalk forever about nature. / It’ll still kick your ass.” I loved that one. And then “Call and Response” is such a great, I think, “amen” to the volume as a whole. So I guess my question is, what helps your ear land on good endings, and how do you know a poem is done?

**RC:** Well, probably time. And there is this benefit that readers don’t know because they see the poem when it’s done instead of through all the revision, where I probably found an ending that I couldn’t find in the first draft, the second draft, the scratching, and the crossing out. Over time, you develop an ear, and you develop a trust.

And also, nobody gets to see the mess that is the kitchen. They only get to see the thing that I brought out and set on the table. So, did I have that in the first draft? I’d like to think so, because that would make me seem, I don’t know, *a natural*. But I probably did

not. I probably had to fail a few times before I found that.

Also, this is the case in the line, “You can lovetalk forever about nature.” OK, two things: I modeled all of the short poems on one exercise. It is something that my friend Rick McDonald suggested to me. He said, “Try translations of poems, but not as in a real translation, more like how the language looks, and work it out..” He meant, size up the language visually and guesstimate what those word-equivalents would be in English. And in this case, all of the poems that are the short ones were prompted by the work of an Icelandic poet named Magnus Sigurdsson. And there may have very well been words that looked enough to me like that line that you’re talking about, that I got to sort of have an accidental discovery just by being baffled by Icelandic words. So that’s one thing. And then the other thing is, I may have struggled with the fact that I wrote that line rather rapidly. I can’t say that this poem specifically happened that way, but all of them did happen rather rapidly, and because I felt like I wasn’t the controller—that I wasn’t choosing a subject—I thought, “How do I trust that this is any good?”

And then you have to think, “Well, no, it’s doing something interesting, and even if I was not in charge, I like what happened, so don’t cross that out. Don’t try to overwork it. Because sometimes, sometimes, you just do it right.” And you have to tell your inner editor to shut up.

## INTERVIEW WITH DESIRAE MATHERLY

by Céline Taylor

*Dr. Matherly's doctoral area is creative nonfiction and she is a former Harper Fellow at The University of Chicago. Her recent writing appears in Hotel Amerika, Assay, and Fourth Genre. Matherly is the winner of the 2018 Curt Johnson Prose Award in Nonfiction sponsored by December Magazine and in 2019 her short fiction won the Owl Canyon Press Hackathon. Matherly is the author of Echo's Fugue, a collection of personal essays published by Mad Creek Books (OSU Press) in 2019.*

**Inscape:** What is your typical process for writing essays?

**Desirae Matherly:** I think it's changed through the years. It used to be, of course, that I would open Word and then just sit there and stare at the page, or I would already have a line, often a line or a concept in my head, more like how a poet works. I think as long as I had some sort of originating idea or a phrase that was stuck in my mind or a sentence, that opening, whatever it was, would lead me right into my topic, and then from there, it was really just following out my associations.

I think it's different when you are writing in a different kind of medium. If you're thinking about trying something radically different



in terms of form, then it might be that you start to maybe make some notes or you create some kind of a form there, and I think that has definitely altered my approach, because after writing *Echo's Fugue*, I realized that it was more productive for me to go ahead and have a sense of what I wanted to create and then to draw up the frame or the boundaries or the rules and then to work inside of those rules. It creates a challenge, sort of like playing a game does. So that's probably the main difference, is that it used to be the case that I would work more from an intuitional viewpoint; I would have an intuition of what I wanted to write, but I would figure out things along the way. But now I think the discovery comes in terms of how I respond to whatever problem I've created for myself.

**Inscape:** As you said, those self-appointed structures and patterns play a huge and intrinsic part in your work and really make them distinctive and stand out from other literature. Why do you gravitate toward inventing and using a pattern of specific syllables or words and, like you said, rules in your writing?

**DM:** In the beginning, I think I had a more traditional approach to writing: I had a concept, I had an idea, I'm going to write this and then I'm going to make it better, and then when it's at a point where I think it's doing all the things I want it to do and it's done, I'm going to submit it for publication. But I think as you get older, the ways that you want to digress into more and more and more ideas, after a point, it becomes unsustainable. You cannot write one essay that's going to hit all of the notes that you think you want to. So I think it's really about the impossibility of completion or being

comprehensive that has forced me to want these structures, because without the structures, I feel overwhelmed.

It feels like I can do anything and that feeling of complete and absolute freedom of writing about anything that's on my mind and digressing in any direction that I want to go in feels like too much. Freedom turns out to be an invitation to be careless or sloppy or to write more than what I need. But if I have a word count or some kind of a structure there, it forces me to make difficult choices. Maybe I don't need five sentences to say something that takes only one. So structure makes me a better editor, and I think it forces me to think about the quality of what I'm writing over the quantity.

**Inscape:** Does your writing process change depending on if you're writing poetry, fiction, or nonfiction? And if you're writing essays, short stories, or books?

**DM:** Absolutely. So when I write poetry, it's very much like what it used to be for my essays in the very beginning, which is: I hear something, I feel a phrase, I want to write it down. In that case, it's usually the pencil and paper. I want to get it down immediately. And sometimes it's just all over the place and I don't even know if it's going to stack into an actual poem. With a fiction story, I find that I do tend to work the way that I used to with opening up a Word document, Scrivener, or whatever kind of writing tool that I've found that helps. I think it also helps sometimes to use a distraction-free writing tool like Sprinter; Freewrite is a company that makes smart typewriters, but they have this free online tool called Sprinter where

it just shows you how many words you've written and you can't really edit. So sometimes I'll use a writing tool that will take away that impulse to edit so that I can stay in that zone of writing a story. I feel like I'm freer when I write fiction to do that kind of thing. Then I move it into Word or whatever I'm editing in.

It's not really an obstacle, but I sometimes like to write for contests because there's a word count. Then the challenge is about keeping it under the word count or keeping it at the length that it needs to be, because fiction can be restrictive. There is a limit on a story. The movement of the story has to proceed in a certain way. So there's definitely more structure than just an essay. And essays, I mean, as I've already explained, it runs the gamut. I really do tend to get bogged down in associations and digressions wildly everywhere, unless I have some kind of a structure. And when you think about the structure of a longer project, like a book, like a novel, or a collection of essays, I think it's even more incumbent on the author to have an idea of what they're doing before they go into it. Because you're ultimately going to have to explain that in a book proposal or a query to an agent. However you're going about the publishing of the work, you're going to have to be able to talk about this thing you've written. And it can't just be this loose collection. It has to have some kind of an arc. It has to have an intention. I think form always matters. Are you using small chapters or are they stories? If you're not thinking about form, you should be. Especially at the point when you're trying to put together a book.

**Inscape:** I'm curious about your specific creative process. Does the inspiration behind your essays usually originate from your day-to-day life events, past events, or a combination of both?

**DM:** I think the day-to-day. You've probably heard the term *occasion*. The occasion is that reason for writing an essay. And sometimes that reason is not something you've been thinking about for days and days, but something that sort of strikes you or occurs to you because someone said something in a conversation that made your mind start to turn on an idea. It could be that you're obsessing about something and you're realizing that whatever this thing is that maybe didn't seem that significant at first, you keep dwelling on it. Maybe you have a dream about it. Maybe you get a phone call that sort of shifts your perspective or reminds you of something in the past. But I think that a lot of essays originate in our day-to-day lives in some kind of a moment that we don't expect that then causes us to reflect on something in the past or to speculate on something in the future, but it's originating in the present moment.

**Inscape:** Your latest collection of essays, your book, *Echo's Fugue*, is an honest collection of essay paragraphs, fictional interviews, sentence diagramming, and dictionary definitions that combine to make a completed book. How did you go about deciding how to structure that?

**DM:** I looked rather carefully at the structure of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Art of Fugue* and I knew that I wanted to work with his composition, so I found a website that discussed each *contrapunctus*.

It's such an unwieldy name for a song, but each contrapunctus is a fugue that is taking that one melody and sort of rearranging it or doing something different with it. So I took the number of those, I believe it's fourteen. Depending on the scholar, some scholars may argue about actually how many there are or what order they came in, but I just went with this one source that I'd found and I thought about the way each particular song was described and I knew that I also wanted to do some different kind of prose structure in each and every case; just like he changed the fugue structure, I want to do something in prose that does the same thing. I also wanted to cover as many of the different varieties of non-fictional forms that I could imagine.

We're all the time immersed in nonfiction in terms of the informative texts that we see on the backs of cereal boxes, in letters, interviews, tests that we take, our exams, or surveys. All of this amounted to something worth exploring in the same manner that Bach did. I think the *Art of Fugue* was really composed as a project for him to explore what he already knew about a topic that he loved, so it was largely for himself. Perhaps it also had a pedagogical purpose, to teach a younger musician how to write or compose in fugue. I wanted to try to cover as many structures as I could and also demonstrate to myself that I was thinking about all of the different things that you would need to think about in each case.

It was an added fun bonus that I would do something with the measures or the number of measures in each of those fugues. I wanted to employ that number in some kind of a structural way in

each one of those. As far as the narrative arc of all the essays, it was kind of being written at the same time life was happening. I didn't anticipate getting involved with someone who was polyamorous, which is, of course, the relationship that the later essays really deal with. The earlier essays are about a more obsessive relationship I was working on with some kind of a crush, I guess, on a friend, and so in some ways that's how one relationship that wasn't very satisfying led into another one, which was for a while, but then ultimately made me ask other questions about what a relationship is.

**Inscape:** Do you feel like other modern nonfiction authors should take chances and change up their traditional writing form and approaches like you have?

**DM:** Well, I think that there's far, far more variety in terms of what is potentially out there for everyone to explore. I mean, I don't necessarily think that everybody needs to do what I did, but it's more about how people should always be exploring the ends of their own comfort with the way that they write. If you're continuously writing the same kind of essay, you're not having as much fun as you can, and I believe it has to be engaging on that level for the writer. I think sometimes we can explore a topic and find solutions or ways of looking at something that satisfies us in the moment, but then there's always something kind of driving us to keep asking questions. I think by exploring with form, you're coming to answers that you could have never have come to before if you had just kept employing the same strategy. So I definitely think trying different things is what every writer should want, at least at some point in their life, after they've

done the basic essay or story. I think exploring other ways is just going to enliven their work more.

**Inscape:** While writing, how do you tap into your personal voice each time?

**DM:** Essayists, we're always fashioning personas, so we may be one version of ourselves in one essay, and maybe another version of ourselves in another. As far as voice goes, it's underneath how any writer writes. It's their own personal place where everything comes from. It may be that this time it's behind this mask, and another time it's behind a different mask or persona, but it's still that author's unique way of going about saying anything about the world at all, or about the way that their mind might skip from one thing to the next, or the kinds of things that that author tends to be preoccupied with. So I don't think it's a conscious thing. I think voice is much more unconscious, but it's something that you settle into. I would say by the time you're in your mid-20s, or your late 20s, you're probably beginning to write in a distinctive style, not to put an age on it. It seemed like it was really the end of my 20s when I started to feel like the essays I wrote all began to sound like they were written by me. So I just think it's about continuing to explore and try different things, but then at some point, anything you write is going to sound like you.

So I don't really have a way of sounding like me. I can tell when I'm not sounding like me, when I'm inauthentic, and that's a problem. Because that's when, especially as an essayist, I find myself being

inauthentic. It's like I'm trying for something artificial, and it's so obviously not the actual direction that the essay wants to go in, but one that I'm trying to force on it. Maybe I'm trying to sound smart because I want to write about something I know about, and then I'll read it, and it sounds pretentious, or untrue. It's not as much about the voice of the individual writer, as it is about what the essay wants to be. If the essay is about something that you haven't hit upon yet, and you're trying all these different things, and it's just not feeling like it's coming together, it's not feeling like it's gelling, I think it might look on the surface like the writer's voice is failing, or not working out, but I think the writer hasn't really connected with what the piece wants to be. So voice then would be more about when the writer, and whatever it is that they're writing, are both meeting in a harmonious way.

**Inscape:** What are some of your inspirations, and do you have deliberate hobbies or practices that you do to spark creativity?

**DM:** Right now it's video games. I just started *Mass Effect 3*, I'm beginning to have nightmares about it currently. I had a nightmare last night where, oh my gosh, it was horrible. Is that an inspiration? Maybe, because when I got up and I thought about it, I was like, "I don't like scary things. Why am I playing this game that is clearly giving me nightmares?" The other day, I was thinking, "Why did I even go down this road? I don't like shooter games. I don't like games with guns. Why have I gone from *Red Dead Redemption 2* to *Mass Effect* and dealing with assault rifles? This is not my style. What's going on?" But then again, what is it doing? It's inspiring me



to think about how my tastes in games have broadened or widened. What is it about the experience of that game that I like that connects with the other games that I like that were more fantasy-based or something along those lines? Sometimes the inspiration is definitely a hobby. I'm playing these games, and I'm trying to figure out what it is I like about them.

Often, I'm doing something already and I'm like, "Why do I like this thing?" Which is not that much different than when we're writing essays about gardening or our great Aunt Matilda. We're trying to get to the bottom of a feeling or an association that we have with that person or that experience. I would like to say that books inspire me, but I'm a professor, so all the time, I'm reading stuff. I'm reading a lot of things that I wouldn't choose to read on a day-to-day basis. But when I am inspired, it's because someone's telling the story in a different way. Someone's telling a story that is interesting to me because, again, I've never seen this particular kind of story or I'm curious about how it's going to end up. Same with poems. Poems can really, I think, inspire me sometimes just on the level of language. If an author makes me feel something really intense and I'm like, "Whoa, what just happened? I read those words and it made me feel this intensely." I think we're all the time getting inspiration from the things that affect us.

Generally, the things that affect us emotionally, are the things that make us feel good about ourselves. Like getting an achievement in a video game. A lot of it is just our response to the world and whatever that world for us might be. In my case, I might read a student essay

and it inspires me to think about my own life in a different way. That happens more frequently than I've ever acknowledged. Oftentimes, my students say things in papers, or I'll learn something about their lives, or something will happen in class and it will urge me to think about this life I've been leading that seems like it's in isolation, but I'm really connected with all of these other people all around me. So other people are endless sources of inspiration.

**Inscape:** You're a person who's devoted a great deal to the writing, studying, and teaching of creative nonfiction, nonfiction, and writing in general. What is the value of nonfiction and creative nonfiction?

**DM:** Well, you know, nobody really asks for a defense of informative general nonfiction because we all know you need people to inform you about things and clear writing helps you understand the world better. But with literary nonfiction, it is an opportunity to actually hear someone else's thoughts on any given subject, high or low. It's not academic. It doesn't have to be, or it shouldn't be, academic. It shouldn't be an argument. It should really be, if it's going to be literary nonfiction, it's going to be more open, more about discovery, more like a poem in that it's about feeling. And I think all of this leads to the same thing that literature does best, which is to inspire greater empathy for others. I've always loved what Philip Lopate says in his introduction to *The Art of Personal Essay*. He says something about how reading essays helps the reader feel "less lonely and freakish." I've always loved that because we do often feel quite alienated from other people, whether we recognize it or not. Now, we may be on social media and we may have a million followers and we may be

well-liked and popular and even extroverted. We may even have a sense of ourselves as being fully present and in the world with others. But when it comes right down to it, we are often intellectually and emotionally quite alone in a lot of our thoughts, our most private thoughts. Private thoughts may be explored when an essayist is willing to share private things about their thoughts, especially on subjects that people don't normally talk about.

Let's say that you're going through a loss or someone is sick, maybe they have cancer. It's not really something you can just talk about widely with a lot of different people and hear what they're going through, their experiences. It might be something you kind of keep to yourself because it's really painful, right? But you might read an essayist who is writing about that same subject and they're telling you things that ring true with your own experience. Again, these are not conversations you would have sought out with other people. I think that is a special aspect of nonfiction when you can connect with an author. Montaigne wrote in a way so that a lot of later writers saw him as a friend. They read him as a friend, more than just this guy, rather someone they know that they can count on to make them feel better about themselves and the way that they see the world. That's ultimately what the most beautiful aspect of literary nonfiction is: is that you can read someone's life like they're a friend.

**Inscape:** What advice and words of wisdom would you give to aspiring writers and essayists who are just starting out?

**DM:** I do believe it's important to read and to read widely, read a

variety of things, not just the kinds of things that you know you already like. I think it's good to look at the *Best American Essay* collections once in a while and see what's being published. Not that those are always the best essays, but why were they chosen?

Also, I think it's never a bad idea to start exploring literary journals and think about the places you might like to see your work appear and read some of the pieces that are being published and try to actually submit some work. And keep a journal. I'm beginning to see that is the most reliably advised thing that someone should do as a writer. Reserve a place for your thoughts that don't have to go anywhere so that you can be messy and sloppy and say things that you normally wouldn't have in your essays. Don't be afraid to digress. I think digression is super important. Sometimes we just feel like we have to stay on topic a little too much. I think that it's good to go off-topic and think about why. Why are we being led in this direction instead of what we wanted to write about? So listen to your digressions and allow your mind to, at least in that drafting stage, take you where the essay wants to go and not where you thought you were going. Be open to that process.

**Inscape:** You've created impactful works like your "On the Power of the Imagination" essay, your *Echo's Fugue* collection, and most recently you're working on an inventive online Choose Your Own Adventure essay project, as mentioned during your English Reading Series visit. Will you keep creating varied projects and nonfiction and fiction pieces for the foreseeable future as the inspiration to do so strikes you?

**DM:** Yeah, and lately I'm thinking about for the first time ever playing around with NaNoWriMo. I thought, "You know what? This is completely impossible. I'm gonna write over 1,600 words every day. That's ridiculous. Okay, I'm gonna try it." So I think it's fun to say, alright, maybe it's not gonna be a conventional novel. Maybe I won't actually make it a full week. Maybe I won't make it three days, but let's give it a shot. And yes, I do want to explore more interactive types of fiction. Maybe not fiction particularly, but writing in general. I'm very curious about nonfiction, how nonfiction can employ branching narratives and interactive choice and that kind of thing. That's still...I think there's a lot out there that I haven't discovered yet in terms of reading, and what other people have done. So I think that's making me excited, and it's inspiring me to learn more and go outside of what's familiar.

## INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL LAVERS

by Christie Gardiner

*Michael Lavers is an associate professor at Brigham Young University. He is the author of two poetry collections, *After Earth* and *The Inextinguishable*. Publications include *Swamp Pink* (formerly *Crazyhorse*), *32 Poems*, *The Hudson Review*, *Best New Poets 2015*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Georgia Review*, and more. He is the recipient of the Chad Walsh Poetry Prize, the University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor's International Poetry Prize, and the Michigan Quarterly Review Prize for Emerging Poets. Dr. Lavers holds degrees from Brigham Young University, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Utah. He shares his life with his spouse Claire Åkebrand, and their two children.*

**Inscape:** When reading your poems, it feels to me as if you are a person who's paying attention. Do you think this is a fair assessment? As a poet, are you paying attention?

**Michael Lavers:** Well, I consider that a great compliment. I mean, it's certainly something I aspire to. Paying attention is something I think is central to the art of poetry, and therefore something I truly wish I was better at doing.

I do know that becoming a poet is about changing the way we see and relate to the world. It's not really about techniques, or styles, or aesthetics, or this conference, or that workshop, or this retreat. It's not something I do for a certain number of hours a day and then take off the poet hat and put on a different hat. It's not really compartmentalized in my life in that way. Poetry really is to me as much a spiritual endeavor as it is an artistic one. So, when I say I'm a person who wishes he could pay more attention, what I mean is similar to the verse in the Bible that says, "...whereas I was blind, now I see."

I feel like I'm constantly falling asleep to the miraculousness of life, the beauty of the world, and the "simple" things that surround me. The things I see as mundane and habituate myself to—yet if I truly *saw* them—I would see them as real miracles. I mean, it's William Blake [who] says this very famous thing about [how] "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite." So, when I read poems, I read them to be woken up to the beauty of life.

Pierre Pasolini, the Italian poet and filmmaker said, "The motivation for all of my films is to give back to reality its original sacred significance." I believe that reality is sacred and significant but because it surrounds us, we habituate to it and therefore are kind of blind to it. I read and write poetry to be woken up.

**Inscape:** It strikes me as you speak, that being a poet is, for you, as much a spiritual practice as it is anything. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

**ML:** I think that life is hard, you know? It's really hard. I think about the difficulties my kids will face as they go through the world and become adults, the normal but very painful trials of a human being. It can be very easy to flounder in this world and not quite know how to make it, you know what I mean?

**Inscape:** Yes, I do. I very much do.

**ML:** Ralph Waldo Emerson says that poetry should "reconcile us to life." I love that phrasing because it implies that life and I are on equal terms, or, at least on speaking terms. After there's been some kind of estrangement or schism between life and me, poetry allows me to fall in love with the world again. Poet Linda Gregg, a poet I really admire, once said in an interview something like this, "The whole point of poetry is to take something plain." You know [what] I mean a "so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow" kind of plain. "...and because of love transform that thing." However, Gregg makes it very clear that we transform it without changing it. The item of plainness is still just a red wheelbarrow. It's not revealed to somehow be a secret angel, or god, or something. It's just a wheelbarrow, but the poem translates it into something really beautiful. It's kind of loved and lit up, simply by being noticed, and named, and written down. If that's not deeply religious or spiritual, then I don't know what is.



**Inscape:** Speaking of love, some of my favorite pieces you've written are poems for your children. I am particularly touched by a line from your poem "The Inextinguishable" in which the speaker says, "dust longed to become you the stars know your name". How has being a father influenced you as a poet?

**ML:** It's changed everything. Are you a parent?

**Inscape:** I am. I have a daughter who is twenty, another daughter who is sixteen, and a son who is eleven.

**ML:** Then you know what I mean, and I'd be curious what you might say. It's not that I'm insistent my children become artists or even readers. If they fall in love with woodworking or motorcycle racing, and that really fills their life with meaning and purpose, then more power to them. But I do want to instill in them a sense of appreciation for beautiful objects. I'm not sure how to balance between kind of tyrannical force-feeding of art and respecting their autonomy. What do you think?

**Inscape:** Well, I think each of us is who they are, and when a parent lives into the life of who they are, say a poet, then their child feels emboldened to become who they are, a scientist, perhaps. I think the problem comes when parents don't have—or don't allow themselves—the space to embody their own being-ness. Perhaps they have cultural or societal reasons for not allowing themselves to be who they are. Women and underrepresented persons encounter this more often, I would assume. For example, it's been my experience that many

times people in the arts aren't taken seriously. Societal expectations convey the message they can't be in the world as themselves; they must be the person they are "supposed" to be in the world.

I think the very best thing we do for our children is to step into ourselves as who we are, no matter what anyone else says. Whether or not your children (or mine) ever write a word of poetry, I know they will be able to better become whomever they are meant to be because they saw their parents valuing self-realization over societal expectation.

**ML:** I mean, yes, I think so. From every direction, society is constantly forcing us, and of course, you're right, women and underrepresented persons especially, to compromise themselves—to negotiate their very being! A person's being should be non-negotiable. We're so bad as a society—listen to me, as if I know anything, I hate sentences like that—but we're so bad at letting people be themselves. If our children have, first a model to see that it is possible, and second, support from the parent, yeah that sounds like everything they need to soar.

**Inscape:** Do you think you would be the poet you are without your children?

**ML:** No, no, no, not in a million years. I remember being in grad school when our first son was born. Both [my spouse], Claire and I were graduate students. I had spent seven or eight years deeply devoted to the practice of poetry as an undergrad and then as an MFA

student, and at this time I was in my Ph.D. program. I really wanted to become a poet, but when my son was born, it was like a light switch changed everything. I became a totally different poet. I mean, this is such a truism. I don't want to give you some impression that his birth was when wisdom came to me and people who haven't had my experience aren't wise. That isn't the case. It was simply the time in my life that woke me up to certain things; really, truly woke me up. I realized that as a graduate student, I was approaching poetry for all the wrong reasons. I was approaching it as if it was some kind of game that would give me a stage on which I could be clever and show people how clever I was. *Wasn't this a fun, clever little game we were all playing with words on the page?* I thought. But then he was born and I realized my poetry ought to say something that I mean, that matters to a person I love. I'm such a dunce. I mean, I was so late to the party. I'm sure everyone writing poetry already knows this, but it took the birth of my son for me to realize that poetry is saying what matters to you, to people you love, hard-to-forget ways. So, I stopped hiding behind all these masks. I adopted a whole new level of sincerity. I started asking, what do I actually think about life and the world, and what do I want this little creature to know? What if I spoke directly to him? Poetry became much more immediate, intimate, urgent, and sincere.

Oscar Wilde says, "All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling." By this, I think he means all bad poetry is sincere. In my opinion, everything Oscar Wilde said is true and false. Proof of its truth is in all those horrible school poems we've all written where they are bleeding on the page and just too melodramatic. However, contrary

to Wilde, I believe it can be said that all bad poetry is insincere. It's bad because people have forgotten that life is finite, so we ought to say what we mean; we ought to speak directly to another person's soul.

**Inscape:** I love the idea of getting to a place in writing where you don't write "bad" poetry anymore because you've written through the bad to arrive at a place of sincerity like you were able to do for your son. I don't think you could have arrived at this way of thinking about your craft had you not allowed yourself to write the bad poetry along the way; to play the games, to study, to imitate, and be "clever." If you hadn't done those things, you wouldn't have been prepared. Whether it's the birthing of a child, or any other major transition, every devoted poet or writer is eventually called to a reckoning with their craft.

**ML:** Yes, and the reckoning might not even like be a big cataclysmic life event like a marriage, or a child, or a death. It could just be something—they saw a deer in the forest perhaps.

You're right too, about allowing ourselves the process. I used to be very hard on myself whenever a poem didn't work out. I used to think, *Oh that was a waste of time*. My view now is that it's all one ecosystem. Good poems embody the bad attempts. Nothing is a diversion. Even months and months of nothing really working out is somehow preparing the mind's soil for something to happen in the future.

**Inscape:** I love you talking about it as an ecosystem, mostly because I have a fascination with eco-poetics. When you said that failure is part of the poetic ecosystem, I imagined all my bad poems wandering around as part of the beautiful whole, like the weeds in my back garden are part of the whole—

**ML:** —or the worms, or the dirt, or the bugs. We don't really like mosquitoes, but we couldn't have a forest, a world, or a biosphere without them.

**Inscape:** So, are you saying my bad poems are the mosquitoes?

**ML:** Yes.

**Inscape:** I love it! Michael, what soil grew you into becoming a poet? Did you grow up in a creative family?

**ML:** I had angel parents. I mean, I really won the parenting lottery. They weren't infallible, but they were loving, supportive, kind, and passionate. And, they were not artistic. My father read airport thrillers and my mother liked church music. I can't remember them ever seeking out a museum or anything like that. This was not an aspect of their lives, and I absolutely wouldn't trade them for any other parents. I remember telling my dad, who was a very serious, white shirt and tie, nine-to-five businessman, that I wanted to go to school and study poetry. (And this is evidence of what I mean when I say I kind of won the parenting lottery.) He didn't say "What are you going to do with that," which is what most people say. He said, "You have

to do what you're passionate about. You have to pursue your dreams. If poetry is what you want to do, you have to do it. If you pursue your dreams, the money problem will solve itself at some point down the road." You know, I still thank him to this day for saying that because it was such a kind and generous response. Such sage advice.

I don't know why I fell in love with poetry. I could pinpoint some moments in my life in which I was turned on to the beauties of literature, but it wasn't because my parents showed it to me. It gets back to what we were talking about earlier.

**Inscape:** Your parents' response is heartening. Consider this: I went on a public computer and typed in "Why are liberal arts..." because I wanted to see what the search would fill in. The first few responses were: "in trouble," "declining," "a waste of time"...

My conclusion from this experiment was that there is a societal lack of value placed on arts education. For people who want to dedicate themselves to an artistic life, what do you think this means and do we even care?

**ML:** I think about this all the time. It's a conversation my wife and I have in some form almost every day. There's a large discrepancy between what it seems our culture values and what I believe truly matters. There seems to be this kind of chasm. It's not something I've been capable of having any kind of conclusion for or wisdom about. I don't want to rant about a broken culture. I feel lucky to live in America in 2023. We're lucky to raise our kids in this place.

It's hard to imagine a time or a place that is so fortuitous. But let's not be blind to the problems.

To me, it seems we have forgotten the soul. I don't know what the soul is. Different religious traditions define this term in different ways. But we seem to have forgotten that the soul is a part of us. However one believes in or defines it, we have forgotten the soul needs to be nourished. If it entropies and dies then the human psyche and human culture is in big trouble.

Even war-torn times put more value on the soul than we do. We live in such a materialistic culture. Wordsworth predicted this:

"The world is too much with us  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away a sordid boom!"

I think that's so true getting and spending so it's all about education. So much about university education now is so you can get a job. I don't think that getting a job should be in the top three reasons that we enter universities. We are losing a multifaceted reasoning behind getting an education and there's something deeply wrong with that.

We've forgotten how to be in love with life and education for the sake of loving it. Now, it's all about social media likes, salaries, promotions—you know what I mean. There's never an amount of social media views that will satisfy. It's like that cocaine rat hitting the

cocaine button more and more and more and more. Our insatiability for that which doesn't matter will kill us. How do we love just being in the world?

**Inscape:** I think, like you said, we have to remember our soul. Writing, performing, music. All these things have reminded me that I have a soul; that I'm alive. I think we remember our souls when we do as you suggested earlier and pay attention to the ordinary. I'm worried we are losing the ability to do this.

**ML:** I mean, how much do you worry?

**Inscape:** Every day. Is that why you are a poet? To find your soul? Why poetry?

**ML:** I have kind of embarrassingly simple and shamefully pragmatic answers to that question. I wanted to write novels. Then I realized I didn't know how to write novels. I thought, *Oh no, I'm not going to spend three years of my life writing a novel that will inevitably fail.* That seems like absolutely soul-crushing stress. *I know,* I thought, *I'll write poems!* It's not that I assumed the poems were easier. I knew a good poem was as intricate and nuanced as a great novel, but I thought even in my wildest dreams what's the longest I would ever spend on the poem you know like three months or something versus the years spent on many novels.



Once I began writing poetry I feel like I accidentally discovered the thing for me. Poetry seems to work more immediately—there’s something immediate about it. A novel has this wonderful build-up. It asks something of you. It asks [for] a little patience. Even a beautiful essay asks you to stay with it for a few pages, but a great poem...in twenty seconds you can be transported into the sublime.

**Inscape:** I see the billboards now, “Poetry, twenty seconds to the sublime.”

I want to talk about *After Earth*, the beautiful book you launched in 2019, right before the COVID pandemic and quarantine. When I read it, I found its publication date apropos considering the feeling the book left with me. I went into my reading conscientious of its publication date. Considering the cultural moment we were experiencing at the time, my reading was an emotional experience. So many of these poems, “The Burden of Humans,” “The Peaceable Kingdom,” “Instead of a Lullaby,” and many more are about connection, both the human connection and our connection to the planet. What was it like to launch this book into the world **before** it shifted and what do you think about the book now that the world has shifted? Is the book changed by what we collectively experienced?

**ML:** I like what you say about connection. I think that’s true. I’m deeply introverted. I don’t really have a big social network or some kind of friend group. I’m very solitary. This is another reason poetry appeals to me. I use poetry as a way to send messages in bottles across the ocean. The novelist, E.M. Forster famously says, “Only

connect,” a kind of two-word motto. It seems to apply on and off the page. As deeply introverted as I am in my life, I clearly long for intimate connection with other human souls. I think all of us do.

I don't have to tell you or anyone what the pandemic did for [connection] is disastrous, but I had a student the other day say something very beautiful about this. I won't be able to articulate it in her words, she phrased it so wonderfully, but we were just talking about how we always suffer from this grass is greener on the other side mentality or the idea that we must endure certain things before we can be happy. We're always postponing our happiness. The student of mine said, “We've been back to in-person classes for a while now and they feel normal again but every once in a while”—I'm not paraphrasing the student here, she actually said every once in a while—“I wake up to the fact that oh this, this isn't actually guaranteed us. Being together isn't to be taken for granted. It isn't a given to be in a room physically in the presence of other human beings, all unified around a common goal of understanding truth and appreciating beauty. To be in the physical presence of other humans is a rare and precious gift, one that can all too easily be taken from us.”

I was really moved by what that student said. I'm not sure how it relates to the book, but I feel like it does. Nothing is promised, so we must connect.

**Inscape:** I feel like the pandemic heightened the book's themes. I wonder what reading *After Earth* would be like not having gone through the pandemic. I think my reading of it, with its love-filled

poems structured around the arc of human life, feels poignant when I consider that the things I love could be lost. thinking of losing it makes it more poignant to me but it does

**ML:** It's interesting because I wrote the book when I was deeply involved with the fear of climate change. I was thinking about my kids and wondering, what kind of world are they going to have to put up? It really scared me. I can't say I'm less scared of it now although the panic has kind of died down. But these days it feels as if I'm trying to be optimistic in humankind's ability to do something about what matters, so I'm not living with that same level of urgency that I was when I wrote the book. It's not dissimilar from the pandemic. Both are global catastrophes that are putting life as we know it, life in community, on the line.

Lots of those poems were written with this fear in the background or foreground about how much longer we might get to live in this way on this planet. Even the title, *After Earth*, seems fitting now. Doesn't it?

**Inscape:** And that's what I mean when I suggest that you are a poet who is paying attention. You just launched your second book of poems, *The Indistinguishable*. It's a common adage to say that writers are always writing whether or not their hand is [on] the page. What have you been writing since your book's launch? In other words, to what are you paying attention?

**ML:** I find myself writing a lot of short poems these days. I'm very interested in trying to discover for myself what is the shortest utterance I can make that still looks like a poem, smells like a poem, quacks like a poem, you know. I mean there are haiku—beautiful and short. I feel myself kind of distilling and cutting and boiling down.

**Inscape:** I have seen evidence of your play versus form in your work. Your work, to me, is this interesting balance between an homage to traditional form and breaking all the rules. For example, your poem might use a tercet structure traditionally through much of the poem, then suddenly, you'll break a stanza with a quatrain. What you are saying about Haiku and playing with short utterances is interesting. You are creating your own creative aesthetic by playing with the form and then breaking it.

**ML:** Well thank you very much! I think that was a good comment. I love work that takes something and makes it new. Like you said, the “it” being the tradition, but the newness also being important. We're not wrecking, abandoning, or setting fire to the tradition, but we are bringing it into our time because we love it. Yes, that is what I hope for

I believe that there are a million ways to write a poem and half of those million ways contradict the other half, which means you can do anything in poetry as long as you can do it well. There's no universal rule that all poems obey, but if there was, I think one thing that is almost universal is that poems must be about their author's not knowing. There are didactic poems in which an author has a

theory, a philosophy, a set of facts, or a piece of information that he or she wants to convey and some of those poems are successful. However, most successful poems are the embodiments of their author's unknowing, not the record of their author's answer. No answers need to exist on the page for a poem to succeed. The more questions a poem has, the more authentic. In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke says to "live the questions." Why is there suffering? Why doesn't God seem to hear our prayers? What should I feed my kids for breakfast? It doesn't matter if the questions we are living are mundane or deep. It's applicable to anyone, not just poets.

**Inscape:** Rhythm and meter seem to be recurring tools in your poems. I've noticed how you use them to invoke feeling. For example, in "Someone's Bright Paradise," the meter of the poem seems to speed the poem up aurally as the poem's subject train on which the speaker is riding feels like it's speeding up. When one reads this poem aloud as I did, the sense of speed and urgency is felt right before the line break. The poem then slows with a dreamy tercet at the end. How do you feel rhythm and meter play together in your process?

**ML:** I feel very flattered that you are reading my poems so lovingly. I utilize rhythm and meter first because they just are fun, and second because they are beautiful. William Butler Yeats says, "The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance." When I hear this quote, I think of rocking

babies to sleep. You do not rock sporadically, or the baby will stay awake. Instead, there's a certain regularity of motion. And so, the purpose of rhythm in poetry is to lull us with regularity but keep us awake with variety. Good writers of metrical poetry mix it up. Think of Shakespeare. Yes, there is an underlying pattern, but Shakespeare is only iambic sixty percent of the time. The other forty percent, he is defying the pattern. Like Yeats says, it is this mixture of being lulled half asleep but kept perpetually awake that is trance-inducing. Yeats' word for this is "trance."

**Inscape:** I'm thinking about the trance you're talking about and how it relates to where we began, talking about poetry being as much a spiritual practice as anything. There is something metrical and trancelike to rituals in spirituality and in writing poetry.

**ML:** Yes. There's the tide of the spiritual practice. There's a reason we sing hymns there's a reason people chant. There's a reason much of the bible is actual poetry.

**Inscape:** In describing your work, I would say it's aural. It's precise. It's intentional. It balances between form and freedom. How would you describe your work and the process of making it?

**ML:** Badly, I'm sure. I would respond with satisfaction to your very generous description. That does sound like me and what I want to have accomplished. What could I possibly add to it? My work is my attempt to fall in love with the world. Sometimes it looks one way and sometimes it looks another. Sometimes it's meter, sometimes it's

rhyme. Sometimes it's about nature, sometimes it's about children.

Poetry in my life is my attempt to fall in love with the world, while still allowing it to surprise me. My work doesn't always obey my commands. I start a poem believing it will be a sonnet, and it wriggles out of that expectation, turning into something totally different.

I can't think of a better pursuit in life than to attempt to fall in love with it. We're here for such a short time we may as well fall in love with it.

**Inscape:** Knowing yourself and your work—what you're trying to do and what you're trying to put out in the world—what should I be asking you that I didn't think to ask?

**ML:** I want to encourage those who are just starting to write poetry. I still have a lot of doubts about how to write poetry. Every time I begin a new poem, I feel like I'm starting over in some fundamental way. I wonder how the poem is going to work. I also wonder how it is that I have no idea what I'm doing. I mean that happens to me every single time. The unknowing has never gone away.

When I first started writing poems, the feeling was especially bad. I remember thinking, *I'll never get on top of this. I'll never know what I'm doing. I'll never have read all the books. I'll never have developed all the skills I need. I'll never have met all the people I need to meet, or taken all the classes I need to take.* It felt overwhelming. I expected too much of myself and I noticed there was such a big gap between

the poems that I loved and the poems I was writing. I wondered how the gap would ever lessen.

I just want to convey to such people what Emerson says in his essay called “The Poet.” He says “Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say ‘it is *in me and shall out*’.” I would have found that really encouraging as a new poet, to know that even a person like Emerson understands that to get onto the page what you have inside of you takes a lot of patience, a lot of work, and a lot of determination. It’s going to go wrong and it’s going to go badly. You’re going to think that you can’t do it. Do not think this way! Try not to doubt. Persist! Say to yourself, “It is in me and will out.” Don’t give up. Don’t give up. Don’t give up. And at the end, that’s what I’d like to say.



## INTERVIEW WITH ALYSON HAGY

by Ian Curtis

*Alyson Hagy grew up with on a farm in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. She is a graduate of Williams College ('82) where she twice won the Benjamin Wainwright Prize for her fiction and completed an Honors thesis under the direction of Richard Ford. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan ('85) working with George Garrett, Alan Cheuse, and Janet Kauffman. While at Michigan, she was awarded a Hopwood Prize in Short Fiction and a Roy Cowden Fellowship. Early stories were published in Sewanee Review, Crescent Review, and Virginia Quarterly Review. In 1986, Stuart Wright published her first collection of fiction, Madonna On Her Back.*

**Inscape:** In your novel *Scribe*, I felt like there was a unity between the setting and the characters, like the characters were almost a product of the fallen world they lived in. I was wondering if you could just kind of speak to the creation of the characters and then the setting.

**Alyson Hagy:** I had this vision of a woman sitting in a dilapidated house writing letters. That happens to me on occasion, and it often means it will lead to a short story, so I just sort of put it in my back pocket. As I thought about this woman in a dilapidated house, I thought "What if she were there because people were coming to ask her to write letters because she's literate?" It was quickly clear

to me that I could set this in the place where I'd grown up and that the characters were also going to be from the Appalachian subculture that I'm from. I thought it might be a historical novel. I thought it might be set post-Civil War, 1870s, the sort of ugliness of Reconstruction, but then I thought to myself, "This is my chance to go back to the world I grew up in when the Civil War felt close and soak myself in those voices."

I think one of the prime reasons I am a writer is I grew up in a really oral storytelling tradition, so people built community and communicated through story. So I thought, "I don't know who this woman is, and I don't know who these people are coming to, but they can be the kinds of people that I know in my bones." I hadn't done a project like that set in Virginia since my second set of stories in a while, 20 years.

[G]eography influences character for sure in the Blue Ridge Mountains, because people can have privacy. You can get into these hollows and these small, sustainable farms. You can be off to yourself and independent. So, geography influences the community. I am a writer who's interested in places where it's hard for human beings to live; where it's not easy.

What I was trying to do in *Scribe* was to tell a story (or a series of stories) and have a character who needed to go on a journey where then there would be these stories told around her. I went back and read a lot of Appalachian folklore, which gave me [the] license to do crazy things, like the scene with Billy Kingery giving her the bowl.

I loved writing about Hendricks. I love the sort of stranger who shows up, and you don't really know who he is. I didn't know who he was for a while, but I didn't care. I just knew I was going to find out, and I really enjoyed figuring that out.

One thing I will say is, don't harness yourself to fashion or what you think should happen. If you've got stories to tell, and they seem to be out of the box or unusual or not what other people are doing, tell them. Because it might be necessary for you as a storyteller to go [into] that space. You must follow it. You must follow the stuff you're committed to. Otherwise, your writing is not going to be interesting. It won't be your passion. I spent a lot of time trying to talk myself out of some of the moves I was making in *Scribe*, but in the end, I just had to follow her.

**Inscape:** How do you know which stories are worth writing?

**AH:** That's a great question. One of my early mentors, the writer Richard Ford, said to me, "Before you start writing a novel, try to talk yourself out of it because it's going to be a three or four-year commitment." So, ask yourself, take some time. Keep some notes but think about it. "Is this important enough to you?" I have had some false starts. I'm not a natural novelist. I love writing short stories so much. I came to the novelist game relatively late.

[T]here are always other writers out there who know more about Appalachian folk tales, or more about training horses, or about the Korean War—whatever these things that I've tried to write about.

But there was always a character I just felt like I could live with for a while, and I really wanted to understand them. Some of them have been easier to live with than others, I have to say. Will Testerman in *Boleto* was a lot of fun. He has a sad life, but he's a good person. I also had a lot of fun with the Scribe protagonist. She's hard, but I had a lot of fun with her because I was able to go back to this Appalachia.

I've been writing hard for 40 years and the doubt is still powerful. I know it's not fun to hear. I have to be willing to write poorly and then just keep the faith.

**Inscape:** How do you hold off the doubt in writing?

**AH:** I'm good at tuning it out, and I'm a good compartmentalizer. I read and I tend to write short stories on the side while I'm working on novels and that gives me a lot of pleasure. These things help me get out of my head. That helps.

My students were reminding me this week, how scary it can be to be in an MFA program, but also how scary it is to work on a first novel. I failed many times. What picked me up, I think, was that I love books—lots of different kinds of books—so much. I wanted to sing with that choir. There's just something about writing alongside the books you love that feels really good.

Now, I'm lucky. Right? I have a job. I have a partner who has a job. For some, economic security is so important, and it should be. Being in the arts is triply scary. You may have a family, and that

might be a worry. This was true for me when I was raising my kid. I had to find a balance and I did the best I could.

**Inscape:** Scribe's characters were masterfully layered. Everyone was morally gray and everyone had more in their story to tell. Why did you choose to write about these types of characters?

**AH:** In Hendrick's case, I think it has always seemed to me that characters who are very physically competent, maybe they're warrior-type figures, often have more complicated interior lives than we might guess. Not always Hendricks is kind of a pirate figure or a highwayman, but he's a good person. I knew he had been forced to learn to behave and act in certain ways to survive.

I think this also goes back to the way I grew up. The brand of Christianity I was raised in was very interested in that kind of layering. That's not true for all brands of Christians. It is for me. There would just be people every week who would be digging into the complexity of Saul or King Solomon. Reading the Bible like you'd read literary characters, and I think that that had a huge influence on me.

I believe there are very few human beings who are unredeemable.

**Inscape:** We've touched on this, but what role mentors have played in your writing career?

**AH:** My mentors have been very important, and they seem to have been there when I needed them the most. I went to a small liberal

arts college. Their creative writing was a very, very tiny piece of the English major and I loved being an English major, but I went to college to be pre-med. Then there was a professor who read my essay on Robert Frost and called me into their office. I was so scared, and he walked me through my essay and where it was not logical, but he said, "Look what you're doing here. You're responding to Frost's metaphors with metaphors of your own. Have you ever thought about taking a creative writing class?" It would never have occurred to me. The professor was a very fine poet and just plucked me out of a freshman class to kind of say "You're maybe not the greatest analyst in the world, but you love language and I think you should have permission to play with language." That was the first.

Then at Williams as a senior, Richard Ford, who was one of America's finest writers, happened to be the visiting writer and he happened to agree, probably because we're both from the South, to direct my thesis project. He took me on. He didn't take other people on. I was a hard worker, so I didn't disappoint him in that way, but he was hard on me because he wanted to see if it really mattered. He wasn't hard, like cruel, but he asked me, "Why are you writing when you leave here? Nobody's going to care. It's easy to be an artist at a college because there's a lot of privilege. But once you get out in the real world, really, nobody's going to care about your stories. They aren't going to. So why are you doing this and how much do you want to do?"

Richard also told me, "I will not write you a letter of recommendation for graduate school until you go out in the real world and live for

a while. If you go out in the real world and you're doing a job and you're still writing stories at night and on the weekend, you call me up and I'll write you a letter." After I graded all those high school papers, I was still writing my stories. Even I was surprised by that, and I did take it as a sign, so MFA.

In my MFA, I thought they were going to say to me, "You're good enough, but here's how to even get better. Do this." That was not what they did. I was actually frustrated because I kind of like to get A's in class or whatever. My professors really built it more like, how is writing working in your life? Here are all these books you need to read, like, yes, you've read George Eliot, you've read the classics, but here are all these writers you've never heard of and all these writers in translation you never heard of. You've got to read like a crazy person.

When I would ask a question about a story, they would just flip it right back to me, trying to train me. I had to work and understand myself so that when I was cast beyond the MFA, I would have some tools.

I've also had other mid-career people. I mean, Charles Baxter, one of our greatest story writers, was on the faculty at Michigan when I was a young faculty member, just a generous, kind person. Annie Proulx was out here in Wyoming when I moved here, just a tough and brilliant writer. Super, super kind to me. Also, Joy Williams, who's also hanging out in Wyoming now. I've been really lucky.

**Inscape:** What would be your advice for new writers?

**AH:** Play with language. Play with whatever drove you to want to write at first. So, it could be sound, it could be really at the level of syllable and sentence, or it could be the character. Your imagination is filled with these personalities you want to get down.

It could be setting, it could be ideas. Some people are idea-driven writers. I'm not. But play [with] whatever draws you there, don't forget the joy, don't forget the play because that's the thing that carries us through.

You also read. Read like a crazy person. And not just the things you think you're supposed to read. Read what you like. I read so many comics as a kid. If they'd had graphic novels when I was a kid, I might be a graphic novelist. I loved those so much. If you love TV and video games, those can also be a part of your narrative practice. Film, music, there are a lot of ways that you can work on your craft. Some of the finest writers I've worked with were trained seriously in the sciences. They're both analytical and super curious. I would say to give yourself permission to make of language what you want to make of it, because we only have three or four key human impulses, and storytelling is one of them. So, join.



## INTERVIEW WITH ROSS GAY

by Christie Gardiner

*Ross Gay is the author of four books of poetry: *Against Which*; *Bringing the Shovel Down*; *Be Holding*, winner of the PEN American Literary Jean Stein Award; and *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*, winner of the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award and the 2016 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award. In addition to his poetry, Ross has released three collections of essays—*The Book of Delights* was released in 2019 and was a New York Times bestseller; *Inciting Joy* was released in 2022, and his newest collection, *The Book of (More) Delights* was released in September of 2023.*

**Inscape:** Ross, in my view, proximation with one another is where hope is born. Your writing feels proximate. I read your work and, I think, “oh yeah, me too!” You make us think of our own delights. First, I want to thank you for that—your words feel like friends—but I also want to ask, how do you do this? How do you write about the world as if you are close-up?

**Ross Gay:** Well, I try to be close-up to the world. That’s the practice. Second, writing that way doesn’t just happen. It’s a skill. I try to write like that. My work is highly edited. It’s gone through many drafts. I’m a writer after all. It doesn’t just come out the way you read it. You should see my notebooks, they’re just a mess. I write my essays very fast, and by hand in a notebook. I find it’s easier that way, to

separate myself from making it the “right” way. It’s harder to not be yourself in a notebook rather than a screen. Often, it’s when I am writing that I actually discover what I am thinking. Kind of like being my own first reader. It’s a great practice because it separates the writer from the outside voices.

**Inscape:** What are the “outside voices?”

**RG:** Most of the writers I know have those voices, and they are often like those sort of perfectionist-making voices, those writing block-making voices, and those are the voices that kind of know what a thing *should be* or what a thing *might be* before you even endeavor to do the thing.

**Inscape:** Ah, I see. These are the voices that tell the poem what it is before it is written.

**RG:** Yes, and that’s not how it works, or at least how it works well. To the extent that those voices are present, I would say, just become aware of them or something. Just see if they are there, and then maybe think about what are, you know, actually like are there ways, again, are there physical, mechanical ways that you can kind of evade those things? Thinking about those things is very powerful, you know?

**Inscape:** Yes! What would a “mechanical” way of evading those voices be?

**RG:** I feel like I'm fundamentally a coach. I like stuff where I can be like, oh, okay, if we're going to work on your left hand, let's just count every left-handed basket as three points, and every other basket you shoot with your right hand, a one point. So for me, like, writing by hand is a really good way to work on the three-point-left-hand shot and disarm that part of my writing super-ego or whatever you call it. I think that when you type, you can always disappear the process by which you've arrived, so that there's something about some of our technology, the way that we use it, some of us, me, that tries to actually hide the fact of our transformation in the process of making something, which is also to say that it sort of maybe makes a dream of the finished thing. It might hold the dream of the finished thing. The notebook holds no such dream. Notebooks are a mess, you know?

**Inscape:** Just like us!

**RG:** I've been transcribing these notebooks, actually, by reading them into the computer, and I'm trying to figure out what the hell I'm saying. I'm like, reading through all my crossouts and all this stuff, which to me is really moving because it's the evidence of how I've come for the moment to arrive at a thought, you know? I'm not thinking to disappear how I've arrived to where I am now. This also, I think, just as a practice, a writing practice, feels also kind of interesting. It's a way to practice being in relationship, you know? It also lets me, to the best of my ability, also understand that everyone's in the process of changing.

**Inscape:** Regarding this process, it feels to me as if you are changing as you approach the notebook page with the ego separated. You're allowing yourself to change on the page in front of the thing you are creating. As we talked about earlier, you're your first reader, so you're changing in front of yourself, then you're allowing other people to witness this change.

When we talk about proximation, I think your way of showing up to the page is, perhaps, why we all have a feeling of "me too!" when we read your work. I think we feel this because you're allowing us to witness change. That's amazing.

**RG:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. There're two things that I want to say about that. One is that it is also a kind of unbecoming, you know? You're watching yourself unbecome yourself. As opposed to this other thing of like, I'm asserting myself, or I'm imposing myself. No, you're kind of witness to your unbecoming.

**Inscape:** Yes! I think going to the page as a writer is a spiritual practice of unbecoming. On the page you get to separate what you think and what is coming out, then choose what to unbecome.

**RG:** It feels like a useful thing. The other thing I wanted to say [about being accessible] is that I had someone, I can't remember, they wrote a letter or something, and they were like, "I was reading your work, and I was watching you in an essay kind of stumble around for the right word, and I was like, why don't you just do the right work? Why don't you just go to the right word?" And then they had the

realization, they understood, “oh, you’re showing us that you think, you’re showing us that you have to work through things to arrive at the right word for the time being.” It’s so beautiful, because that person’s email then offered me what I was sort of offering. They were discovering what they thought as they wrote it. First they were kind of annoyed, but then they appreciated that I went back and forth.

That discovery as I go, whether it’s speaking or on the page, is precisely one of the things that I do. I think actually you’re right, doing it this way makes readers be like, “oh, yeah, me too.” I never know the right word right off the bat.

**Inscape:** Yeah, me neither. And it’s not just with words, it’s with feelings. The same process of discovery applies.

**RG:** Yeah.

**Inscape:** Oh, I really love that, and I love the idea of a process of unbecoming. My brain is kind of spinning with that right now, because we always talk about becoming. I kind of love the idea of unbecoming. Where did that idea find you?

**RG:** Hmm. I can’t remember. I can’t remember, like, I remember sitting in a program I was teaching for the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary with my buddy J. Kameron Carter, the theologian and a beautiful writer and thinker. We were reading a poem called “Zong” by M. NourbeSe Philip, and it’s just a very, it’s an incredibly beautiful, powerful, difficult, difficult poem. It’s sort of, it’s an almost

impossible poem, and that's what it needs to be, but somehow the conversation that we were having was about questions of the spirit. I was a theologian, so he had the sort of chops to do all that, and you know, questions of the spirit were always very present in the thinking and talking, but there was something about that discussion that made me think that connecting to witness our own unbecoming is part of the reason we turn [toward writing]. Writing can hold our unbecoming. Something about that conversation made me think, oh, this is a kind of relationship to the work that feels more real, and it sort of articulates more what I'm thinking about. Now that I think about it, in my *Inciting Joy* book, that essay about grief is also very much about unbecoming.

**Inscape:** You're right, it is. Regarding that essay, "Grief Suite (Falling Apart: The Thirteenth Incitement)," and the essay which immediately follows it "Oh, My Heart (Gratitude: The Fourteenth Incitement)," which are both in your book *Inciting Joy*, they surprised me! It's a novel concept for most people to hold both grief and joy. How do you hold these at the same time when the world is upside down? Social, political, and ethical crises abound and yet, as I'm reading your essays and poems, it feels to me that you have learned how to hold delight in one hand with deep concern in the other. Somehow, you come to the page impassioned and joyful rather than impassioned and bitter.

**RG:** I think partly the reason is because joy is never separate from grief. Joy is never separate from devastation or catastrophe. Joy is always acknowledging, aware of, and in the midst of those things.

**Inscape:** Yes, joy and sorrow are two sides of the same thing, but what I feel like you have done that I am striving to do in my life, and I think many people are striving to do, is to allow the joy in while sorrow sits waiting. I no longer want to wait sorrow out before feeling joy.

**RG:** That's Beautiful.

**Inscape:** Is that a learned practice? I mean, how did you arrive at a place of gratitude, joy, delight, because I assume, and from what I've read and learned, your life has the same challenges everyone else's life has?

**RG:** Yeah, I mean, in a practical way, I feel like when my mind became sort of, difficult to be with, I was shown books, teachers, et cetera, who maybe gave me some kind of possible way. The writers Pema Chödrön—a Buddhist nun, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Chödrön 's teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche mean so much to me. A book, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* by Chögyam Trungpa, affected me so much when I read it. Then, later in life I reread it and was looking at what I had underlined back when I was 32 and 33. One of the underlines was something like, [paraphrases Trungpa] *you know that you're sort of moving toward this kind of the peaceful warrior as a loving, compassionate creature, if you are smiling with the tears in your eyes.* I've had many other models than that too, but I feel like those models came at a time where it felt in a way very hard to sort of be alive, you know.

Even in the “Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude” poem, it kind of starts in the orchard and all this stuff, but early on there’s like a bell [a bell of awareness ringing to the poem’s speaker]. I think of it like a bell telling you, it’s the orchard that might help you stay alive even. You know, studying things like this: the orchard, the celebration, the gathering, the care, the planting, the tending, is one of the ways we stay alive; one of the ways that we survive in the midst of the horror, you know?

**Inscape:** Yes, this is important. I’m also thinking about how you hold on to seemingly discordant positions and still manage to find joy. You’re writing about delight, gratitude and joy, and I wonder how do you write like this without losing yourself or your positions? You aren’t weak. Your essays strongly hold both joy and sorrow. How?

I think of the essay “Snoopy” which is about watching the Macy’s Day Parade with your mom, who you love, while being frustrated by the “global corporate dominion,” represented by this parade. That doesn’t feel simple. So how are you holding both joy and sorrow in the moment?

**RG:** I probably do and don’t hold both in the moment. I should also be very clear, like I’m a writer, and my books are a crafted thing. I’m just a mess like everyone else. I’m thinking about things and writing things and I’m just good at revising, you know, so there’s that. The way that I read that essay, and that last line especially, like, I’m loving Snoopy, but I’m also wondering, why won’t he give Linus the water? He did it again. He keeps on not giving Linus, the sick



person, the water, you know? To me, even that moment of trying to redeem the experience by talking about how much I love Snoopy, in that setting, in that midst, I hear both how comical Snoopy is, but I also hear, yo, hey, Linus needs a drink.

**Inscape:** Your explication is, to me, another example of holding joy and sorrow, both in life and in writing.

**RG:** Yeah.

**Inscape:** I find in your work an awareness of impermanence. It seems not to scare you. Instead, it feels as if impermanence fuels your delight and joy. Can you talk a little bit about that and if that is also a part of your spiritual practice, a part of your writing practice, both?

**RG:** Yeah, it's so neat that those Buddhist teachers would surely have been places where I would have been encouraged to think hard about coming to terms with impermanence, you know, to really think about it. Like a lot of people, I have been told, and have kind of believed in, making a thing that lasts forever as an aspiration. You know, like, *how cool if someone three-hundred years from now was reading my work, or a thousand years*. That's the kind of thing we're told to aspire to as artists. And at some point, I started to think, *not only do I not have any aspiration for that, but that I don't know if it's a good idea to want to last forever*.

**Inscape:** Why is it not?

**RG:** It's sort of like, it's time to let other people, you know? There is some deep occupying part of ourselves. Like we just want to be *there* and stick around and take up all the space. It's a kind of egotism to imagine that the things I'm wondering about are going to be of use beyond this moment.

I want to practice being very concerned about and joining my questions with the people with whom I share the planet at this moment. Even more particularly, I want to join my questions with people I might run into at the vegan bakery, or the Afghan place, or at the basketball court—now. My friend Patrick Rossell, a beautiful poet, talks about the local a lot. And it's sort of like that. It's sort of like, there's all kinds of locals. And I feel there's a kind of temporal localness too. Like, maybe it's okay to only talk to people who are your neighbors in both place and time. If it happens that some connection goes beyond that, all right, great. Whatever. But really, to have that aspiration, I don't know, it feels dangerous actually. The spirit behind that feels kind of harmful. It feels acquisitive, as if you are saying "I want everything. I even want the future." At the same time, I like to plant trees in part because I like the idea that trees will be around for a long time. I want to acknowledge that there's some kind of contradiction. I don't know if there's a contradiction in that, but anyway, you've provoked me into writing an essay. I know I am going to write one.

**Inscape:** This is so interesting because I'm thinking, how is an essay different from a tree?

**RG:** That's the essay. That's the title. That's the title. I'm going to write that down. How is an essay different than a tree?

**Inscape:** I had this experience once while hiking. I was tired and put my hand on an aspen tree to rest. I felt a zing of pain in my hand, so I pulled my hand away from the aspen. When I looked at the tree to see what could have hurt me, I saw freshly carved initials in the aspen's bark, right where I had put my hand. I carefully put my hand back on the aspen and I swear, I could feel the pain of this tree. That was the first time that I learned that a tree could teach me. Since then, trees are my friends and someone else did plant them. They were here before me, and they'll be here after I'm gone. When I put my hand on my copy of *Inciting Joy* placed on the table next to me, like I did that aspen tree, it teaches me. I think about all the literature that's come before. To think we wouldn't have it is devastating. From what would we learn? It's troubling to me to think we should assume we have nothing to learn from thinkers of the past. And yet, I see what you're saying in that it is kind of dangerous arrogance to assume our writing could inform the future. I don't know.

**RG:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. At least it's a question. It might be the case that certain questions, seem to periodically, or resurgently, or steadily be useful, but we can also imagine, I can imagine ways that certain questions remain useful to a set of values that maybe could like change, could go away.

**Inscape:** I guess that takes us to a question of what is everlasting, and what is temporary? Is there anything everlasting? ...I think love is everlasting.

**RG:** Yeah, that seems right.

**Inscape:** Maybe it's the only thing that is.

**RG:** You're right. It feels too, like in terms of that, of joining one's work to that...

**Inscape:** ...to love....

**RG:** ...yeah, offering it to love feels to me like a reasonable thing to do. Not offering it to the permanence of "the state" and carving it in marble—which is all a fraud anyway. It's a brutal fraud. But to think of offering my work to an actual permanent thing, which is called love, which I would also say trees are an eminence of, that feels right.

**Inscape:** And it also begs the question, does our work belong to us?

**RG:** Yeah, totally.

**Inscape:** Do I own the words I put on the page? I mean, I don't know. I'm sure you wondered the same. I'm sure every writer does. More times than not, when writing that I'm like, yeah, this is me writing. But there have also been times where it feels like a flow from somewhere both inside and outside of me. It's usually when I'm

writing in nature. It feels like the words are coming in and coming through me and coming out. So if I write them down, do those words belong to me? And if they don't belong to me, then couldn't they belong to everyone before me and after me?

**RG:** Exactly. I think what you just said is like an expression of gratitude.

**Inscape:** What is the difference between joy, delight, and gratitude? I noticed that the title *Inciting Joy* uses a verb, whereas your books on delight don't have verbs in their titles. Is there a difference between joy, delight, and gratitude?

**RG:** So just real quick, "incite" is an adjective too. It's a verb and an adjective, which is why I partly like it.

**Inscape:** *Inciting* joy. I love it as an adjective!

**RG:** You know, I do too. Joy is *inciting*. I firmly believe that our practice of tending to one another is an incitement that will afflict such things as a brutal system. *Inciting* will be a violence to brutality. Our capacity to care for one another in radical ways, to plant trees together, to care for each other, to rely on one another, that's a violence to a system which needs us to believe that they are the ones who are going to care for us. That *IT, the system*, is the one that is going to care for us. It's not true. And so, when I chose the word *Inciting*, I meant it.

But here's how I think of the difference between joy and delight: This was articulated for me by this guy named Michael, in Northampton, Massachusetts. We were talking about joy, and how the connection of joy is sort of like mycelium, which is sort of like love actually. I think of joy and love as being pretty much the same thing. But like, the fact that we are connected, threaded together to one another is amazing. Joy to me feels like the practice of witnessing and attending to that connection. It's there. But we, for various reasons, often do not acknowledge it. Delight, and this is what this guy got me on, he is like, *oh, delight is like the mushrooms, periodically popping up through the mycelium reminding us to remember, it's all connected.* So that's how I'm thinking about it these days.

Gratitude, it's funny, in my head I kind of have an overlap of gratitude, joy, and love—like a trinity. I think of gratitude like understanding connections, and also understanding that practicing gratitude is how anything meaningful has arrived. Any bit of care, any bit of love, any bit of tending, any bit of nourishment, any bit of anything. What we have is impossible to catalog, absolutely impossible to catalog, no matter also the destitution that we're in. Which is often why the best teachers of gratitude, I think, are the people in the midst of profound trouble. It's not the people in the midst of profound ease, it's the people in the midst of profound trouble who can teach us about gratitude. And the thing about gratitude, I think, is that in acknowledging that, whatever you call it, the sort of ongoing, ever-changing, ever-replenishing oceans of care, it inclines us to join the care. It inclines us to be more generous, because we understand.

By acknowledging the care, we understand that we've never done anything by ourselves, despite all of the mythologies to suggest it was otherwise. What a relief to be like, *yeah, no, I didn't do that amazing thing. I worked on it, I worked on it, I put a lot of hours in, da-da-da-da, but it would take me about, oh, ten minutes to come up with a hundred things completely outside my control that were done on my behalf, in order for the amazing thing to happen.* Some of those things might be like the sun shone. And some of those things might be like, you know, my mother cooked for me every night she could. And she had a mother, and her mother had a mother, and her mother had a mother, and her mother... you know, at which point you're sort of like, oh, I guess maybe I should do my damage to chip-into this thing with my gratitude. I will accept that I'm special in the fact that I'm like part of this whole thing of care, but also, maybe I should figure out how to chip-in to life.

**Inscape:** Talking about the idea of interconnectivity brings me back to the "How is an Essay Like a Tree" thought. If nothing actually belongs to any of us, and nothing is created in isolation, then it seems to me that you could, theoretically make something that lasts beyond yourself without violence, because the thing you made was never yours to begin with. Is that part of chipping-in with gratitude?

**RG:** Yeah, yeah, that's right.

**Inscape:** Ross, your voice is so distinctive. I know that if I picked up a book and didn't know anything about it, I would read one page and know it was yours. How did you develop your voice, and do

you feel, based on our earlier discussion, that you are unbecoming something you were made to be, or do you feel like you're discovering who you were meant to be?

**RG:** I definitely feel like every good bout of the thinking that is “writing,” is a process of unbecoming. So, my aspiration is a kind of unbecoming into something I can't imagine. Finding voice this way is also a kind of curiosity I feel like I'm, I am in the process of always developing a voice by copying other writers who I love. Just thinking about who I want to sound like, and practicing. It's as simple as that. When I was a kid learning how to sing, I would listen over and over and over again to Terence Trent D'Arby, and Lenny Kravitz, and Bono, and Tracy Chapman, and Al Jarreau, and Simon and Garfunkel, and Al Green, and Michael McDonald, and The Doobie Brothers. I'd come up with a way to sound like something, that is again, not original, but is a kind of gathering up of other people. In writing, it's the same thing.

Recently, I was going back to reading the writer John Edgar Weideman, who was one of my most important writers. It had been some years, and I was like, “oh shit, that's how I learned to write a sentence.” Even another friend read Weideman and said, “Ross sounds so much like this guy.”

And there's so many other people I can say that about. Our beloved Gerald Stern, the poet and essayist who died about a year ago, he is all in my voice. Even in terms of like, some of his syntax, some of his inclination to repetition, his pulling the delightful and the sorrowful



right next to each other again and again, his tendency to digression... in my work, that all comes from him, you know? Not from him alone, but from him. I could talk about the writer Rebecca Solnit.

**Inscape:** Oh! I love Rebecca Solnit...

**RG:** ...Oh I love her too, amazing! The writer Toi Derricotte, her voice is all in my voice. The writer Jeff Dyer, or David Shields, or June Jordan... There's so many I could list and I sort of think, "oh I'm just gonna imitate some of that. I'm gonna try to learn how to talk like they talk."

Ultimately, I want my voice to sound how I love a thing to sound. I'm trying to make something I love, so that's important too. By the way, making something you love is different than trying to make something that's good. I'm trying to write stuff that when I finish it, I'm like *yeah, I love that!*

**Inscape:** Because like you said, you are your first reader. I like the idea of seeking to write what we love over seeking to write what's good because what's good is determined externally whereas, what we love is determined internally.

**RG:** Yeah, yeah, exactly.

**Inscape:** The internal versus external is an important distinction, because, as you know, being a writer comes with a lot of rejection.

What would you say to the writers who are in the midst of submitting their work and experiencing nothing but rejection?

**RG:** Yeah, we've all gone through that. It's kind of the way of things, but more importantly, there's the kind of professional and also social kind of the publicness of submitting to journals and all that whole life, but there's also something that feels really important to keep track of and I try to remind my students of this and it's not always easy because I feel like the pressure is very hard but I would want to remind emerging writers that you are not a bad writer because your stuff doesn't get accepted into a given journal nor are you a good writer because it does.

We need honest and loving readers of our work, through whom and with whom we can actually understand whether or not something that we've made is beautiful. For myself, I always have other people who I really trust read what I work on.

The one thing I know by now is that it's simply a losing game to put our belief in how an editor (who's sleepy, hungry, has to go home and, like, cook dinner, and just themselves got rejected 11 times last week) is gonna respond to your poem. You gotta be a little more like, *yeah whatever*. It's also useful to remember, as we're having strong feelings about this stuff, that when we read those magazines we're aspiring to get into, we don't like everything or even half of what's in them. Basically, we gotta stop measuring ourselves by these false things. What I really need to say is, we have to stop measuring ourselves, and just write.

Writing and being in community feels to me like the most important thing. And, yes, publication can be an attempt at being in community with other writers. This actually took me a long time to understand, but my most important advice for those in the face of rejection, is to love other writers' work.

**Inscape:** Oh, that's beautiful! and in that way, based on everything we've been talking about you get to become a part of their work in loving their work and being grateful for their work, you are a part of that tree, you are a part of that mycelium.

**RG:** That's right.

**Inscape:** So, what are you working on now?

**RG:** Well, I have a handful of books I'm in the midst of writing. I'm very excited to say that in January I'm gonna start in earnest on a book about my garden. I've been working on it on and off for the last few years, but I kind of have a form set up for it, so I'm excited about that.

I've been writing a lot about this very intense book tour that I've been on and that's feeling very interesting. In the midst of writing that is where I discovered that in my writing I'm actually the one writing and reading what I'm writing at the same time, so, you know, that's been fun. There might be some poems percolating around there.

**Inscape:** That's exciting! I love everything you write about your garden. My husband is a gardener and whenever I read about your garden, I think of him. He finds God in his Garden. Ross, who or what is God to you?

**RG:** God is that love we were talking about, that connection.

**Inscape:** Do you feel like writing is a way to connect to that?

**RG:** More like, to connect to whatever is here. When I'm writing, I'm writing to connect as deeply as possible to what is right here, and that to me feels like the spiritual practice. The connections between us might feel like what I think of as God, you know?

**Inscape:** Yeah, I think I do. Thank you, Ross.

**RG:** You asked all the good questions. You challenged me. You inspired me, actually your questions kind of really energized me.

**Inscape:** I'm so glad you energized me, so we shared that today

**RG:** Yeah, that's what we did. We shared.

## INTERVIEW WITH AGATA IZABELA BREWER

by Alyssa Kang

*Agata was born and raised in Poland. She came to the U.S. as an MFA student and graduated with a Ph.D. in English from the University of South Carolina. Her publications include a forthcoming memoir, *The Hunger Book*, scholarly books on 20th-century literature, as well as essays and short stories in *Guernica*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Contrary Magazine*, *River Poets Journal*, *Entropy*, *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities*, and *Wabash Magazine*. She is the winner of the 2022 Gournay Prize and the 2019 *Black Warrior Review* Nonfiction Prize. Agata lives in Indiana, where she teaches at Wabash College and volunteers as a Court Appointed Special Advocate. She is the founder and chair of Immigrant Allies.*

**Inscape:** When did your writing journey begin? You mentioned how writing became an escape from the challenges you were experiencing. Was there a moment or period of time early on that influenced your path toward writing?

**Agata Izabela Brewer:** I wrote bad poetry as a kid and adolescent, in Polish. Then I became too self-conscious and self-critical to write creatively and, instead, I read voraciously and started writing literary criticism. I think I had to mature to being open again to the trials

and mistakes of creative work. Perhaps seeing my kids engage freely in all kinds of artistic endeavors helped me realize it's okay to do art, even badly. I'm not sure, but watching them draw chalk rainbows and misshapen dinosaurs reminded me that perfection is the enemy of creativity and that the process itself is what matters. I began writing *The Hunger Book* without thinking much about the end goal. I just wanted to record what I witnessed and try to understand it.

**Inscape:** This book explores the idea of hunger in many unique ways. Could you share some additional insights behind the creation of the book's title? Did the title to you come right away or did it take time?

**AB:** The title came to me quite early, which is unusual for me. I often struggle with titles for my scholarly books and essays. Here, I understood early that what I was meditating on was hunger understood in many ways: the hunger for food during and after World War II that my grandparents experienced, the hunger for a warm meal my brother and I sometimes felt when Mother was drunk, and the more metaphorical hunger: for love and affection from a parent who was too far gone into the drink to notice that need in me and my brother. While the subtitle of the book was my publisher's idea, the first part, *The Hunger Book*, had been on my mind as I wrote the essays.

**Inscape:** Throughout the book, you share much of your culture with the reader through traditions, food, and nature. What was it like compiling different traditional Polish recipes and customs and exploring the memories associated with them?

**AB:** I love doing research and connecting seemingly unrelated things, playing with these connections, testing their limits. So traveling to archives, digging through boxes filled with sepia-colored photos, interviewing people—all this was a fun exercise for me, even though the subject matter itself was not always fun. But at one point I realized that the research became a form of escapism, a distraction from the hard practice of writing, and I had to tell myself, “Stop!” So there is a lot of unused material on my computer that I made myself abandon in favor of the creative process. I hope to go back to some of these interviews and photos when I have time to devote to another creative project.

**Inscape:** You share how sometimes your family wouldn’t try certain foods that you grew up with, or that your son preferred to go by the American version of his name. When coming to America, what was it like experiencing that cultural distance or isolation while trying to hold onto that part of who you are?

**AB:** When I came to the U.S. as a graduate student, I thought I knew the country because I had been immersed in the American culture. I had read Steinbeck and Faulkner, Morrison and Dickinson, Poe and King, and I watched American TV shows, and so I thought I was not going to be surprised by much. But, of course, I was wrong. I knew one or two of many complex versions of this country.

As for isolation, neither South Carolina, where I went to grad school, nor Indiana, where I live now are known for large Polish populations. It’s true that I miss speaking and hearing my native

language, tasting traditional Polish foods, having immediate access to all the new books and magazines and films coming out of Poland. And yet I understand that I tend to idealize my native country, perhaps due to the distance, and I tend to forget the things I wanted to escape when I applied for scholarships to distant countries: the parochialism, the religious adherence to the past, the unquestioning attachment to traditions even if they harm living, breathing human beings. In other words, my attitude toward my home country is complicated.

**Inscape:** In the book, you talked about how you initially wrote to understand your mother's past actions, which led to a deeper exploration of your country's history and extended family relations. Do you feel that your past is clearer to you after writing this book, or do you find yourself left with more questions?

**AB:** What writing this book helped me realize is that there is more to my mother's alcohol use disorder and lack of warmth than I had initially thought, that there is epigenetic trauma behind her aggression, that the political and historical context behind her own childhood and early adulthood played a significant role in shaping her as a grown woman, mother, and wife. I also realized that hiding trauma and suppressing unsightly emotions perpetuate dysfunctional behaviors and patterns. I don't know whether I sufficiently answered the questions I was asking at the beginning of the writing process, but I do know that writing helped me ask the right questions and accept ambiguous and incomplete answers.



**Inscape:** You mentioned how coming to write this story was challenging for you and there were difficult obstacles you faced. How did you overcome those barriers? Do you have any advice for writers who might be struggling to write about their own difficult pasts?

**AB:** I do have advice: Don't push it. Be kind to yourself. Whenever I wanted to continue writing despite obvious signals that my body was reacting to unearthing childhood trauma, I ended up paralyzed by fear and panic. I wish I had been gentler with myself. It was my amazing therapist who said that I needed to give myself permission to stop writing, even for longer stretches of time. I learned techniques that helped me ride the waves of panic attacks, which I experienced for the first time while revisiting traumatic moments in order to write about them. To recreate a scene, a writer often wants to remember the specific sensory elements of that scene because that's how scene building generally works. But those same elements that make writing tick can make the writer herself ill all over again. If I associate a particular smell or color or whatever with finding my mother after one of her suicide attempts, I relive that moment all over again, as if I were a small girl. This is why access to mental health specialists and a strong support network are important for memoir writers.

**Inscape:** What is something you hope your readers can take away from your memoir?

**AB:** Well, unlike my scholarly books and essays, which have a thesis, my memoir doesn't have one big claim or a didactic element, or at least I did not write it to teach readers a lesson about anything.

It's an offering of sorts. Here is my life. I hope I turned it into art that you, [the] reader, can be immersed in for some time, be moved by it one way or another, and if you do take something away from it, I'm fine with that, of course. If you see yourself in some of these pages, or if you learn about a life previously alien to you, you've engaged in the text, and that's what matters.

## INTERVIEW WITH DARLENE YOUNG

by Brandon Merrill

*Born and raised in Utah, Darlene Young currently lives in South Jordan with her husband and sons. She received her BA from Brigham Young University (1994) and, after raising her family, returned there for her MFA (2014). She teaches Creative Writing and Literature of the LDS People at Brigham Young University and Brigham Young University-Salt Lake.*

**Inscape:** Do you usually have multiple projects taking mental space or do you just focus on one?

**Darlene Young:** I mostly write poetry. I usually get a draft down, then I put it away for a while so I can concentrate on the next one. On another day, I might pull an old draft out, but it's really—poems are so short. In terms of bigger projects, I only have one at a time that I'm working on. When I have lots of poems, then I start thinking, "Okay, do I have enough for a collection? What would that look like? What are the themes?" Then, there's a lot of rearranging and culling and, you know. But I don't have more than one book going at a time.

**Inscape:** So tell me more about your collection with *Here*. How did it come about? A similar instance of you had a lot of poems that you started looking at and seeing some themes?

**DY:** I had a lot of poems; I even thought I might have enough for two books. There was an illustrator who wanted to get together and

do a motherhood book. I thought, “Can I pull out all the motherhood ones and make this separate thing?” I did that for a little while, and it didn’t work out. I just moved them all back and felt out what would be a good size and how many would go into each section.

When I was putting together this collection, I realized I had themes. The first thing I did was stack all my poems according to theme. These are the “My body’s getting old” poems. These are the “I’m a parent, and I don’t know if I did a good job or not.” These are the “commitment to a religion,” and you know, these are the “marriage poems.” Like that.

This collection isn’t all the poems I had done at the time. There were others that didn’t really fit that I just set aside—maybe for the next book, or maybe never. Then it takes a while to go through the publishing process, get accepted, and all that. Meanwhile, I’m writing more.

**Inscape:** Do you, how do you keep all of that organized, organize all of these poems that you’re writing?

**DY:** So that’s not that hard. I have different folders for what state they’re in. I have folders for “in progress” and folders for “done but need to be reviewed by someone else.” I have a writing partner and we talk about it and work on it.

The organizing trick is when the poems are ready to be sent to publishers. Like keeping track of who’s got what and who’s rejected

what. You send them out in packets of five, and so it's a mess to keep track of. I might send the same five to one publisher and they'll take one, but they've got four more, so I have to withdraw that one from everybody who's got it... That's a mess. I just have a spreadsheet. That's about it.

**Inscape:** I read elsewhere in a different interview of yours where you talked about poems and literature as an opportunity to feel other people's experiences. Would you talk more about that?

**DY:** To increase in empathy. I mean, ideally, you—as someone who doesn't fit the expected demographic for my collection—would read it and say, “I understand my mom more now.” And she would read it and say, “Oh, someone else has been through what I've been through.” It's cool to get that.

**Inscape:** Talk to me a bit more about the section titles in your collection.

**DY:** So each of the section titles takes words from one of the poems in the section. I was very loosely aiming for a kind of feeling in each section or an overall theme. For example, section three, “this jumblesale world,” I wanted to talk about how life is messy, you know? I picked those words from one of the poems to be the theme for the whole section. Or the last one, “its glorious burn.” Because it's talking about getting old: the burning out feeling, burning up and burning out.

**Inscape:** When did you first read the poem (Grace Paley’s “Here”) that you used as the epigraph for your collection?

**DY:** Isn’t it a great poem? I first read that poem in, I think it was a Best of American anthology, years ago. I don’t know. It might’ve been 2015, 2012. I just loved it. I never forgot that image of the woman. She’s got these big old hips and she’s sitting. Just this older lady who is sitting, enjoying the evening. And I love that it describes her, that she’s large and she’s relaxed and she’s having a good time and she’s with people she loves. She’s older, and I thought, “This is who I want to be. I want to be a woman just like that.”

I just filed it in the back of my head. I teach that poem, so it keeps coming back, and I’m sure that I have written to that poem many times subconsciously. But as I was gathering the poems together for this collection and seeing that it was a book about an old lady—it’s about a middle-aged lady whose kids are growing up and she’s deciding whether or not to enjoy herself. So it felt like a good thing for the book, like a good entrance to what I wanted to do.

**Inscape:** At what point did you know that you wanted it as your epigraph?

**DY:** I think it was one of those things where I woke up first thing, 5 AM, and it was running through my mind, and I thought that it fit several of my poems. I thought I might use it as an epigraph for one of my poems. Then when I went through, I realized I didn’t write any of the poems directly to it—I usually use an epigraph because it

informs the actual writing of the poem—but it sure seemed to apply to a lot of the poems. It really epitomizes a lot of what I'm doing.

So I don't think I had decided for sure on exactly which poems would be in the collection, but I felt a pretty good feeling of what most of the poems were going to do or how they'd hang together. So it was well into the gathering process.

**Inscape:** How do you approach saying something is finished or done (either a poem itself or a collection)?

**DY:** That's a good question because even after something gets published, I can still see its weaknesses and want to play with it. It's hard to stop. So I get a draft. I let it sit for a while. I play with it some more. I share it with somebody. I play with it again. Then I decide whether I'm sick of it or whether it wants to be something more. Usually, after I've peer-reviewed it and then tweaked it again, I feel like I'm done with it.

Whether it will make it in the book is something else. But I have a great writing partner who will point out where it feels like there should be something more or where it doesn't feel quite done. That helps.

So I might take something back and work on it some more, but after it's been through her opinions and another revision, I'm usually done. As I said, I'll get proofs and still want to tweak. This happens with anybody who's practicing a craft, you get better, hopefully. Even now, I look at my first book and there are things I would write

differently now, and I have to just say, “That’s proof I’m getting better. That’s good,” and I let it go.

**Inscape:** Is it frustrating to look at things and feel like you’d like to change them?

**DY:** I mean, it’s a little bit annoying to have my older poems that I’m less proud of now to be out there in circulation. But other than that, no; I’m glad I’m growing. I had to get over that a long time ago.

**Inscape:** Talk about some tensions writers experience.

**DY:** We have to admit, it takes a huge ego to think you have something to say that other people will want to read, and especially to pay money for—not that anyone buys poetry—but you have to have an ego to think that. You have to make peace with that because if no one felt that way, there’d be nothing for us to read.

Anyone who’s had their lives changed by a really great book realizes that it’s horrible to think that no one would ever dare put something down because they knew their weaknesses. So I have to forgive myself for the ego of thinking that I have something people might want to read.

The flip side of it is that every writer has great insecurities. You know the flaws of your work, and, in particular, you know the flaws of your earlier work compared to what you’re doing now. You have to be sufficiently excited with what you’re doing now to think it’s worth



working on. But the things in the past, you've moved beyond them.

So for a writer just starting out, embrace that. Embrace that you'll look at something you wrote last week or last year and think, ugh. That doesn't mean I should stop, that means, "Wow, look at me, I can see better now. I'm getting better already."

**Inscape:** Do you feel like there are other emotional or psychological blocks that you have to overcome as a writer?

**DY:** For sure. There's just the famous fear of the blank page or blank screen. Just starting in the first place, getting the motivation, getting over the nausea of sitting down, and getting the first bit down. That's always hard.

I've heard of writers who say, "Oh, I just can't help it. I can't stop. I just can't wait to get to my keyboard." Great for them, but there are a lot of people it's hard for. You learn, you sit down, and you do it anyway. That's the difference between writers who get stuff done and those who don't: they sit down and do it anyway, right?

**Inscape:** So you teach, you're a professor, and you're a mother. There are other things you balance. Talk to me about your writing practice.

**DY:** I'm really good at not writing. I wish I could say that I couldn't help but write all the time. Ideally, I would be writing every day, but I can go months without writing. So at least once a year, sometimes

twice, I take a whole month and write a poem every day that month. This is a project I started maybe six years ago. What happens is, I end up with 28 or 30 really lousy drafts, because it's just one a day. I'm not spending a lot of time revising, but I have the rest of the year to revise them, right?

Two-thirds of them will end up being published. So that's pretty good output, I think, for six months or a year. And it's a really cool project because what happens is, after a couple of weeks into the writing month, you think you've written a poem about every subject in the world—there's nothing left and you've covered it all. And yet, you still have to write a poem. That's the assignment, so you just grab at anything. But the thing is that desperation is what makes the best work.

The not knowing beforehand, the being surprised, the forcing yourself to go somewhere you weren't planning on. I'll just write a poem about dirty sneakers because I've got to get a poem for the day. That may be the best one. By the end of the month, I'm seeing poems everywhere, and I sometimes write two a day, because something clicks into my mind and says, "Oh, I'm serious about this." You start getting in the zone, I guess.

So that's my really odd strategy. Come and see me in February, and I'm very poetic.

**Inscape:** Is February always your writing month? Is there a pattern to when in the day you write?

**DY:** Well, it used to be August, but I started a group on Facebook that does it with me, and they all voted for February. I think it's because they're wussies, and it's two days shorter. That's when we do it, but I sometimes do it again in the fall.\

I also do it first thing in the day so I can get it over with. I can't relax until it's done. It feels a lot like training for a marathon, you know? A marathon's huge, but you break it down and you say, "Today is my five-mile run. I just gotta get through today." You just get it over with, and the rest of the day feels so good.

And the next day I get up and do it again.

**Inscape:** In your article for the Association of Mormon Letters, you talked about the idea of poetry helping you fall in love with the world, and how it's an act of turning very abstract ideas into concrete details. Can you talk more about that?

**DY:** A good poem has to be specific. So if I decide I want to write about something, I have to find some concrete, specific imagery. Maybe a situation, or maybe just a bunch of images, or something like that, in order to make the poem good, in order to create an experience for the reader. It just has to be specific.

The falling in love with the world—If I'm going to write a poem about something, I have to be attentive to it, right? Knowing that I have to do that makes me more attentive to the experience. I get up, it's a day in February: I have to write a poem, what is there around me? There's my front yard. I have to write a poem about my front

yard, so I'm going to have to care about something about it. I'm going to pay attention to its details. I'm going to try to find ways to make those details matter. I'm going to try to find a journey through the writing of the poem so that I'm a little bit surprised at the end.

I think if you know exactly where a poem is going to go before you start it, it tends to be kind of boring, and not very fresh, not very interesting, and it might be better as a sermon or an essay than a poem, right? So I'm going to pay really close attention, and I'm going to look at those details, to try and be surprised, to see something I haven't seen before, and in the process of that, I come to love that thing more, because I've been attentive to it.

The other thing I was going to say was just that there are abstract topics I love, but you can't write about an abstract topic and make a good poem, so you have to make it concrete. One of my favorite themes is, "What is faith? What does a faithful life look like?" To me, faith is what you do, separate from what you believe or feel. So faith is just a choice to act in a certain way—because there's nothing we can know for sure, right? If we know it for sure, Alma says that's the end of faith, that's knowledge. So faith is what happens in the gaps, which is a great place for poetry.

**Inscape:** But what does faith look like? If you write a poem just in the abstract, somebody might find it satisfying intellectually, but I don't feel like it moves anybody. They can't access the experience. So I have to think of what faith actually looks like.

**DY:** Well, faith looks like a kid getting up at five in the morning to go and shovel snow for the neighbor, because he's hoping there's some truth to this "follow Jesus" thing. So I'm going to talk about that, instead of something abstract. I'm going to talk about the details of that. It's cold, and it's miserable, and there's nobody there to see, and who's going to know if he leaves it undone? Those are the details that are interesting, and they're the details that a reader can access, and so I feel like the reader can have an experience with faith through those details.

**Inscape:** When you're writing a poem, do you start with the details and it leads you to abstractions? Or is it the other way?

**DY:** I've started both ways. If I say, I want to write a poem about my temple experience—that's kind of abstract—I'll brainstorm. I might draw a cluster or mind map. I might brainstorm lists like the details I could use to talk about a temple experience. I want to get as specific as I can, so I might choose just one room. I'm going to pick something really specific and get details for that, but I started with the abstract. Other times, I start with the details. I just want to talk about this thing that happened today, or this object, and I'll describe that, and maybe it will lead me to realizing that this is really about getting old, or about my fears for my child.

**Inscape:** How do you balance being specific to a moment in time with being relatable?

**DY:** I kind of think in terms of choosing a topic that's timely. I mean, some of the things I wrote about in the poems that ended up in this book were the things that were on my mind. It was worth writing a poem about the pandemic or about politics at the family gathering or something like that. And because I knew the book would probably come out quickly enough where people would know those things, I left those poems in.

But I really believe that the more specific you can get, the better, even if it does anchor you in a specific time or place or to a white, female, middle-aged, Mormon experience. I think that when something is told well, its specificity actually enables even someone different from me to access the experience in a way because it triggers their own memories of times when they felt similarly. So, for example, even though you haven't been a mom, you have experienced worry over whether you did well enough at something, right? Or worry about if you've offended somebody. I feel like the more specific a writer is, the more it enables the reader to find a comparison somehow to their lives which overall might be different.

So I think about some of my favorite books that are very specific to their time and place. Chaim Potok and *The Chosen*, one of my favorite books, is very steeped in the Hasidic Jewish community, and there are things about that culture that I didn't know until I read the book, and yet I recognize loneliness. I recognize disappointing your father. I recognize trying not to offend someone who has a different religion than you. And because it is told so well, and I'm inhabiting those feelings, it reminds me of the things I've experienced, even

though they're different.

When I teach my students to write, they tend to want to please everybody, so they back out and try to be really vague so it can apply to everyone, but the problem is that doesn't affect anyone, because it's not specific enough. It's not triggering any of the responses we get when we experience something. They have to be specific to their experience, and their time, and their gender, and their situation—whatever it is—in order for it to be good art, in order for it to create an experience for the reader. Then the reader can have their own little revelations as they experience those things.

**Inscape:** What role or influence does the idea of an audience have in your writing? Do you write for an audience, or do you write for yourself?

**DY:** My ideal reader is probably someone just like me, so I probably write just for myself. I think for me that's the best way to write well. If I wrote trying to please other people, I don't think I could do it well. However, it's super important to me to know that there is an opportunity to get my stuff out to people who might care.

I write LDS literature. They're LDS poems. They have LDS themes in them; they're for LDS people. If I felt it was impossible that anyone who has my background would ever read them, I would be less interested in writing. So it's important to me to know that I could find an audience somewhere that would understand these things. As I just told you, if I write it well, it should apply to anyone,

and I do believe this. But I include some distinctive LDS cultural details, like in the temple poems. I can portray an experience in the temple exactly, but if you are not ever able to go to the temple, you'll miss things about that poem. I still think it's worthwhile to write that poem, assuming that people like me who've had temple experiences can read it.

What I'm getting at is I feel it's super important that there is an audience for LDS poetry. And we have a problem right now in that the major publishers of books for LDS people don't think there is a market for LDS poetry. Because of this, they are unwilling to take poetry manuscripts. In particular, I'm talking about Deseret Book. So my ideal readers buy some books from Deseret Book, but they'll never find my book there because Deseret Book won't publish poetry.

BCC, the publisher of this book and my first book, is doing good work to change that, but they're still very small. They're non-profit, they're volunteer, they don't have inventory, they're only print-on-demand, they can't get their books into big bookstores. So there's a problem. I find I have a good audience. When people read my work, they like it, especially people like me. But they have a hard time finding out about it. So I feel pretty passionate about just getting the word out that there are people who want to read this kind of thing because then more writers will write it. When good writers think others would never read LDS-themed work, then they're not going to bother to write it.



Kind of got a little off-topic there, I think, but I feel strongly about that, about building an audience. And I don't care so much about sales of my book, but I care a lot about publicity for my book. Because if I can get the word out, and if people like it, and they tell other people, that communicates to my publisher that people want this, and maybe to other publishers that people want this. And we'll have more people writing it. We'll get better.

**Inscape:** If you can and if you want, talk to me a little bit about what you're working on now.

**DY:** Well, I have another collection coming out in Spring of 2024, this time from Signature. Other than that, I'm just doing little poems here and there. Come February, I'll do a bunch. And then we'll see.

I've published several essays, with some success. I'd like to do some more. But essays are hard to publish, like poetry. And especially if they're LDS in content. Like how many essay collections have you read? And where would you find an LDS-oriented essay collection? It's tricky. But I'd like to do more—an essay collection, or maybe a lyrical novel. I'm toying with some ideas. I haven't been ready to commit yet.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**SHANE ALLISON** is a poet and artist living in Florida whose work have graced the pages of West Wind Review, The Cream City Review and a plethora of others.

**EMILY BELL** graduated from Otis College of Art & Design in 2005. She lives and works in Los Angeles with her husband, three sons, and a German Shepherd named Quimby.

**FLAVIA BRUNETTI PROIETTI** lives in Rome, Italy, where she writes stories and hunts for the perfect espresso. She grew up bouncing back and forth between Rome and San Francisco and has lived between Italy, Tunisia, Libya, Palestine, and Niger, so her writing often revolves around time and belonging and is usually written on a plane where she inevitably apologizes to the person sitting next to her for bumping their elbow. She is the author of the novel *All the Way to Italy*. You can find her published work at [flaviinrome.com](http://flaviinrome.com) and keep up with her travels on Instagram @whichwaytorome.

**DANTE DI STEFANO** is the author of four poetry volumes including, most recently, the book-length poem, *Midwhistle* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2023). His other poetry collections are: *Love Is a Stone Endlessly in Flight* (Brighthorse Books, 2016); *Ill Angels* (Etruscan Press, 2019); and *Lullaby with Incendiary Device*, published in a three-in-one edition titled *Generations* (Etruscan Press, 2022), also featuring work by William Heyen and H.L. Hix.

**HOLLIE DUGAS** lives in New Mexico. Her work has been selected to be included in Barrow Street, Reed Magazine, Qu, Redivider, Porter House Review, Pembroke, Salamander, Poet Lore, Watershed Review, Mud Season Review, The Louisville Review, The Penn Review, Breakwater Review, Phoebe, Broad River Review, Fugue, and Louisiana Literature. Additionally, "A Woman's Confession #5,162" was selected as the winner of Western Humanities Review Mountain West Writers' Contest (2017). Hollie has been nominated for a 2020 Pushcart Prize and for inclusion in Best New Poets 2021. Most recently, her poem was selected as winner of the 22nd Annual Lois Cranston Memorial Poetry Prize at CALYX, in addition to, the 2022 Heartwood Poetry Prize. She was also a finalist in the Atlanta Review's 2022 International Poetry Contest. Currently, she is on the editorial board for Off the Coast.

**PHILIP RYDER DUNN** once received a history degree from the University of California, Berkeley. Then he completed a master's in journalism from the University of Southern California. He had a career as a journalist, marketing consultant, non-fiction author, and college media professor. Dunn paints impressions of the ocean and various scenes of wonder. He combines photography and wandering to examine what's right in front of his nose. He also paints juxtapositions of local nature themes with dreamscapes. Dunn writes poetry almost every day. For recreation, he plays ice hockey and pickleball, and surfs almost every day. He has three delightful children.

**ILSE ESKELSEN** is an English major who hails from the DC area but spent her formative years in Stuttgart, Germany. She is the proud owner of two cats, two ukuleles, and at least two family members willing to put up with her at any given time. Her work has appeared in online literary journals such as Penultimate Peanut, Every Day Fiction, and Barrelhouse.

**RENEE EMERSON** is the author of the poetry collections *Keeping Me Still* (Winter Goose Publishing 2014), *Threshing Floor* (Jacar Press 2016), and *Church Ladies* (forthcoming, Fernwood Press 2023). She is also the author of the chapbook *The Commonplace Misfortunes of Everyday Plants* (Belle Point Press), and the middle grade novel *Why Silas Miller Must Learn to Ride a Bike* (Wintergoose Publishing 2022). She lives in the Midwest with her husband and children. [www.renee-emerson.com](http://www.renee-emerson.com)

**TIGHE FLATLEY** spends his days directing marketing campaigns, his early mornings writing and his late evenings editing. He lives in San Francisco where he is a founding member of the Page Street Writers. If you need him, he's usually by the snack table.

**PAUL LARSEN** is from Saint Louis Missouri. He greatly enjoys the warmth of Midwestern culture but has been captivated by the mountain scenery in the Rocky Mountains. While he has a love for photography, he prefers simple point and shoot action done from an easy hand held device or camera instead of an extensive set up with a large apparatus.

**EDWARD LEE** is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, non-fiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen* and *Smiths Knoll*. He is currently working on two photography collections: 'Lying Down With The Dead' and 'There Is A Beauty In Broken Things'. He also makes musical noise under the names *Ayahuasca Collective*, *Orson Carroll*, *Lego Figures Fighting*, and *Pale Blond Boy*. His blog/website can be found at <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>

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**WILL MUSGROVE** is a writer and journalist from Northwest Iowa. He received an MFA from Minnesota State University, Mankato. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Timber, The McNeese Review, Sundog Lit, Tampa Review, and elsewhere. Connect on Twitter at @Will\_Musgrove or at [williammusgrove.com](http://williammusgrove.com).

**JENEDY PAIGE** was born with two God-given gifts: she's an early riser and she's consistent. She's used her natural abilities to become a professional oil painter and an American Ninja Warrior athlete. She believes we all have a divine spark that really does make us capable of achieving anything as long as we're willing to work really really hard for it. She is the biggest fan of her alma-mater, BYU-Idaho, and credits herself as the "product of a great art education." She is a wife, a mother, a teacher, a coach, and her mom says she struggles with being able to relax. When she's not in her studio or the gym, she loves to be in her kitchen, creating delicious healthy food for her family. She thanks God every day for carefully leading her down a path she could have never imagined for herself.

**ROBERT PALMER** at explores the beauty and complexity of nature through the lens of memory and imagination. Drawing inspiration from his surroundings, Robert creates landscapes that are more than mere representations of physical spaces; they are visual expressions of his emotions and perceptions of the world around him. Robert's paintings capture a moment in time, preserving a memory of a place that may no longer exist or has been transformed by time. He removes the figure from his compositions to focus the viewer's attention on the plane, creating a sense of transcendence from imaginative nature to reality. His paintings are born from ethereal memories, blending representational and expressionistic styles to define nature. In his recent oil paintings, Robert uses thick layers of paint to capture the mosaic shapes created by the sky, trees, and landscape. He employs a fractured technique to represent the foreground and background, creating a sense of depth and scale. Robert experiments with watercolors to explore the conceptual and expressive possibilities of his art. He uses a dry brush technique overlaid with wet into wet washes to create chaotic marks of transparent and opaque paint on the surface, capturing the grandeur of this world. Robert graduated sum cum laude from ASU with a bachelor's degree in Fine Art Painting. His work has been featured in various publications, and he recently exhibited at Gam-mage Auditorium in Tempe. Through his art, Robert invites the viewer to explore the infinite possibilities of nature and to experience the beauty and wonder of the world around us.

**PATRICK PFISTER** is the author of the poetry book, *El Camino & Other Travel Poems*. His poetry has appeared in *Gargoyle*, *Juked*, *Virginia Normal* and other literary magazines. He is the director of two award-winning documentary films about poetry: *The Stone Circle* and *Poetry*, New York. His novels are published by Spuyten Duyvil Press, NY. He lives in Barcelona, Spain. [www.patrickpfister.com](http://www.patrickpfister.com)

**JIM ROSS** jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after rewarding career in public health research. With graduate degree from Howard University, in eight years he's published nonfiction, fiction, poetry, photography, hybrid, interviews, and plays in nearly 200 journals on five continents. Photo publications include Alchemy Spoon, Barnstorm, Burningword, Camas, Phoebe, Stoneboat, and Stonecoast. Photo-essays include DASH, Kestrel, Litro, NWW, Paperbark, Pilgrimage Magazine, Sweet, and Type-house. Recently nominated for Best of the Net in Nonfiction and Art, he also wrote/acted in a one-act play and appeared in a documentary limited series broadcast internationally. Jim's family splits time between city and mountains.

**NATALIE SERBER** is the author of *Shout Her Lovely Name*, a New York Times Notable Book, and *Community Chest*, a memoir. Her fiction has appeared in *One Story*, *Zyzzyva Magazine*, and others. Essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *The Today Show*, and others.

**SAMANTHA SNYDER** is currently an MFA student at Brigham Young University. She enjoys combining traditional printmaking techniques with the destruction and assemblage nature of collage. Her approach provides a language to navigate the uncanny and eerie spaces of various realities that stem from detachment and reclusion. Samantha is originally from the Central Valley of California, but has lived in both Texas and Oregon where she taught Elementary school for several years. She resides in Provo with her husband and 3 kids.

**EDWARD MICHAEL SUPRANOWICZ** is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is A Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

**JAMES READE VENABLE** was born in Manhattan, New York. He has been published in *Black + White Photography*, *Dodho*, *F-Stop* and many more. He is a 2x London Photo Festival Monthly Competition Winner and was on the Shortlist for the Storytelling category in this years 500px Global Photography Awards. He lives in New York City at the moment.

**GABRIELLA WARNICK** is currently studying studio art, sound design and Italian at Brigham Young University and is set to graduate with her BFA in 2023. With backgrounds in various creative arts such as theater and music, she approaches art through a range of mediums and interdisciplinary practices. Investigating questions related to observations that straddle lines of imagination and reality, she deals frequently with concepts of memory, magic, sound and time.



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