

Fall 2025 | Volume 42 | Number 1

EST 1983

WEBER

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

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Deriving from the German **weben**—to weave—**weber** translates into the literal and figurative "weaver" of textiles and texts. Weber are the artisans of textures and discourse, the artists of the beautiful fabricating the warp and weft of language into everchanging patterns. **Weber**, the journal, understands itself as a regional and global tapestry of verbal and visual texts, a weave made from the threads of words and images.

Perspectives on U.S. National Parks and the Natural World

From the editor's desk

As a woman of color, my history with the park is a bit different. My experience was not as a Rosie the Riveter; that tended to be a white woman's story. Black women had been working outside their homes ever since slavery.

— Betty Reid Soskin, oldest National Park Ranger in the U.S.

I am glad I will not be young in a future without wilderness.

— Aldo Leopold

We take too much of our heritage for granted. Harriman State Park is not Mt. Vernon. Nor is it Yosemite. But heritage cannot be measured on a scale. . . .

—Mary E. Reed

The National Parks are the Declaration of Independence applied to the landscape.

— Ken Burns

When all the trees have been cut down, when all the animals have been hunted, when all the waters are polluted, when all the air is unsafe to breathe, only then will you discover you cannot eat money.

—Cree Prophecy

I do not think the measure of a civilization is how tall its buildings of concrete are, but rather how well its people have learned to relate to their environment and fellow man.

—Sun Bear, Chippewa

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EDITORIAL MATTER CONTINUED IN BACK

VOLUME 42 | NUMBER 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FALL 2025

CONVERSATION

4 Angelika Brewer, *Inclusiveness over Divisiveness. Nurturing Unique Work through Small-Press Publication – A Conversation with Kristen Renee Miller*

12 Electra Gamón Fielding, *Intricacies of the Chicano Experience – A Conversation with Jimmy Santiago Baca*

21 Marc Nelson, *"We Are All Tourists on this Planet" – Insights and Wisdom from Venerable Geshe Lhakdor*

29 Ukamaka Olisakwe, *Piercing the Veil of the High and Low, the Real and the Fantastic. On Opera, Telenovelas, and the Gothic – A Conversation with Silvia Moreno-Garcia*

40 Ukamaka Olisakwe, *The Luxury of Distance. Reimagining Literary and Cultural Divides – A Conversation with Ranjan Adiga*

46 Susan J. Matt and Daniel Menning, *Historical Fiction and the Emotions of History – A Conversation with Ruta Sepetys*

54 Michael Wutz, *Navigating Art with Art History and the Local with the Global – A Conversation with Ben Steele*

ART

63 The Art of Ben Steele

POETRY

75 Paul Willis, *Mono Pass* and others

78 Megan Harlan, *This Berlin*

80 Ann Keniston, *A giant fishing hook suspended in Great* and others

84 Elizabeth Birch, *Our Infinite Exodus* and others

88 Kimberly O'Connor, *Poem in which the Future is Foreshadowed by a Depression-Era Dust Storm* and others

91 Juned Subhan, *Home I* and others

97 Klaus Andrieu, *Göbekli Tepe* and others

99 David Koehn, *Full Stop* and others

101 Lois Marie Harrod, *My Nature Poetry Workshop Has Pre-Class Queries* and others

107 Connie Wieneke, *Mitchell Springs* and others

FICTION

110 Ranjan Adiga, *The Smuggler*

116 Russell Brakefield, *The Date Farmer*

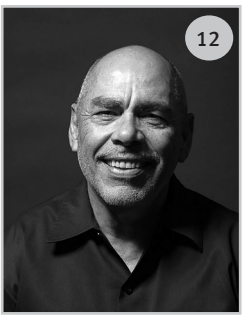
123 Robert Bennett, *Sister CES Letter*

ESSAY

131 Joanne Furio, *The Mother Tree*

136 Val Holley, *Richard Romney, Fawn Brodie, and the Unsolved Mystery of Richard M. Nixon*

147 Leath Tonino, *Eight Hikes and One Drive*



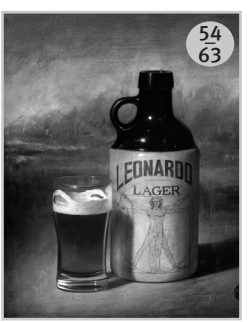
Jimmy Santiago Baca



Silvia Moreno-Garcia



Ruta Sepetys



Ben Steele

Inclusiveness over Divisiveness—
Nurturing Unique Work through Small-Press Publication

Angelika Brewer



A Conversation with
Kristen Renee Miller

Kristen Renee Miller's work began with a childhood enthusiasm for literature and evolved into a passion for inclusive publishing. As the director of Sarabande Books in Louisville, Kentucky, Miller creates a home for writers who take an unexpected route to complete a book and embraces the uniqueness of each individual path. Miller attended the University of Kansas intending to become a physical therapist but switched gears when she found that her love of writing could translate into a career in the field. A Masters of Arts in English, a successful teaching career, and a life-changing residency later, Miller continues her impactful work with Sarabande Books and thrives within her own writing and translation projects. Miller is not only a playwright, a poet, and a translator – she is an engineer of form, an inventor of craft, and an artist with a knack for finding the remarkable in every nook and cranny of life. Miller was a guest artist at Weber State University's Creative Writing Program in November 2024, when she kindly agreed to this interview. It has been edited for clarity and length.

Thank you for your time today. It's good to be chatting with you. Can you give us a brief introduction on where you're from and where you are residing now?

I've lived in Louisville, Kentucky, for the past seventeen years. I got my Master of Arts in English from the University of Louisville and taught in their creative writing department before coming on board with Sarabande Books in 2013. Sarabande was founded in Louisville, and I've been there almost eleven years.

Can you talk a bit more about the journey to your position with Sarabande Books? You are now the director and editor in chief of Sarabande.

Sarah Gorham founded the press in 1994 and served as director until she retired in 2022. We worked together for almost ten years. I stepped into the role in July of 2022, as the director and editor in chief, which is the role that Sarah held as well. There is a lot of nonprofit administration work involved in the role. The part I love best is being an editor—curating our titles, editing our books, and working with authors. I was hired to develop signature programming, free community arts programming, as a well as a handful of other tasks. I came from a creative writing and teaching background, so I was initially interested in the editing portion of the job. I started taking on book projects right away and began independently acquiring around 2018—I have been working on acquisitions and editing ever since.

What types of books does Sarabande publish?

When Sarah founded the press in the '90s, it was during a time where there was a very small field of independent publishers. New authors, debut authors, authors of highly-literary works, authors of experimental works, and authors of hybrid works were not finding homes for their books. Largely, books were published through corporate publishers and some university presses. The type of work that Sarah and her friends did, and loved to read—literary short fiction, essays, and poetry which foregrounded craft and care through technique—were not finding homes in the way that Sarah and her friends felt they deserved. Sarabande was created to be a home for the sort of works that were less marketable or less packageable. Since the '90s, especially since 2015, poetry has exploded in popularity. The same can be said of short story collections, which were not highly sought after in the '90s. Since 2010, well-done and exciting short story collections from highly recognizable and distinguished authors like George Saunders and Lauren Groff have been picked up by major corporate publishers. None of this is new information, but Sarabande started incubating and nurturing those works along with other independent presses back in the '90s. They invested time, money, attention, and love into those less marketable genres. Today, we love to see the quality of being craft-forward in the work. The message of the work itself is of equal importance to the form. Seeing work that is doing interesting things with form and craft is essential. We publish a lot of hybrid works, like visual poetry collections or graphic novel memoirs. We love hybrid work like flash fiction, flash essay, and book-length essay. We like the unexpected in terms of form.

I think that's amazing. A lot of writers don't feel that they have anywhere to go with their work, that they don't fit anywhere. You talked a little bit about your previous career and what you are doing now, but what did your life look like in between college and now? You mentioned that you taught at the University of Louisville. Were there steps in between?

I attended the University of Kansas as an undergrad, where I studied English with a creative writing emphasis—playwriting at that time. I changed my major to English

from pre-physical therapy. Two years into my undergraduate degree, I really thought I was going to go with the physical therapy route. However, I found that I couldn't bear to give up my English courses—which, at the time, were just electives—I loved them too much. So, I changed tracks and focused on playwriting. At that time, I had a play go to The Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, and it won some awards there. I got to meet a lot of people during that period who were taking professional steps in creative writing. Growing up, I was relatively sheltered, so I didn't even know you could have a career in creative writing. I think it took a while for that to sink in, but it really changed my perspective on where I could take my skills and interests. I realized that my writing skills could be the start of a career for me.

I graduated with my BA, got married, and then served coffee for three years—I didn't really do much else. In 2009, I applied to University of Louisville's Master of Arts in English program because of their Axton Series. It was a series that brought in distinguished authors from around the country. The program also offered a fellowship for a graduate student to run the reading series and teach creative writing while studying to get a master's degree—that seemed to check all the boxes for me. I got back into reading literary fiction and found a lot of joy in reentering literature as a reader. I started that program and got to teach a creative writing survey course that covered poetry, fiction, and playwriting; it was really fun. I found that teaching was something that came to me organically; it was joyful and exciting for me to talk with people about reading and writing. I did that for five years through my program, and for three more years afterward I taught creative writing. Through the Axton Series, we brought in great authors like Marilyn Nelson, Mary Ruefle, Martha Rhodes, Nick Flynn, and Lee K. Abbott. It was a privilege to be able to meet all of those folks. In some cases, I endangered their lives as I ferried them from their hotel to the university

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in the pre-Google Maps era. (Laughter) I feel like it would be a much less interesting story if I had just uneventfully transported Tobias Wolff to his reading without getting lost for fifteen minutes, but he was very kind about it, and now I have a good story to tell. (Laughter)

I taught, ran that series, and waited to see what was next. I didn't feel especially driven to force steps. I was teaching adjunct at that time and was making things work with my partner. In 2013, I enrolled in a program through the Bread Loaf School of English—it turned into a life-changing summer. It's a low-residency program where you spend six weeks in the mountains of Vermont focusing on survey courses. That summer, I read everything Italo Calvino wrote and studied with some great professors and poets. I came back energized and was ready to find the next professional step I could take in creative writing. A friend of mine from there had just gotten a managing editor position at a small press in Lexington. That was the

first time the idea of publishing as a career registered on my radar. That November, one of the founders of Sarabande approached me with a job opening. It was fairly entry-level, but it was exciting to think about getting to do work in the service of publishing literature; I took that chance and came on board.

The transition from serving coffee to the beautiful little moments that brought you to Sarabande is amazing. When you were a kid, did you have an interest in writing and translating?

As a kid, I loved reading and I loved books. I considered authors and the people who made books to be super heroic figures. I was a kid who stapled Post-Its together to make original works. I was always drawn to books, both as a vehicle for discovery as well as objects themselves. I am the kind of person who reverse engineers any type of artifact I can hold in my hands. I thought a lot about the making of books, but not as a career. I didn't know publishers; I didn't know anybody who worked in publishing. I started writing poetry. I think a lot of people who start writing later in life write poetry. I wrote poetry as soon as I could write. The things that drew me to it were the puzzle of meter and rhyme and the playfulness of working with those things. You could feel clever while stringing thoughts together in a certain way; that was so appealing to me. That process has become more refined over time, but it's still very much there. What draws me to writing and translating is the spark and excitement you get when you solve something with language, or solve something with sound, within your poetry.

Individual writers tend to be drawn to particular themes. Are there any specific themes in poetry that you tend to use?

Rather than being drawn to certain themes, I am drawn to certain practices. Each project tends to be very distinct from the next in a way that defies collection when you have works that are intentional mistranslations, works that are erasure poems, works that are invented forms, or works that are like artifacts. One of my favorites is a poem that you read by clicking through a View Master reel. It was not my original idea; it was a partnership I did with a press called Container. Doug Lumen is the editor at Container. What unifies those creations is that they start with an unusual intervention or constraint in regard to language. If I'm creating an erasure poem, I start with a piece of pre-written language that I can't change; I have to work with it "as is." If I'm doing a sonic translation, I'm constrained in a way that limits the source text. As somebody who doesn't necessarily approach writing with a specific *idea* I want to express as much as an *exercise* I want to *practice*, it works. For me, it's about going through the motions of the practice, seeing what *emerges*, and making a poem out of that—making *meaning* out of that. The themes of my work are somewhat secondary; I still end up with what I wanted to say, I just make it there in a *sideways* manner.

When it comes to poetry, sideways *is often the best way to get there. You've spoken a bit about your writing process already. At this point in your career, is poetry something you have to sit down and devote a lot of time to writing, or are you letting it come to you when it does come?*

It's been different at different times. I have, at times, been really persistent and relentless about carving out time to work and making that a regular part of my week. In 2016, I joined a group of poets who each agreed to write one hundred poems in a year and to read twelve books of craft and twelve books of poetry. The group was called The Gauntlet. It was created by a friend of mine, Christopher McCurry. Twelve or so of us joined the group in an effort to lean into our writing, and we met monthly. We spent a year of concentrated effort creating those

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one hundred drafts. That year was the most concerted time and effort that I've put into being rigorous about writing. In some ways, the experience mirrored grad school—complete with deadlines and social pressure.

I'm usually much less structured with my practice. I'm very driven by excitement. If I have an idea, it needs to all come out at once, or it will not at all. If there's time for that to happen, there's time.

I became a mom six years ago. I took on a lot more responsibility at Sarabande at about the same time, and then even more responsibility a couple of years ago. So, my time has been quite limited. I've been given some really generous residencies through several awesome nonprofits—like the Hermitage Artist Retreat in Manasota Key, Florida; the SWWIM Residency at The Betsy in South Beach, Miami; as well as others. I go into a residency and force myself to write one poem; it's the poem I write that year. The piece I wrote during my residency in Florida was featured in *Ninth Letter*. The poem is titled "Fear Not, For Your Names are Written in the Eternal Scroll," and it was the *one* thing I wrote *all* year. I wouldn't have been able to do it without that residency. There's scarcely time to catch my breath sometimes between my various responsibilities.

Residencies are wonderful for that reason. We really do have to carve out that space. Who are some poets, playwrights, or translators you are inspired by?

There are so many incredible people working. One person who stood out to me in 2017-2018 was Sarah J. Sloat; I loved and admired her work. She ended up being my first independent acquisition for Sarabande. She is the author of *Hotel Almighty* and the forthcoming book *Classic Crimes* with Sarabande. She does gorgeous work with visual poetry and erasure poetry. The thing that's special about her work is that it is so visually stunning that you might not immediately notice how sophisticated her craftsmanship with language is. She really is, in terms of erasure poetry, the heir apparent of a poet like Mary Ruefle—she can infuse so much personality, whimsy, and melancholy into a very tiny, fragmented piece that's not even originally her own work. In those brief poems, you can see the technique. Somehow, she manages to enact enjambment, anaphora, and refrain in a way that feels truly miracu-

lous. Her work is so special that I could spend the rest of the interview talking about it.

Anybody in the vein of Mary Ruefle—who's absolutely one of my major arcana poets—is somebody I'm going to be paying attention to. Also, anybody working in the vein of Italo Calvino— fabulist and lyrical work— will also be somebody I pay attention to. I got a chance to spend some time with the playwright Halley Feiffer while I was at the residency in Manasota Key. She is extraordinary, and such a sparkling person. Her play *Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow Moscow* is a favorite of mine; it's a very interesting reimagining of a classic. I also got to spend some time with the extraordinary playwright Martyna Majok. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning play is titled *Cost of Living*. She's doing some really interesting work on Broadway right now. She just adapted *The Great Gatsby* as *Gatsby: An American Myth* with music from Florence & the Machine. She's also adapting a play called *Sanctuary City*.

I also have always loved Lauren Groff and her work. She's a bit of a local myth at University of Louisville. She was an Axton Fellow when Stephen King discovered her and got her first novel, *The Monsters of Templeton,* published. She's done extraordinary work in both the novel and short fiction genres ever since. I feel lucky every time I get to immerse myself in her work.

I keep shouting out Sarabande authors, but I've admired Katrine Øgaard Jensen long before we ever published her work. She translates from Danish and does extremely cool work with experimental translation and collaborative translation. She is expansive in how she imagines working with and between languages. She has a whole series of collaborative, experimental translations out in *BOMB* Magazine right now, in which she works with poets like Aditi Machado, Sawako Nakayasu, and others. Her projects are playful and clever.

I've mentioned cleverness a couple of times. For a while, cleverness was something poets were discouraged to cultivate as a quality. It was sort of placed as a quality opposite authenticity. Poets, especially young poets, are encouraged not to be clever in their work. I think that cleverness, in some circumstances, is a quality that is highly important to cultivate and to keep within literature. I identify it as a quality that reveals a sense of humor without being funny; that prevents us from taking ourselves and our work too seriously. One of my mentors once said, "The work we do is important and serious, but we don't have to always be serious." I think that is so right. It's so important—if we are going to remain in this field and remain in this work—to find lightness where we can.

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What is the process for your own translated books? Regarding Spawn *and* Heating the Outdoors*, did you translate an existing book of poetry and then publish it as it was written in the language you translated it from?*

The poet Marie-Andrée Gill writes and publishes in French in Quebec. She has a French-language publisher, La Peuplade, and has three complete books of poetry with them. I discovered one of her books in 2016. Each of

her books was originally published in French prior to me signing onto the project. There are many ways for translations to come about, but in this case, it's a relationship between the French publisher, La Peuplade, and the English publisher, which is based in Toronto, Book*hug Press. The French publisher sells the rights, the English language rights, to the English publisher. The English publisher then contracts with the translator, and they work together to formulate the translation—which is an English translation of the complete collection. Then, there is a back and forth with the author and the original press to make sure everybody's satisfied. When everyone is satisfied, the book comes out in English. I don't have any say in the arrangement, the title, or the section titles; those are all a representation and an interpretation of the original.

Is the cover art the same in each version?

They're different; it's quite a different market. I'm not an expert on speaking to the esthetic of francophone Canadian publishing and the literary field, but the esthetics are quite distinct. While they share a province, English-speaking and French-speaking cultures are distinct from one another. When teams look at packaging the work, they're aiming it at *their* readership. We've gotten to work at Book*hug Press with a really talented mixed media artist who's also an author herself, Tree Abraham. She designed the covers for ***Spawn*** and ***Heating the Outdoors*** in their English translations. I'm delighted with what she created for them; I think it's a really insightful representation of the work.

The covers are gorgeous. Looking at similarities in the cover art, is one a sequel to the other, or are they completely separate collections?

I wouldn't call the second a sequel, per se, but both of the works draw on M.A. Gill's lived experience in the community of northern Quebec on Lake Piekuakami (Saint-Jean) because both of the collections are set there. The first collection, ***Spawn***, is a coming of age narrative that tracks her experiences as an adolescent; the second collection, ***Heating the Outdoors***, is about first love lost—kind of like a breakup album, so to speak. So, you could see the second collection as a continuation of that persona. The styles are quite similar, but they were not billed as a book and a sequel. However, because of the subject matter and the location similarities, we thought it would be a smart choice to visually reference the intersections between the two.

It absolutely had the impact you thought it would.

They do such a beautiful job. I don't know if you've been able to hold a copy in person, but this publisher also did something unique with the printing on the inside cover of the book. For the inside cover of ***Spawn***, they chose elemental illustrations—the inside features lake water, a photograph of the lake. The inside of ***Heating the Outdoors*** features a snow-covered forest. Both of those images were taken near that land where that community resides. As a small-press publisher myself, those special touches demonstrate the care that is taken with each work, the way in which you are honoring the work that you're packaging.

I think the folks, Jay and Hazel, who run Book*hug Press, are just so extraordinary. They're top-tier in terms of artistry and literary quality. They are celebrating twenty years as a publishing house this year.

You were a fellow through the National Endowment for the Arts in translation. Did these projects have anything to do with that fellowship, or were they separate?

The fellowship was for ***Heating the Outdoors***.

How important, do you feel, are the literary arts within a community, and beyond?

They are absolutely crucial. I have so many thoughts about this. I think the way that the literary arts pull in a community around itself—a community that might not otherwise be drawn together—is so important. Many differences and divides can be bridged through art, especially right now. There are many politicians, media figures, and actors who profit from dividing us and manipulating us with wedge issues that we never thought we would have or care about before. They do it in bad faith. Anything that disarms us of those artificial, preconceived notions, and instead brings us to the table with one another, over a shared interest—whether it is something incredibly profound or something that is just momentary and delightful—is irreplaceable.

At Sarabande, we have a program called Zine Lunch. We created it during the pandemic as a way to give people an hour each Friday to make low-stakes art with other people who also want to make low-stakes art. They come together and listen to a micro-writing and art workshop hosted by a teaching artist. They make a tiny little expression of their ideas and their creativity. It is not intended to be capital A, art. It's not meant to be capital P, profound. So often, we don't make time for creativity—time to think in a messy, nonlinear way. That, for me, in a broad sense, is what art does for communities—it gives us the chance to meet on equal footing over an interest that is inclusive and not divisive.

I think we need more opportunities to do that, and we need fewer places that profit from the opposite. I strongly believe in Sarabande's identity as a nonprofit, independent press. Nobody is creating shareholder value through the editorial choices we make or through the programming choices we make. We're here because we want to see the field thrive. For us, that means putting works out there that are not easily categorized, that are not easily packaged and marketed—works that challenge and surprise people. Every independent press you encounter will have a mission that resists capitalism and commodification in some way; that's ours. It's so important to have independents and nonprofits out there, because the entire focus of our efforts is to disrupt the corporate capitalist machine. It's a machine which is ultimately a race to the bottom for the art form; it's more divisive than it is inclusive; it's more pacifying than it is challenging. That is why I do what I do. It's why I believe in what we do, and I want to keep doing it.

Thank you so much for your time today.

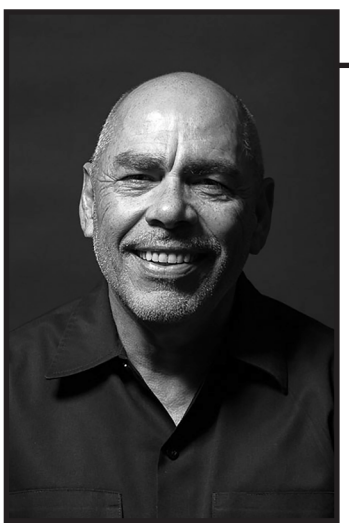
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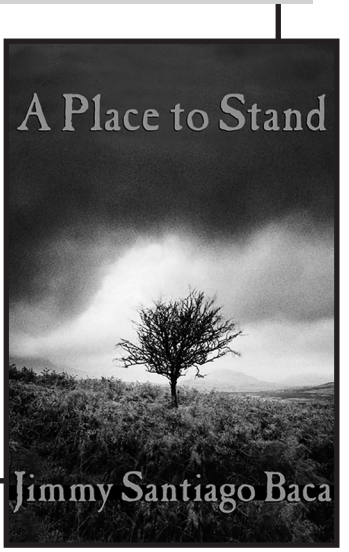
Angelika Brewer is a writer, speaker, teacher, and the 2022-2026 Poet Laureate of Ogden, Utah. She is passionate about the arts in all of its forms and has dedicated her career to creating spaces for making and sharing art, building community, and finding the cross-section of what exists and what could exist. Brewer was a 2024 Poet Laureate Fellow through the Academy of American Poets and the creator of the historical arts installation, "The Ogden Ar(t)chives Mailbox."

Intricacies of the Chicano Experience

Electra Gamón Fielding



A Conversation with
Jimmy Santiago Baca



Jimmy Santiago Baca is an American author of Chicano descent born in 1952, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Abandoned by his parents at a young age, he was raised partly by his grandparents and later placed in an orphanage. His childhood, alluded to during the interview, was spent between his grandparents' home and life in an orphanage with Catholic nuns; for a while, he ended up in the streets. In 1973 he was convicted on drug charges and spent five years in jail. While serving his sentence, he taught himself to read and write, starting his journey into poetry writing and literature. His first collection of poetry, Immigrants in Our Own Land *(1979), gained critical acclaim for its powerful depiction of his experience in prison and the plight of the marginalized. Other prominent works include* A Place to Stand *(2001) and* Black Mesa Poems *(1989), which earned him national recognition. Baca's work has been praised for its emotional depth, its commitment to social justice, and its exploration of Chicano culture and identity. Beyond his writing, Baca is an advocate for literacy, memoir writing, and the transformative power of education, particularly for vulnerable and oppressed populations.*

Who or what have been your greatest influences for poetry and writing?

My number one influence is nature. One of my earliest memoires was of a cathedral in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where I was born. I remember the bells booming in the morning. I remember all the bells in the morning, and the ***mijitas*** and the nice ***chicanos*** would come out, and you could smell the bread. My first memories of people, and culture, and community came when I was around four years old. I have a really brilliant memory. I don't know why; maybe it's because I have a big head. I've got big ears and a big head. (Laughter) My daughter tells me, "Papá, I love your big head, and I love your big ears." And I say, "Thank you. I love them, too." I can remember things. I can read fifteen pages and remember every word. I was taken away from my grandparents by the authorities at a young age. After that, I found my nurturing through nature—the sunrise and the nightfall. I began to look to nature as a nurturing parent. From then on, I stayed at St. Anthony's orphanage, a Franciscan institution. I liked them a lot, but I never got that sense of parents. I know a lot of poets who were influenced by their parents. I never had that connection. I had a strong connection with nature and with people in general. I was blessed to see them as people. Pretty nuns; I used to have fantasies about making love with them. I knew very early on that I was doomed to endure the fires of hell. But I thought, "Who cares? I'm going to hug Sister Rita's legs and kiss her kneecaps. I'll go to hell." I was only five years old, thinking that. (Laughter)

You were four or five years old?

Four or five years old, yes. There must have been a grieving period; I must have grieved for my parents, even though they were absent. One was a drunk and one was an addict. I must have grieved in my heart. But, all I can remember is having fun with them. The nuns were nice. Some were mean, but they were like mythical characters from books. There were sweet nuns who were very, very pretty and very nice, and they all loved me. They'd say, "Hey, Jimmy, you don't have any parents. Come over with me." It was like I had one hundred moms, just not in the sense of a congenital line.

Your descriptions of your childhood in A Place to Stand *are very vivid. In it, you said, "we lived where society was falling apart," and it made me feel like you were not just living on the margins of society, but perhaps even further removed. In what ways have your life experiences shaped your journey as a poet and writer?*

I don't think you could pull them apart. I think they're one and the same. It's funny, perspective is everything. People say it's how you think about something—if you can't change it, then change the way you think about it. When you're on the ***outside***, witnessing a war, that's one thing. When you're ***inside*** the war, it's another thing. When you have experiences like I had growing up, people looking in say,

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"Oh, my God, how terrible!" But inside I'm like, "Wow, what a beautiful life." It's been a beautiful life. I had all these moms; I would go into dormitories and see babies who were abandoned. I didn't think of the political fallout; I didn't think of the moral fallout; I didn't think of anything. I just saw fifty cribs with tiny babies who women didn't want. It was like walking into a Fellini movie. When you're in a room where fifty babies are crying, all swaddled in white, with white nuns bending over them—it was like living in a Spanish movie. I must have cried at night, but I got over that.

Absolutely, my experiences have shaped my writing, but when you talk about experience, most people assume it's linear. For example, if you're a young woman, you go to school; you find a man and you fall in love; you get a career; you get married; you have kids; it is linear. I don't know if you plan it out, or if your parents help you plan it out, or if you did it with the structure that was already there. The point is, the infrastructure was already there, you're just filling it in.

In the poet's case, it's not linear. You can be walking down the street one day, and the next day you can be on a boat, or flying somewhere in the South Pacific with a bunch of monkeys. Then, the next day, you could be in China with a woman who you vow to marry, and then you don't see her ever again—your life is totally messed up. You have no linear experience. In that way, my experience is not linear. It's been made up of magical moments. But, you're always surprised to find yourself where you're at. And you have to ask yourself, "How did I get here? *Yo no sé qué pasó*." But, that's your experience, and you have to write about it. I tell myself, "You better write about this in order to make sense of it."

Your work explores themes of identity, displacement, and determination. What message do you hope to convey to your readers through these themes? What do you hope your readers will get out of your work?

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I hope for only two things. I hope they get angry enough to burn their house down and hate me. Or, I hope they curl up on their couch like a little baby and start to cry and hold themselves with a renewed sense of their importance in the world. I want them to connect with aspects of themselves that they didn't recognize before.

I had a longtime girlfriend from here. I took her down to New Mexico, to a place I had. I said, "Come with me. The moon's up. Come to the river with me." So, we went to the river, and there was a big tree there, and I said, "I want you to dance around this tree, I want you to dance *hard*. I want you to *really* dance, like a jazz dancer. I want you to free yourself through dance." She took all her clothes off and, under a full moon, she danced. She danced until she felt a connection to the tree and the water. The next morning, she said, "I'm staying, I'm not going back." She stayed there for the next twenty years because of that connec-

tion. It was a connection she created that she never knew existed before. Connections are funny, because connections can destroy you as well. They can easily take your experience and give it a wrong turn.

How has your Chicano background influenced your branding? Do you feel a strong connection to this aspect of your identity?

To me, it's like the mountains, it's like the ground that grows trees. It's not a distinction; it's not unique. It's organic; it's inherent; it's in my metabolism. I don't think about it. I just know I feel really happy. I have close friends who are painters, dancers, and film directors. The reason they love me is because I bring the exuberance of my happy being to their homes—that's being Chicano. We have so few writers, painters, and dancers who have touched on what it means to be Chicano. It's an existential collage that merges so many different things.

Do you speak Spanish in the home, and, if so, do you feel a strong connection to the language?

I speak more English than Spanish. I need to speak more Spanish. One of my commitments to myself is that I'm going to buy a place in Mexico and move there with my partner and my kids. Probably somewhere along the ocean, somewhere in Mexico City. I've got to get back to my Spanish-speaking roots.

I think with Chicanos, this whole idea of not having had enough experience and opportunity to define ourselves has really hurt us. Masculinity has really hurt us. Kindness, sweetness, love, and service—all of that turns into bullshit anger. I hate it. It shouldn't be that way. I've been around some of the most caring Latino people in the world, the most beautiful people. This aspect has grown around us as a protective shield, and it needs to be taken down.

I think you're referring to aspects of machismo*, right? When people talk about* machismo*, they often think that it only benefits men? But I think they're also victims of it.*

They're victims. When you talk about ***machismo***, you're talking about hurting yourself. "I'm macho" means, I'll fight until you beat me, break my bones, and cripple me. Any sane person would say, "No, I'm not going to fight you"—but not with ***machismo***. For example, if someone says, "Take this drug. It's fentanyl and cocaine. Aren't you a man?," you'd say, "I hurt myself. Yeah, I'll do it." Then, someone says, "You're just going to let that guy say that? Go, fight him." You've got to say, "Okay, I hurt myself" and go fight him. If someone said, "You're not going to go to school?," you'd have to say, "No. I hurt myself." Machismo can be translated to, "I hurt myself," because you've been shame-based. You've been taught to ***be*** shamed, ***to*** shame, and to ***live by*** your shame. So rather than be shamed, you hurt yourself instead.

Growing up in the United States, do you feel you had to negotiate between the two identities of being Chicano and being an American?

I feel ***more*** American by being Chicano than I would by being an ***American*** American. Being American American is like one of those stupid buffalo heads hung on a wall. You walk into a lodge and see the buffalo head tacked up above the fireplace. It's still a buffalo, but it's dead. All these white guys are running around with guns, shooting kids and teachers. They're dead, they're human beings, but they're dead. There's something inside them that has died because you've got to be dead to be able to do that. Something in your cellular makeup has got to be in dormancy to do that. These people are spiritually comatose. You could tell them all the facts—you could stack them up from here to Albuquerque and back—and the people in that comatose

state of mind still couldn't understand that two plus two equals four. Being a Chicano, I feel like my heyday was when Mexico was here and Spain was here. *Yo soy viejo, yo soy americano viejo*. I'm an *old* American. I should be walking around this school asking these white boys for *their* green cards. I should say, "What's wrong with you people, coming over here, across the borders like you have? Go back to England. You brought nothing but crap here. Get away. Go back."

This way of thinking often comes from an ignorance of their own history. When I talk to my students about the situation in Texas or New Mexico—Chicanos that were crossed by the border—I remind them that they didn't cross *the border; the border* moved. *They don't even know their own history, or maybe they know a different* version *of history.*

You see it all over, it's very apparent. White people are beginning to look at us in a way they never have before. They used to look at us with a John Wayne type of look. Now, they look at us like we've taken their place—they're the ranch hand and we're the ranch owner, and they hate us for that. I see it on planes. I fly first class, and you wouldn't believe the way they look at me. They're like, "Ugh, Mexicans." But the thing is, no matter how they feel about me, I really like myself. I should be whipped and punished for liking myself this much. I love who I am. I love my *gente*. I love my daughters. I love my sons. I love my *comida*, my music, my paintings, my dance. I love Spanish. We're some of the greatest poets. The people of Spain are political geniuses, they can speak to you about anything. They're intelligent, they're temperamental, they're emotional, they're *alive*. They care about their country. Now, you have these white people who are being displaced. No matter where you look, they're griping about being in second place now. They've been so accustomed to having their diapers changed. They've been so accustomed to having the nipple given to them. *En español tenemos un dicho, "ya se acabó la chiche."* ("In Spanish we have a saying, 'the good stuff is over.'") These white guys want to suckle at their mother's breast until they're eighty years old. Isn't that gross? They expect to have entitlements. They expect to have privilege. They aren't getting it anymore, and they feel it. This is the first time it's filtered down to the common middle class. Now, white people are looking across the street from them and seeing Mexicans or Latinos with new cars, and it never used to be that way. Not anymore. Now, it's different, and it's *very* good. You can see the country changing right in front of you.

I've been invited to *O, The Oprah Magazine* for an interview—I didn't take it. *The New York Times* and *The L.A. Times* did a big front-page thing on me. Normally, *nada*, I won't put myself out there; it's been that way for fifteen years. But recently, I find myself seriously thinking of going out to try to get people to vote because it's that important to me that we

But the thing is, no matter how they feel about me, I really like myself. I should be whipped and punished for liking myself this much. I love who I am. I love my gente. *I love my daughters. I love my sons. I love my* comida, *my music, my paintings, my dance. I love Spanish. We're some of the greatest poets. The people of Spain are political geniuses, they can speak to you about anything. They're intelligent, they're temperamental, they're emotional, they're* alive.

continue **that change, that we become *part* of that change, that we *are* the change. It's important as hell to me that we are the change.**

While preparing for this interview, I was thinking of Chicana feminists such as Ana Castillo and Gloria Anzaldúa. I don't know if you know them. Gloria wrote Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. *I see them as natural storytellers, and they were very significant voices in the Chicana movement of the '70s and '80s. What role do you think poetry and storytelling have in social change?*

It's everything. I don't think change can come around politically without first coming around culturally. *People* are the stories, we just write about them. *People* engender your experiences; *people* engender your dreams. Your dreams can be absurd; they can be bizarre.

Castillo and Anzaldúa were treated unjustly by publishers because they were feminists. Even in the '70s and '80s, people treated Chicanas in a way that said, "They're beautiful. You want to have sex with them. You want to go to a party with them. But all they want to do is talk about freaking feminism." That was their problem—they wanted to talk about feminism. They wanted to talk about injustice. They were sick and tired of being treated like sex symbols. They were telling the stories back then that are being listened to now. They broke that wall into middle-class academics. Academics, to me, is the biggest problem run by whites. You've got white guys thinking they're doing right by holding the border up and not letting us in. They honestly think they're the candle bearers of God or something. We have spent so much energy going around them.

Even after Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga edited *This Bridge Called My Back*, they still could not penetrate academic America. Not only white liberals, but even white liberal women were talking about different issues than what was really concerning the Latina. What concerned the Latina was their horrible life and how to improve it. And it started from the inside—men beating the shit out of women, men disrespecting women, men not treating women like human beings—because that's how Mexicans were taught. Mexican men were taught that you take sex by force when you want it. When you tell an *hombre*, "That's not right," all of a sudden they go into a grieving state with the realization that they've hurt the one they love. That makes it worse, because then they start drinking and knocking other guys around. It's because they've internalized the shame and the guilt. They start hitting other people at parties and dances because they realize that the one person they love they've actually been raping—because that's what it is. When they realize that, get out of their way, because they'll knock the heck out of you.

Castillo and Anzaldúa were treated unjustly by publishers because they were feminists. Even in the '70s and '80s, people treated Chicanas in a way that said, "They're beautiful. You want to have sex with them. You want to go to a party with them. But all they want to do is talk about freaking feminism." That was their problem – they wanted to talk about feminism. They wanted to talk about injustice. They were sick and tired of being treated like sex symbols. They were telling the stories back then that are being listened to now. They broke that wall into middle-class academics.

Do you think that writing – as in memory writing – can help with these issues? Do you do workshops on memory with storytelling or memory writing?

Absolutely. I do workshops all over the world. When you tell a Spanish, or Mexican, or Chicano man, "This is what you've been doing, you've been raping her. When you come in drunk, go to bed, and hit her, or just turn her over and don't even care about how you treated her in the morning"—the first thing they'll tell you is, "Shut up." The second is, "I love her." That's the big one. I know they do; you can see it in their hands, their eyes, their lips, and their face. They love her. So, what do you do, now that you've opened the wound? Reading a book is not going to help them. Writing a story is not going to help them. You have to tell them to sit down and write a letter, telling her that you're sorry, that you never meant that. Even though letters have gone out of style, they are the only form of communication that is personal. If their wife or girlfriend reads it, she'll believe it, and she'll cry. She'll hold onto a letter; she won't hold onto a book he's written in the same way she will a letter. That's our biggest problem, guilt. I hate guilt. I hate what it does to us, it fucks us over. I don't like that.

I've done a lot of shitty things in my life, and I have never felt good about it. Fuck that. If I did something bad, I did it, but I won't do it again. I've learned not to nurse guilt by demeaning and belittling yourself—that's the first thing we've got to do. It starts with Christianity and *mea culpa, mea culpa*. If you were born a woman, it automatically puts you five steps below a man. It's your fault, because you made Adam take the apple. I have two daughters, one grew up to become a doctor in Miami; one is seventeen and travelling the world. The one thing I taught them, as well as my three sons, is not to have guilt. I don't give a shit what you do, there's no guilt. Tell me the truth and move on from it. I grew up with guilt. In the orphanage run by nuns, and then later with guards, it was always, "You did this. You did that." How much can one guy do? (Laughter)

So, writing that letter, I wrote it to the world. Instead of a wife or a girlfriend, because I didn't have that, I wrote it to the world. I said, "I'm sorry I did this. I didn't know that you had to have a job. I didn't know that you had to go to school. I'm sorry that I didn't go to school. I don't have a job. I don't have a new car. I'm sorry. This is what I have, I'll give you this letter. You can have this letter because that's me. I'm sorry for disappointing you, but I love you." And then, the world responded to me, and said, "We love you too, Jimmy."

That's pretty good! (Laughter)

That's what I did in prison. I started out with my grandma. I said, "I'm sorry, grandma, for disappointing you by being here. I know you worked really hard." She used to wake up in the morning to put wood in the stove, and clean the house, and make tortillas and beans and *arrocito*, and I always prayed that I would go to school and be a good boy. I was a good boy, Jimmy was a *very* good boy, until the authorities came and took us away. That was when I *started* writing—it was that letter.

I've never talked about this, ever. You're the first person I've talked to about this. Can I have a copy of this interview? I would love to have a copy.

Yeah, of course. The editor always sends a copy of the issue. I understand you are working on a novel now?

It's seven or eight hundred pages so far. It's been in my head for twenty years. I was terrified that I couldn't do it, so I partied a lot; I went out on dates every night; I traveled. I did anything to escape having to face that job. This is a novel that takes place over forty years. It is my Chicano experience.

You were scared of the scope of the work?

Yeah, the scope of it. And the fact that I feel like I can't do it. I just don't have the skill to do it. I don't have the skill because something like that is on the level of ***War and Peace***. If you're going to deal with forty years of Chicano culture—the intricacies of the Chicano experience; the emotion, especially with women and with fame and fortune; and try to turn it into auto fiction—some of it's true, some of it's not—there's no way. I kept on flirting with myself, saying, "***Hombre***, you could do it." But, there was another part of my brain that said, "Don't even open that door, ***porque tú eres un cobarde, cabrón***. Because you are a coward, you asshole. Don't even attempt to try it, because you can't." Then, I started praying to the Indigenous pantheon of Gods. I said, "Mother Earth, help me get started. Let me know what's going on." So, I did. Maruca tells me, "That is the most beautiful work I've read in my entire life." She's my critic, you know. She usually tells me, "Burn it." Not this. She read a little part and she said, "God, you wrote this? Oh my God, Jimmy, you finally did it." I sent one page to New York, to Random House, and they said, "We want it. How much do you want for it?" I said, "Nothing's ready to go yet."

When do you think it will be ready?

In about three months. I've got eight hundred pages. But Hollywood's calling, so I've got to go back and do the pilot for a show. I won a boxing script. So, I have all these things outside of this book. It's really screwed me up, because I could make all this money doing other stuff, but I chose not to in the last three years just so I could follow this thing. I got drunk a lot of times in the middle of it, because I just couldn't deal with it. It felt like, man, I can't do this shit. Two or three weeks would pass, and I'd forget where I was at. I'd forget what I was talking about, and I just kept on doing that over and over. It's like being married to a man who you aren't in love with anymore, but you stay because of utilitarian necessity. That's what it was like writing the book. It was showing me who I was. I was a piece of crap, until I wasn't. I've got three more months. I broke it down structurally. It was hard to do; I did some things I haven't done before. I use a type of language that's inventive and fresh. And I use a type of structure and storyline within that structure that keeps the momentum and adrenaline hot. Why tell a story that consoles you into sleep? You want to tell a story that's going to beat against your heart.

Do you feel the process is different from writing poetry? You were talking about poetry

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being a lot more organic, not so linear, right? How has the experience been?

The thing about poetry is, you stand before the mirror and you put on your best clothes. You make sure you've got a bow tie on, and everything's pressed. Then, you go out, but there's no event happening. You got dressed because you wanted to get dressed, but there's no event. That's poetry. Then, Mr. Prose gets up. He's got on jeans, a T shirt—the kind that smells, and some torn-up sneakers. He's being called to the dean's party. He's got a place to go. That's prose. That's the difference between poetry and prose. (Laughter)

Those are really good descriptions. (Laughter) Thank you for your time.



Electra Gamón Fielding is Professor of Spanish and Translation and the chair of the Department of World Languages and Cultures at Weber State University. Her research interests span medieval and early modern Peninsular literature, the influence of Orientalized elements in Spanish cultural production, and translation studies. Additionally, she has delved into postcolonial studies, with a particular emphasis on Chicanx and Latinx cultural and literary production, culminating in a publication on Ana Castillo's work, and the teaching of several classes through the lens of postcolonial studies and the Chicanx/Latinx experience.

“We are all tourists on this planet”—
Insights and Wisdom from Venerable Geshe Lhakdor

ང་ཚོ་ཆོང་མ་འཛམ་གླིང་འདིའི་ནང་གི་ཡིག་སྐྱེས་བ་ཡིན།

Marc Nelson



When China invaded Tibet in the 1950s, over 100,000 Tibetans fled to India. Venerable Geshe Lhakdor was seven years old when he made the dangerous journey on foot with his family through the Himalayas. The spiritual and political leader of Tibet, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, had been exiled and established a home away from home for Tibetans near Dharamsala in northern India. Today, over 10,000 Tibetans still live there with their spiritual leader.

Not long after arriving in India, Geshe Lhakdor donned the maroon and yellow robes of a Tibetan monk and began to study Buddhist philosophy. He earned several degrees in the subject and now holds honorary professorships from the University of British Columbia and Delhi University. He has also gained a reputation as an insightful scholar within the global Buddhist community. In 1989, Lhakdor was asked by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to be his translator and co-authored and co-translated

several books on Buddhist philosophy. He is currently Director of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala and continues to teach and work for the preservation of Tibetan culture and the Tibetan people.

Marc Nelson is an American philosopher who studies the meaning of life and teaches a course on that subject for Weber State University. He says that, although the meaning of life may seem like an intimidating topic to some students, the course works because it's not about finding the (one) correct answer to this notoriously elusive question. Rather, it is more about studying diverse cultures and religions around the world and their unique approaches to, and insights into, the meaning of life. One such religion is Buddhism.

Last May, while on a research trip to Dharamsala, Nelson was kindly granted an interview with Venerable Geshe Lhakdor to discuss Buddhist perspectives on the meaning of life. Lhakdor graciously met him at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Thank you for joining me, Venerable Geshe Lhakdor. Please introduce yourself to the readers of Weber, *in which our conversation is going to appear.*

My name is Geshe Lhakdor. I am the director of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala.

Would you mind telling us a little bit about your childhood in Tibet?

I was born in Tibet, but I belonged to a nomadic family. We lived in tents and moved from place to place with yaks, horses, and other animals. We went wherever there was nice pasture and green grass. We ate meat and used dairy products—milk, cheese, butter—typical nomadic sustenance.

Did you have to stop doing that when you became a monk?

When I became a monk, I was already in India. So, there was no such possibility to get all those things. (Laughter)

Will you tell us about your journey from Tibet to India?

We left Tibet for India because of the Chinese invasion. I was seven or eight years old when I escaped with my parents. They put me on the back of a yak, and we escaped. I don't know how many days it took, but we traveled day and night. I don't remember much; the only moment I remember is when we were hiding out on a small mountain, and the Chinese army sent out messages saying, "Come down! Otherwise we will blast you." On another occasion, we were hiding

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in a small cave with other women and small children like us. All the men had already gone into the mountains because we had heard that the Chinese armies were coming and taking away all the men, so they went into the mountain and hid themselves. The women and children stayed in a small valley in a cave. I remember that five Chinese horsemen came and asked us not to hide there, but to come down with them. We did, and then the men followed. It was not long after that that we escaped and came here.

Can you talk about what it was like being the translator for His Holiness the Dalai Lama?

It was a privilege. I never expected to be his translator. I translated for him for sixteen years until he asked me to be the director of this institute.

You traveled around with him?

I traveled around the world with him to many countries.

Can you tell one or two stories that illustrate the meaning of life according to Buddhism?

I don't remember a particular story, but if you look at the relationship between parents and children, you'll know. Children are born totally helpless. The child is only able to survive and flourish because of the unconditional love given by the mother and others. That is how you are able to grow up and be happy; that is the meaning of human life. What I am trying to say is that the meaning of life is happiness. Happiness means deep-down satisfaction. Deep-down satisfaction comes when you receive genuine, unconditional love.

Can you say more about what happiness is*?*

Happiness means satisfaction. Satisfaction comes when what you say and what you do match. It comes when there is no duplicity—saying one thing and doing another thing, showing one thing, while hiding another thing. If you are living a double-standard kind of life—for example, trying to show yourself as a good person when you are actually not a good person—you have a mismatch between what you say and what you do. Therefore, your conscience gets disturbed. You do not have confidence based on integrity and genuineness, so you develop a split personality, and your confidence lowers.

So, are you saying the path to profound satisfaction is authenticity?

Yes, absolutely—authenticity.

I remember a metaphor you once told: your actions are like a recording on a tape.

Yes. You can cheat other people for a time, but you cannot cheat yourself. Whatever you do is recorded in your brain, in your mental continuum. Once it is recorded, it is not lost easily. Your mind is probably better than this computer. Ordinary tape record-

Happiness means satisfaction. Satisfaction comes when what you say and what you do match. It comes when there is no duplicity – saying one thing and doing another thing, showing one thing, while hiding another thing. If you are living a double-standard kind of life – for example, trying to show yourself as a good person when you are actually not a good person – you have a mismatch between what you say and what you do. Therefore, your conscience gets disturbed.

ers have a ribbon in the tape cassette that you can see; you can see how it's recorded. You don't see that in your mobile phone; there is no ribbon, but it's recorded. It's the same way things are recorded in the brain. How do you know what has been recorded? You will know the next time you push the "play" button. You can hear whatever you have recorded. The next time you meet a certain situation—an aggravating situation, an activating situation, or whatever situation—probe it. Whatever you record will come out, good or bad. That's what we call memory.

Would you say that's also basically karma?

Yes. Karma means action. You do an action, and that action— physical, verbal, mental—imprints on the mind. Here, we are primarily talking about mental action.

Can you tell the story of the three criminals?

When we are a little bit successful and healthy, a little bit independent and free, we think, "Oh, I can manage. I don't have to have love, affection, or compassion from other people. I'm independent. I can manage." But, in the worst scenario, you become a bully; you exploit other people. All of this is happening because we don't know the law of nature on a bigger scale. I will give you one example: we are all going to die. This is a law of nature. Not even artificial intelligence will be able to stop it. Artificial intelligence will come up with products to distract you from it. I'm not saying it is outright negative or bad. What I'm saying is, there are certain things you cannot change—death is one example.

Now, if you are somebody who has a great understanding of death—the imminence of death, of you, me, and everybody—there is actually no room to mistreat each other. This is where my example of the three criminals comes into play. Three criminals were caught and made to stand on a stage. They were told, "You only have ten hours to live, after which you will all be executed and killed." Now that they know that they only have ten hours left to live, what should they do for the next ten hours? Fighting each other; exploiting each other; bullying each other—none of these negative activities make sense.

The only thing that makes sense is that they should console each other. If they are believers, they could talk about God or Buddha. Or they could talk about things they regret—the bad things they have done. They should call their friends and relatives to ask for their forgiveness. All this normally happens when a person is dying. Unfortunately, at that time, it is a little bit too late. This cognizance of the imminence of death must be there in one's daily life. *Every day*, we should remember that *today* may be our last day. If today was your last day, what would you do?

We are not doing these things, but we should be. You think you have years to live, therefore your priorities are different. But if you have a clear understanding that today is your last day, what will you do? The wisdom will come by itself. You don't need a great teacher to give you this teaching. My point is, there are certain things about which you should really take time to think about. This topic is very important to the meaning of human life. Don't just listen to other people. What do *you* think?

Now, when we talk about the meaning of human life, first, we need to ask, "*What* or *who* is a human being?

Many of us, unfortunately, don't know. If I ask you, "Are you a human being?," you will say, "Of course." But in what sense? What is it that distinguishes you from animals? Animals sleep, they eat, they have sex. So, what is it that makes you *different*? There's a long story based on findings from science and spirituality. Us being able to speak and communicate is a unique feature. Our special brain is a unique feature. We have an amazing capacity to communicate on very sophisticated topics. We have the capacity to extend a helping hand, or hug—animals don't have all those things, right? More importantly, the

brain has the capacity to judge what is good for you, what is good for others, what is good today, and what is good in the long run. We have an amazing capacity to develop things like kindness, compassion, patience, and harmony—all great qualities which animals cannot do. But most of us are using the amazing capacity of our brain and intelligence in the wrong way—like, how to invent a nuclear bomb or smart gun ballistic missiles; it's completely crazy. The Buddha's Buddhist teaching says, "You don't have to kill people, they will die." This is called wisdom. If you have somebody who is dying, why do you have to kill this person? Let them live.

All these so-called "great leaders of the world" are in a mad rush on how to eliminate each other.

It's happening right now in so many places. The only solution is proper education. Now, unfortunately, the system of education is not good. Education is used only to get a certain degree, for livelihood, or to make money. There is hardly any education for total human happiness and flourishing.

All of these technological inputs are useful, but they are just another tool in the hand of an innocent child. Material marvels like your iPhone cause you to have limited time to reflect within yourself and explore your inner resources—what we call meditation.

You are in touch with others through your mobile phone, the internet, your websites, but what is the one thing that will help you keep in touch with yourself? There are no technological products that will help you keep in touch with yourself. Because people have lost touch with themselves, they experience depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and many other diseases—some of which we have never heard of before. It is because people run after external, material things and do not keep in touch with themselves.

Today, you marry one woman, but after a few days you think, I thought this was the woman for me, but it turns out she is not the right one. So, you divorce. You marry another woman, thinking that *this* is the right one. But, the same situation happens all over again because you *yourself* never changed. You want everything—that is the problem.

If you could give everybody in the world some advice, would it be to meditate more?

I would not use complicated words like "meditate more." I would simply say, "contemplate." Simply contemplate death and see what is the meaning of human life. Is it better to kill each other or to live in harmony? Is it better to make divisions—white versus black, green versus red, men versus women—or to live in harmony? I would tell them that you're just a tourist on this planet.

When tourists visit a place, they enjoy the sites, they smile and talk to the local people and then say, "How nice." Good tourists don't go throwing garbage around and starting fights with the locals. We are all like tourists here. We are not going to live here forever. Depending upon your age, if you're sixty or seventy years old, you have another ten years left. Your job is to bring some kind of peace and happiness to the minds of other people. If you do that, then it doesn't matter whether you call it Buddhist or Christian—you are doing a religious practice. If you're not doing that, then you can repeat all the mantras of the Buddha and remember Jesus all you want, but it is all hypocrisy.

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Jesus and Buddha's main concern is how to bring harmony and happiness among the people.

If you are not doing that, you are not listening to them. Even if you go to church or temple and sing their praises, they will not be happy with you. It is the inconsistency of thoughts.

The problem is, normally, we don't use our brains. We simply follow movements. Because of this, even democracy has become bad democracy. Democracy, in the good sense, is government of the people, by the people, for the people. In the bad sense, government is by the cattle, for the cattle, of the cattle—animals. In many countries, they use the word democracy, but the way they lead people is through dictatorship.

You said we should focus on spending our time trying to increase the happiness and satisfaction in the minds of others. Would you say that's the best thing we can do with our lives?

Yes. But not just by talking about it, but living it. Be an example. Living in accordance with what you are taught is difficult. You need to *show* by example. In today's world, there are so many people who are dying for a genuine smile from somebody.

When someone is mad at you, or being mean to you, it's helpful to remind yourself that deep down they just want somebody to love them.

That's why we say, don't judge other people. You have no idea how someone struggled this morning just to get out of bed; they may be in a very difficult situation. Still, they use cosmetics, wear nice clothes, and go to the market pretending everything is okay, you see? We are living in a world like that. Externally, everything looks good—high rise buildings with shiny roads in between. But in these big buildings, many people are living alone, sad, and depressed with nobody to trust.

Would you mind talking about enlightenment?

The English word "enlightenment" doesn't mean *complete* enlightenment—it means by degrees.

If somebody knows something you don't know, you call it "enlightened." That's *one* meaning. But when we use this word for Buddha, we are talking about *complete* enlightenment—one who knows everything, and one who has removed all their own personal sufferings and problems.

You've said there is no push button to enlightenment.

Exactly. You cannot achieve enlightenment very easily. Also, is it possible for somebody to know everything and to remove all the suffering? These are big questions. The good news is, if you make an effort, you can reduce your suffering; you can achieve greater happiness.

The Dalai Lama is enlightened, correct?

We *believe* he is. But as I said, you can't judge who is who.

I appreciate that the way you explain things and the words that you use show that these things are available to everybody, not just Buddhists. How can we know *that happiness is the meaning of life? How do we know that happiness is the* best *goal to have?*

Because, when you're born, immediately after birth, the first thing the child does is cry. And what do you think the child is asking for? He's not asking for suffering. He is definitely saying, "I have some suffering. Please help. I want happiness." That is what he is saying. He is not asking for a long teaching on Buddhism, Judaism, or Christianity. He is asking for somebody's unconditional love, like the kind he gets from his mother. We are born like that. It has nothing to do with religion. It's not only human beings who crave this—all sentient beings, animals, they all want happiness. With their limited means, they try. If it's very hot, if they are thirsty, they know where to get water—things like that, right? So, it's inborn. In Buddhism, we say the inborn wish to have happiness is really good news. If you make the effort, you can get that higher level of happiness. Unfortunately, we don't pay much attention. We are satisfied with fleeting pleasures, sensual satisfactions, and we have no time to go deeper.

I find it interesting how humans find pleasure in being compassionate and in loving. It makes me feel good to be kind and loving toward other people. Sometimes, people ask the question, Is that selfish? Is it selfish to be kind if it's for my own satisfaction?

If you think just of yourself and completely ignore others, that is selfish. If you don't do that, you have every right to care about yourself, to be compassionate to yourself. In fact, from a larger perspective, if your goal is to help others, then first help yourself. You see, taking care of yourself *is* taking care of others. Taking care of others *is* taking care of yourself.

Do you have any practical advice for how people can do that more? How can they be more compassionate to themselves, even from a selfish motivation?

That's why His Holiness the Dalai Lama, says, "If you want to be selfish, be wisely selfish." Wisely selfish means, the more you care about others, genuinely—not with an object to get something from them, but genuinely care for them—the more people will also take care of you. If you genuinely smile, they

The most difficult thing is practicing what I preach. It's not a problem, it doesn't cause me suffering, but it's not easy. It's like going to the gym. You have to sweat and build your muscle. It takes many months of work, it doesn't happen in one day. Similarly, for the spiritual practitioner, they must build their mental muscle. For that, you need repeated practice, not just one day and then forget it.

will also smile at you, and you'll get happiness. This has nothing to do with religion.

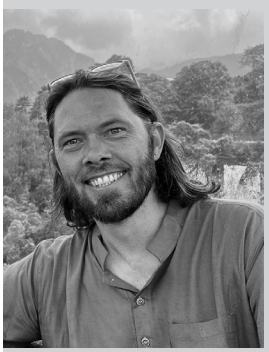
What is the most difficult part of your life?

Practicing what I preach. The most difficult thing was not when I was kicked out of Tibet by the Chinese. I had a lot of fear and things like that, but I still would not say that was the most difficult thing. The most difficult thing is practicing what I preach. It's not a problem, it doesn't cause me suffering, but it's not easy. It's like going to the gym. You have to sweat and build your muscle. It takes many months of work, it doesn't happen in one day. Similarly, for the spiritual practitioner, they must build their mental muscle. For that, you need repeated practice, not just one day and then forget it.

Does that mainly come through meditation?

Not just meditation, but everything—study, reflection, learning how to be compassionate—things like that.

Thank you. It was wonderful to talk with you.



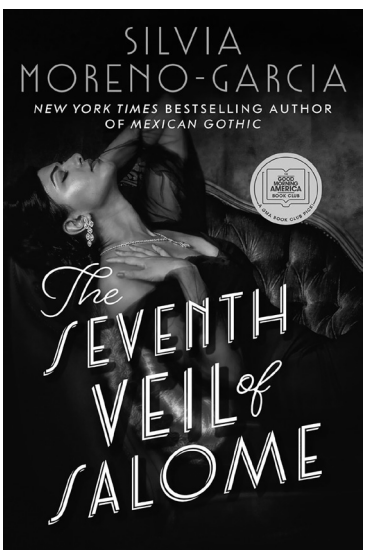
Marc Nelson is an adjunct instructor for the philosophy, honors, and study abroad programs at Weber State University, where he has taught for twelve years. He holds a master's degree in Philosophy of Mind from the University of Warwick in the UK.

Piercing the Veil of the High and Low, the Real and the Fantastic.

On Opera, Televnovelas, and the Gothic



A Conversation with
Silvia Moreno-Garcia



Ukamaka Olisakwe

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is the author of the critically acclaimed The Daughter of Doctor Moreau (2022), Mexican Gothic (2020), *and, most recently,* The Seventh Veil of Salome (2024), *among many other novels. She is the winner of the prestigious Locus Awards and the British Fantasy and World Fantasy Awards.*

In October 2024, Ms. Moreno-Garcia visited Weber State University as part of the Browning Presents! event series under the auspices of the Telitha E. Lindquist College of Arts and Humanities. While on campus, writer and script writer Ukamaka Olisakwe, assistant professor of English at Weber State University, had the privilege of having a conversation with Silvia in front of a live audience. Their conversation ranged from Silvia's interest in gothic, horror, and romance, and what it means to write genre fiction in the 21st century, to her writing practice, her literary influence, her love for music and film, food, and The Seventh Veil of Salome. *The interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

(Uka) *It's an honor to have you here, Silvia. I would like to start by asking you to talk a little bit about yourself, particularly a fascinating detail that some people may not know: you came from a science background and have taught in the faculty of science. Why have you now decided to dedicate this phase of your life to the creative arts?*

(Silvia) I have a master's degree in science and technology studies from the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. I worked for ten years at UBC in the science department as the communications coordinator. Science and technology studies is a multidisciplinary degree. It is a degree that looks at the sciences through the lens of the humanities and the social sciences.

My thesis was on H.P. Lovecraft, women, and eugenics—I was already on a literary bend back then. I come to the sciences from that angle. I did my degree in STS because I believe there isn't as much of a separation between the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences as we think there is. When you look at something like vaccine development, it responds to social factors, financial factors, and distribution factors. If you are distributing vaccines to other parts of the world, there might also be translation factors at work. When you think of science in that way—not as something that is *separate* from people, that never touches people—you see that it *touches* people at all points in life.

I started writing short stories when I was in my 20s. Even while I was doing science-communications work, I was going home and writing stories, and then later on, novels—I had two existences. Three years ago, I became a full-time freelance writer. I no longer have a pension or dental plan now. (Laughter) It's been a relatively short period of time since I became a full-time freelance writer. Before, it was very much a life lived in the sciences.

(Uka) *The reason why I asked that question is because I also come from a computer science background. Your move into the humanities has been incredibly inspiring. In a recent interview, you said that the characters in your most recent novel,* The Seventh Veil of Salome*, are like musical instruments clashing together to form a dramatic song. In many of your books, including* The Seventh Veil of Salome*, you included a playlist for your readers. Music seems to be a strong component in your writing. How do you decide what music best suits the genre you're writing in at any particular time?*

(Silvia) While writing ***The Seventh Veil of Salome***, I was influenced by the opera ***Salome*** by Richard Strauss. Strauss's musical choices influenced the structure of the novel through his use of polytonality. Polytonality is when there are two or more tones played at the same time. It can sound a bit chaotic, but it works really well in ***Salome***. If you're old enough to remember ***The Twilight Zone*** theme song, you will understand what polytonality is. Polytonality causes a sense of anxiety. I was trying to replicate that within the novel. The characters within the novel act as instruments—clashing instruments. The chapters of the book are titled with the names of characters—excluding one chapter towards the end called "Son Clave." I did this to mimic Cuban rhythm. The pattern is the basis for a lot of Cuban music; it actually draws from African roots that were imported to the island. I was also thinking about Latin American music at the time. "Son Clave" is there for a reason; you'll have to read the novel to find out why. I was thinking about music, musical patterns, and how they produce certain reactions within audiences.

(Uka) *By the end of the novel, I was on the edge of my seat. There is a shifting perspective toward the end – Salome's perspective, the Hollywood Gossip writer's perspective. These perspectives kept shifting. It was fascinating because it was almost like a series of vignettes, staccato sounds clashing, until we get to the end and find out what happened.*

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Moving on, you have said your favorite genre is noir. It reminds me of the iconography on the inner cover of Mexican Gothic*, which lists you as the "director." We see your love for film across these genres, such as in the supernatural suspense of* Silver Nitrate *and in the sweeping thriller of* The Seventh Veil of Salome. *Do you usually approach the page, no matter the genre, with that cinematic eye of a filmmaker?*

(Silvia) It depends on the project. For example, ***Silver Nitrate*** is set in 1993 and is about an actor and an editor. Film was always on the back of my mind while writing that novel. In other projects, it's more of a minor influence. ***Signal to Noise*** was my first novel. It is split into two time periods and is basically about three teenagers in Mexico City who learn how to cast spells. One of the thematic ideas is, here's this person who, twenty years later, returns to the city to deal with things that happened to them as a teenager. It's like how a record works—when the needle reaches the edge of the record, it lifts, and then it goes back again to its original place. The idea of the novel was going back to something circular, and he plays to make his case. Music influenced me in that way.

In a novel like ***The Seventh Veil of Salome***, aside from the music of Strauss, I was also thinking about biblical epochs and holy week. It was all biblical, all the time. ***The Seventh Veil of Salome*** is not a fantasy novel, but I think there is an element of the fantastic in the Salome sections. Those five little movies, to me, are ***actually*** fantastic because of the way they're shot. The costumes the people are wearing, and the fact that they all have British accents, create an element of the ***unreal*** in these Hollywood epics of an ancient world. You might say, "All films are kind of ***unreal***." But, because of the Technicolor way these things were shot, there is a sense that you're entering a different world and a different reality—a reality in which Cleopatra really was Elizabeth Taylor. I wanted the sections that were narrated by Salome to have the same sense of ***big*** drama and ***unreality*** that permeated the movies with huge casts. So, in those sections, I wanted to give you a sense that we are now watching a Hollywood movie. We then move into the more realistic parts—Nancy's point of view is ***very*** realistic, and Vera's point

of view is *very* realistic about Hollywood. But, when we're in Salome's point of view, it's different. Film was very important for the *feeling* of those sections. I loved those movies growing up. I loved how Hedy Lamarr in *Samson and Delilah* has a peacock dress, even though it is an *impossible* dress. Some of those films are as fantastic as *The Lord of the Rings*.

(Uka) *One can see the amount of research that goes into each work. You have written supernatural suspense, romance, everything, and these varied genres demand rigorous research, which takes time. It is impressive considering that you are so prolific! You've published at least one book every year since 2015. Some of us struggle to do that. (Laughter) Could you tell us about your research, and, more specifically, how you succeeded in making sure that the research component didn't overwhelm the story? Sometimes, we read a book and we immediately know that the writer did research. However, in your work, the research component doesn't overwhelm or pronounce itself; it is subtle. How do you do it?*

(Silvia) I love the research phase of a book—it comes from the scholarly component within me. The information comes in, you filter it, and then you do something else with it. There's a period where you're almost like a caterpillar—you're eating a lot, and then, eventually, you become a beautiful butterfly.

Each book has different needs, and so the research can be quite different. There are some topics that I'm already familiar with because I've been interested in them for my entire life. I did not start liking 1950s Hollywood films just last year. I attended a Catholic school since I was twelve-years-old, so I know about it—that tends to be the case with a lot of the things that I write about. These are lifelong obsessions that I am putting on the page. Opera, however, is something that I became interested in only a few years ago. A friend of mine is a big opera buff, and she took me to see performances of The Met in movie theaters; we saw several performances together. Then, on my own, I started to buy opera tickets and going to the opera. I finally started to understand the theatricality of opera. Everything is *big*; the emotions are *big*. Nobody *just* dies; they sing a whole song about it. (Laughter) What interested me about that was, how can I bring *big* emotion to the written page? How can I take some of the things that opera does so well and use them for something else like short stories or novels? I became obsessed with opera at that point. Watching different versions of *Salome* was part of my research process. I watched what performers were doing on stage in all these different ways; I studied their emotion, and how *huge* the emotion was. Telenovelas also do huge emotions.

We have this differentiation between low and high art, and Telenovelas are supposed to be low art. But what I really enjoy, especially when it is a good Telenovela, is that it may be over the top, it may be silly. Some of the conflicts could be, for example, that a woman's adopted daughter is not *really* her *adopted* daughter, but she was *really* her *biological* daughter, whom the grandmother smuggled in, and now she's getting married to an evil guy who stole her coffee empire. (Laughter) But, when it's well done, you just stare at the screen; you can't look away. I love when this happens in what we consider "low media"—comic books, crappy movies, too. There's something in them, at times, that is more authentic than things that are very polished.

I took a drawing class once and did a little drawing of a person in motion. It was just a sketch, so it didn't have a lot of features like clothing or anything like that. It really did look like a person who was walking. For the next class, I did it again, but I made the sketch more elaborate. I gave the person clothes and hair. The teacher said, "No, you went too far, it needs to be looser. What you did before was better. This is too stiff, too fake." And I said, "You're right." The first time, I just

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wanted to capture the motion, and I actually did it. The second time, I was overthinking it, and it came out stiff. That's one of the things that I really like about Telenovelas, there's something that is *true* there, that you don't find in other media. It's the same with opera; there's an element of *true* passion. I've been thinking about that. How do you do that on the written page? How can you write big things like that? If you write, "She fell in love with him at first sight," people will say, "That's impossible. That doesn't happen." Well, maybe not every day. But, if our favorite characters hadn't found passion and love at some point in time, if Romeo hadn't been looking up at Juliet on that balcony, we wouldn't have all these stories, right? It's something that we don't see much nowadays, but when I look at old media, I really like it when they are being very theatrical in films.

(Uka) The Seventh Veil of Salome *is a masterclass on points of view. Some parts were written in the first person, and others in the third. When it comes down to individual voices, each one mirrors the narrator's personality, background, and the way they talk to each other. Could you talk about the choices you make when deciding which book should have multiple points of view, as we see in* The Seventh Veil of Salome*, or a single point of view — as we see in* Mexican Gothic*?*

(Silvia) I naturally prefer to have multiple points of view; it is my default. The book sometimes demands a single point of view because of its structure. ***Mexican Gothic*** demanded only one point of view. Female Gothics are structured that way; it's a story from a woman's point of view. It helps you to think of mystery and to conceal certain things until a certain point in time. I think you feel closer to the character when it's just her alone in that house. If you had another point of view in the novel, she wouldn't seem so alone and isolated. ***Untamed Shore*** is another novel that has a single point of view. It's a coming of age novel about a young woman who starts working with these Americans who she thinks are glamorous and cool; she later discovers that they are not what they seem. That novel required a single point of view—the way ***she's*** seeing things. Other people cannot come in. It is hard for me sometimes, because I want just one more point of view, but some books refuse this. I've been thinking, I really want to do a first-person point-of-view in present tense. I have done it in short stories, but never in a novel.

(Uka) *How do you manage this onerous task of writing across genres when some writers struggle to survive in* one *genre? Here you are, doing this superhuman thing of travelling across time and subjects, while producing such culturally relevant works that continue to enrich our archives. What's the secret?*

(Silvia) I love a challenge. Genre switching is an internal challenge for me. I ask myself, "Can I do this? How will I do this if I have to?" Also, I get tired very quickly with things. I have a very short attention span. I also have a terrible fear of death. It's a real fear that keeps me awake at night. This sense of mortality makes me write a lot. Sometimes, when I'm feeling lazy and don't want to write, there's a voice in my head that says, "But you will die." (Laughter) It's a good incentive to have—an anxiety mechanism that can keep you going.

Penguin Random House has a promotional feature on their Instagram called "Writer Spaces and Writer Processes." They ask for a picture of a writer's space, and for the writer to explain their process. They asked me to participate. Other writers who had been featured had these beautiful apartments; everything was organized. When these writers explained their process, they'd say something like, "I wake up every morning, have a coffee, and write." One writer said, "I start a new novel on January 6th every year." I told them I can't do the writing space and process thing because I write in my bed sometimes, and it's a very small home, so it's very messy. Also, my writing process, sometimes, is that I get an idea and I write until 5 a.m., and I forget to eat. I don't think we can put that on the Penguin Instagram, right? (Laughter) And they said, "It's okay, you don't have to do it." (Laughter)

(Uka) *Do your ideas come fully formed, or do they come in sketches as you write?*

(Silvia) I have a big idea file folder, and I just put everything that comes to me in there. Ideas usually don't come fully formed. Usually, it's just one thing, and then, eventually, that one thing will lead to another. If I keep thinking about it, I know there's something good about it. If you keep going over the same things, it's like your subconscious is trying to tell you something. At a certain point, I start talking to my characters.

(Uka) *So, talking to ghosts?*

(Silvia) Yes, a little bit like that. Sometimes, I go in the shower so I don't freak people out so much. (Laughter) Generally, when you're talking to yourself on the street, people get ideas about you. Maybe not so much nowadays, because everybody has a device in their ear and you're no longer sure who is having a manic episode and who's just having a Zoom conference. (Laughter) But I got used to doing this in the shower. I would start talking to a character and ask them who they are, what they like to eat. I'll talk in their voice, I'll do their mannerisms—all that kind of stuff. It helps me figure out the physicality of them; it helps me figure out their traits. When I'm at that point, I know I'm going to write something—either a short story or a novel—because I've already gone through this obsessive idea, and now I'm thinking about the character. The character might change and evolve, but it's inside of me and wants to come out—so I do the playacting, without people watching. But it sometimes is weird. My husband will be doing something in the kitchen, and I'll randomly say, "I'm going to kill you if I ever see you again!" And he would go, "What did I do? You didn't like the enchiladas?" And I'll say, "I'm not talking to *you*." (Laughter)

(Uka) *Literary fiction likes to laud itself as being the camp of fiction that is truly concerned with the human condition. But you have done such tremendous work across genres. How do these different genres you write, despite their distinct histories and conventions, engage with us, and in what ways do they help us understand the com-*

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plex social, cultural, and political issues we grapple with in our world today?

(Silvia) I think sub-genres, or conventions, last because they have something that we find interesting. We may not know why people find it interesting, but it keeps reoccurring. It's because throughout time, we keep finding something to talk about. Haunted houses, for example, we've had them for a long time. The idea of a haunted house, traditionally, is the idea of a Victorian haunted house. Traditional Victorian stories by Henry James, that kind of stuff. But, then—in the 1990s and early 2000s—Japanese cinema was full of haunted apartments; it became a different kind of landscape. Then came haunted technology—*The Ring* featured a haunted VHS tape. I wouldn't be surprised if in the next few years, we have haunted emails and haunted AI. (Laughter) I think it's because we're trying to explore something when we talk about our personal living spaces being haunted. When an apartment building is haunted, what do you do? Do you call a priest? If your power grid is haunted, do you call a techno-exorcist?

Even with things we don't typically consider haunted, or question in terms of how they explore the human condition, they can. For example, human possession stories (something coming into you and changing the way you are, like vampires—something that consumes you) throughout history, these are ideas that are inside our head, and we are trying to deal with them in all kinds of ways. They are all vehicles that can be used in many different forms. You can have the traditional, fun, vampires, but you can also do something with vampires that digs a little bit deeper, that asks questions: "Why are we afraid of being consumed? Why do we want to consume somebody else? Why is there a desire to feast or feed on something? Why is the vampire suddenly romantic? Why did we have *scary* vampires, through a long history of vampires, but now we have *sexy* vampires? Why is that erotic desire present and how is it being handled?" The thing about all these ideas is that they have power, right? And that, to me, is the interesting part as an artist. What do you do with these ideas that have power? What do you construct out of them? That's why, when people talk about "high" or "low" genre, I think something like a Telenovela can have power and can be useful. As an artist, you can use these genres to think about ideas and how to express them. What can I take from that form of entertainment and use to tell a story? You can look at zombie stories or werewolf stories, even from specific parts of the world, and ask, "What is this saying to me? What do I want to do with it?"

For me, genres are fun for that reason, both when you want to work within the borders and when you want to get outside of the borders. When you want to destroy genres or mix them, it can be a very liberating process, as opposed to thinking, "I'm a serious writer, I cannot write about vampires." That's bad. Take, for example, the writer Octavia Butler—a wonderful science fiction writer. She wrote an interesting vampire story that deals with race and all kinds of different issues. Other authors are also doing that. So, there's no reason why you should feel you cannot touch that, or think that the toolbox is tainted by vampires.

(Uka) *Of all the genres you've written in, which has been the most tasking, and which out of your books was the most challenging to write?*

There are many challenges with the research process. I guess my first novel was the most challenging. It wasn't the first novel that I wrote, but it was the first one that was published. When writing that book, I had ideas about playlists and about circularity. It was a difficult process to get down on the page. I knew what I wanted to say, but I wasn't quite sure how to say it, even though I had completed a few novels previously that hadn't sold. I think it's a good thing that those novels didn't sell. This was the first novel where I actually felt like myself. The previous two novels were exercises in thought, but they were not fully formed. My first published novel was the first fully-formed thing that I created. For that reason, it was difficult. The others became easier. Some people feel pressured that their first novel has to be published; I don't think so.

(Uka) *Who do you think we should be reading right now?*

(Silvia) Mariana Enriquez has a new short story collection out called *A Sunny Place for Shady People*. I love the cover. I love her. I love her short stories. I love that she's being translated more. I love reading stuff in translation. I think Yōko Ogawa has a new work in translation that's coming up. I really like her short stories that I've read. I love seeing how people in totally different parts of the world construct narratives; that's why I try to read books in translation.

It's also Hispanic Heritage Month, so, I would say, look around and find Latin American or Latino writers to read. There are so many out there, and a lot of them fly under the radar. Everybody always recommends *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. But you know that one; pick another. I definitely recommend Mariana Enriquez. Also, *Ten Planets* by Yuri Herrera; it is a sci-fi short story collection. The author is from Mexico. I really like a couple of novels that he has done. Also, *Monstrilio* by Gerardo Sámano Córdova. Córdova is a Mexican-American author. The novel is about a mother whose son dies, but she keeps a little piece of his lung and a monster grows out of it. It's a queer story, a love story, about a monster that eats people. (Laughter)

(Audience question) *Could you share a bit about when you made the decision to go from your career and take the jump to become a full-time author? Who is in your circle? Who supports you in this journey?*

(Silvia) It was two years ago, and to be frank, I needed to save up some money first. A friend told me to save six months' worth to live on while I took the plunge, see how it goes. So I did that, and it's been working out. Who supports me? Well, one of my kids says they don't like my books. (Laughter) But I like their honesty. My husband reads everything I write. When he was commuting to his previous job, I used to send him a chapter every few days, and he would read it on the subway and tell me in the morning what he thought about it. So, I got used to that dynamic of sending him chapters. It was a good for me.

(Audience question) *What author do you feel, when you were forming your voice as a writer, was most influential on your writing*

style. And also, which author did you read the most?

(Silvia) I think it is H. P. Lovecraft. I did my thesis on him. I know everything about him. I know his favorite ice cream flavor. I know what he was afraid of—almost everything—from Italians to small dogs. I've read him since I was eleven-years-old. I've probably ready every single H. P. Lovecraft story on the face of the Earth; even some of his poetry—some of it is not very good. I love him. He was such a mess.

I've read a lot of Henry James, too, because I really like ghost stories. A lot of Edith Wharton. A lot of classical writers. A lot of pulp fiction from the early twentieth century—so, lots of *Conan the Barbarian*. As a kid, I said, "Give me more Conan, with the sword!" (Laughter) Those are my big influences. Also, Joyce Carol Oates. She's so prolific. She's really funny on Twitter. She made a post on Twitter about her infected foot. It looked like she had gangrene. She posted a picture of her foot with a caption saying, "Anybody know what's this?" (Laughter)

(Audience question) *What brought you to Canada, and what do you miss most about Mexico?*

(Silvia) I went to Canada for school and I miss the food. There's no good Mexican food in Canada. (Laughter) I come to the United States to eat Mexican food. When I get invited to speak somewhere, I ask, "Are there Mexican restaurants in the town?" (Laughter) It's getting better in Canada, but I definitely miss the food and the spices. I went crazy the first time I found Choco Krispis in a store in Vancouver. They're like Cocoa Puffs, but better. I bought a mega box and I sat in front of the TV with a big bowl of it. My child was like, "What are you eating?" I was like, "Mine!" (Laughter)

(Audience member) *You use a lot of folklore and monsters and mythology. How do you make those creatures and gods your own?*

(Silvia) A lot of the folklore comes from my great-grandmother. When I was growing up, she would narrate stories to me. They were *real*. I think this is what people don't understand: when somebody tells you a ghost story, or a story about a witch who did something in the village, they're not narrating the fantastic, it's an everyday thing. And there is often a lesson attached to these stories; for example, "that's why you keep scissors under the bed, so the witch won't fly into your room." There's no distinction between the fantastic and the real. The rules we often get in fantasy, which people really like in *Dungeons & Dragons*—if you do this, you deactivate it, as if it were a bomb, that kind of stuff—sometimes it just happens. Sometimes witches fly into your room, and they eat you. It's a terrible situation, but it happens. (Laughter) For that reason, that vision of the world—the permeability to the fantastic and the real—was not present that much when I was growing up, because grandma would tell me a very realistic story of growing up during the Mexican Revolution and how hard it was, that there was no food, how the soldiers came to town and killed people. Then, the next story would be about a guy who shapeshifted and ate chickens. (Laughter) They were both intertwined. That built a perception of the world that is a little bit different than what other people have experienced. So, for me, all of these things exist, and they don't, at the same time.

(Audience question) *How do you go from writing a little bit every day to becoming an author? What is the process that you go through?*

(Silvia) Well, the trick is, if you write a little bit every day—I'm not talking about pages and pages, I'm talking about one hundred words every day—at the end of a month, you'll have a short story. And if you keep going, at the end of six months, you maybe have a good chunk of a novella or a novel. If you stay in the practice, you get better and faster at it.

It's like running, it takes practice. We tend to be very unsteady in our practices. We lie to ourselves a lot as humans. I do it myself; I tell myself I only ate 1,200 calories, so I'm not breaking the diet that the doctor put me on. But I had enchiladas today. I know it was more than 1,200 calories, but I had told myself this is not true. (Laughter) I know when I speak to the nurse about this next week, she's going to say, "Silvia, why haven't you lost a pound?" It's because I'm lying to myself.

As writers, we lie to ourselves in other ways. We say, "I don't have time to write." One of the things that I did when I was working was that, if during my commute I was trapped on a bus for forty-five minutes, I would use that the time to work. I might not have been writing, but I was reading, or I was doing research. It was true work time. It's tough to discipline yourself like that. But if you say that there's going to be one hour of the day when you're going to write, you would throw your phone out, lock the door, and tell people not to come in. If you really dedicate time to the process of writing, you will begin to accumulate something over time. It's tough to impose that limitation, to tell people, "I am serious about this, from nine to ten I'm writing. Don't come to ask me for a slice of cheese," like my children did. I sent them to their dad. "From nine to ten, Mom writes." It's hard to ask people to give you the space to be creative, and to ask yourself to give yourself the space to be creative, because there are things that are much more exciting than writing, including getting into Twitter fights. (Laughter) But if you're consistent, you will eventually build a body of work.

(Audience question) *The female gothic can often be a deeply annoying genre. Sometimes, we want to strangle the protagonist.* Mexican Gothic *sort of rebooted some aspects of the genre that I really enjoy. Could you speak about how you dealt with some of the challenges of the genre?*

If you say that there's going to be one hour of the day when you're going to write, you would throw your phone out, lock the door, and tell people not to come in. If you really dedicate time to the process of writing, you will begin to accumulate something over time. It's tough to impose that limitation, to tell people, "I am serious about this, from nine to ten I'm writing. Don't come to ask me for a slice of cheese," like my children did. I sent them to their dad. "From nine to ten, Mom writes." It's hard to ask people to give you the space to be creative, and to ask yourself to give yourself the space to be creative, because there are things that are much more exciting than writing, including getting into Twitter fights. (Laughter) But if you're consistent, you will eventually build a body of work.

(Silvia) The thing I really like about what is called the "Female Gothic"—and some people don't like using the term, but it has been used in academia for a long time to refer to a certain type of gothic novel—is that, ultimately, when you look at them, they're stories about "final girls," like in horror movies; it's the woman who survives the narrative. Now, with female gothics, she survives the narrative and finds fulfillment—that is a traditional formula of the "Female Gothic." But for me,

the important thing is that she survives the ordeal. Just like in slasher films: Jamie Lee Curtis is chased around by the masked killer, but at the end, she's going to make it. I think that's something that I find really interesting about female gothics: at the end, she's going to survive, she's going to be the hero, she's going to make it out of that house, and she's going to be okay. I really like the notion of gothic novels being proto-final-girl stories. I like genre fiction, and I like it with all its warts. I love the things that are sometimes annoying, because, again, there is something interesting that the genre is trying to say to you as an artist, and you can reply to it.

(Audience question) *I'm dying to ask you what your favorite movie is. Also, has any of your work been optioned?*

(Silvia) My favorite movie is probably Martin Scorsese's *Age of Innocence*. I also like *Le Samourai*, which is a French noir set in the 1960s with Alain Delon as an assassin. It is very cool and sophisticated.

My work has been optioned several times, several of the books. But nothing has actually made it to production. An option is when they give you a certain amount of money to potentially develop something. So, "For eighteen months, we have the right to such and such a thing, and maybe we might do something with it, or maybe not." It's the best thing that can happen to a writer, because you're not doing any work, but suddenly there's check in your hand. (Laughter)

(Uka) *Thank you so much for your time, Silvia.*

(Silvia) Thank you.

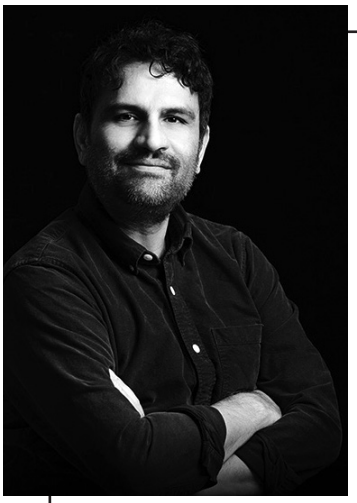


Ukamaka Olisakwe is an assistant professor of English at Weber State University. She is a UNESCO Africa39 honoree, a University of Iowa IWP fellow, a VCFA Emerging Writer Scholarship winner, a Morland Foundation Scholarship finalist, a Gerald Kraak Prize runner-up, and a Nommo Best Novel Award finalist. Her works have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Granta*, *Guernica, Longreads, The Rumpus, Catapult, Google Arts & Culture*, and elsewhere. She is the author of *Ogadinma* (2020) and *Don't Answer When They Call Your Name* (2023), and she is writing a TV series, *Agoodjie*, for Canal+ and StudioCanal.

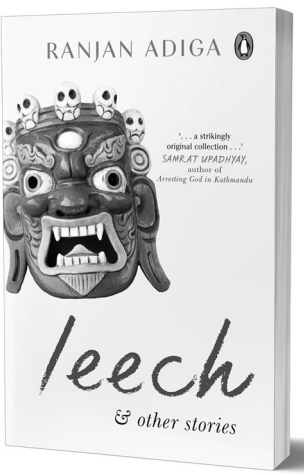
The Luxury of Distance—

Reimagining Literary and Cultural Divides

Ukamaka Olisakwe



A Conversation with
Ranjan Adiga



Ranjan Adiga's stories and essays have appeared in the New York Times, HuffPost, *and* Story Quarterly, *among others. In 2024, his debut story collection,* Leech, *was published in Asia by Penguin Random House India and in the U.S. as* Diversity Quota *by the University of Wisconsin Press. He teaches creative writing and literature at Westminster University in Salt Lake City, Utah.*

On October 8th, 2024, assistant professor of English Ukamaka Olisakwe and Ranjan read at the Neighborhood Hive in Salt Lake City. After the reading, they discussed their writing processes, the challenges of publishing in the United States – especially as immigrants – how they navigate the gains and limitations of translations, and the impact of distance from their home countries on their works.

Thank you for joining us, Ranjan. You are from Nepal. I am from Nigeria. There is often an expectation of the kind of stories we should *write. As immigrants, or international persons, we could write about our trauma. We could write about immigration. We could write about moving between continents. We could write about our experiences with racism. That's the usual* expectation. *We can't just write anything else, whether fun, flowery, or funny, else we veer from the expectation and risk losing publication opportunities. How you are able to surmount such challenges?*

I think the literary landscape has become a lot more inclusive within the last ten to fifteen years. It's really important to find the right journal to send your stuff to. I consciously look for journals that feature multicultural voices.

I have gone through my share of having stereotypical expectations put upon me based on where I'm from. I remember when I sent a story to a journal, and the editor came back and said, "I like your story, but I would recommend some revisions." Now, I'm always open to feedback and revision, but his comments were things like, "You have the word 'holler' there. That doesn't sound Nepalese to me. Holler sounds Southern, like Southern American. Can you remove that word?" I thought to myself, people in Nepal holler; it's a normal human expression. The other example I remember is when one of my characters was carrying an iPhone, which automatically implied that he was wealthy. The editor couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that someone carrying an iPhone in Nepal could be going through the struggles that he was. In that way, there have been stereotypes and expectations that I've had to navigate through.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about this in her TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story." I think a lot of us who write about different cultures have experienced these things. So, yes, sometimes there are expectations for my stories to be about mountains and monks. In my ten stories, there isn't a single mention of Mount Everest, which was very disappointing to some readers. (Laughter) But, you learn to navigate that and realize that there are all kinds of editors and publishers out there—there are good ones and there are also a lot of bad ones. Even though the landscape has changed and has become more diverse and inclusive within the last ten to twelve years, some of the gatekeepers still have the same mentality that they had thirty or forty years ago. Until that generation gives way to a newer generation of readers and editors, this is going to be an ongoing dilemma.

Another thing about Nepal is that it just seems to bring a smile on people's faces. When I say, "I'm from Nepal," there's usually a positive response. People say, "Oh, wow, Nepal is beautiful." But that itself can be very limiting and stereotyping in terms of the stories that they expect out of me. I've had to navigate through it. At the same time, it also opens up conversations.

What has been your experience with these things?

My experience is complicated. My research is primarily centered around narratives about motherhood and narratives about the body, and how society polices the body. So that becomes an expectation. *When I wrote a story about my experience with postpar-*

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—Ranjan Adiga

tum complication, the trauma of dealing with that, and how society contributes to the silence around that, especially within my community in Nigeria, I got an acceptance within twenty-four hours. But, when I wrote a story about something very funny, it was treated differently. But I agree with you completely that things are changing with the journals that we have today. A friend of mine who is here tonight is a publisher. He publishes African writers in the diaspora. We now have a collective of African publishers in the United States, and the diaspora, who are bridging the gap by publishing wayward, stubborn, rebellious, funny stories that veer from the typical. When someone reads works by a Nigerian, or by someone who is Nepali, it's almost as though they read those works for anthropological or ethnographic purposes. They are looking at the culture, not necessarily just to enjoy art. They look at it from a cultural lens, a political lens, a historical lens, and not a lens that allows you to just appreciate the beauty there.

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– Ukamaka Olisakwe

It's gratifying to know that there is an increasing awareness about colonial histories around the world. At the same time, that also gives way to an itch to see our lives only through the lens of oppression. That can be hard to navigate.

You've said the English language gives you a sense of escape. For myself, when I'm thinking, I think in my native language – Igbo. When I'm writing, there's a sense of translation that happens for me. The God of Nigerian literature, Chinua Achebe, would say that the English language is a vehicle through which we transmit our ideas. When you read his work, you know he's not just speaking English, he's speaking Igbo. He speaks with a lot of aphorisms, a lot of proverbs. You know this because, syntactically, it is different from the typical arrangement in the English language. Another writer who does that is Lola Shoneyin. When you read The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, it's like reading Yoruba, even though it's written in English. The English language, then, is like a vehicle the writer uses as a mode of translation.*

With these translations, do you feel that some things get lost? For example, there are certain expressions in my language that don't translate well across languages. We don't say "I love you," we essentially say, "I see you." When I write it in English, I just say, "I love you," but it feels empty; it doesn't convey the heart *that comes with* seeing *someone. Loving is like really* seeing *the person, like looking into their eyes and seeing them. When I write "I love you" in English, it's* just *I love you, which is generic. Something is gained by opening up my work to a global audience, but something is also lost.*

Nepali is my native language. But, for some reason, I always gravitated towards English when it came to writing, even as a kid when I would write small sketches. When I wrote in Nepali, I felt like my parents were either looking over my shoulder, or they were standing on my shoulder and quarreling with each other; it felt too close to home. I needed distance and perspective—English gave me that. It also gave me room for imagination, which I felt my native language wasn't quite giving me in the same way. I was talking about this with another Nepali writer recently who said, "If you felt such a deep emotional resonance while writing in Nepali, that could only be a good thing, because it's hitting a raw nerve." But different writers approach things differently. I felt like I needed some distance and perspective—the English language gave me that. The story I read today has more of an American voice because it's set in the U.S. It's about a student who goes to an American school. But I also have stories that are set in Nepal, and I'm writing more characters that don't speak English. They don't speak English, but I'm conveying their experience in the English language. So, I have to bend the English language to make it sound Nepali; it's still English, but it doesn't sound American. I don't want to overpower it with the local flavor, but at the same time, I do play around with syntax.

You talked about the difference between "I love you" and "I see you." In Nepal, a very normal greeting is to say, "Have you eaten?" "*Hanakayo*?" It means, "Are you full?" Historically, I don't know where it comes from, but that expression is so normalized. Now, if I were to use that as a phrase in a story, it wouldn't make any sense, right? So, I draw a compromise. Instead of "How are you?," I use another phrase, "at peace." It's asked in the form of a question, "at peace?" Like, are you at peace? If I were to put that in dialog form, I would have a character say, "at peace?" The other person would then have to respond with "all good." That sort of normalizes things a bit. But if I just write "at peace?" and leave it hanging without anyone responding to it, my American readers might ask, "What was that all about?" Having said that, readers also have a responsibility to do their own research and not be spoon-fed. If they're open to reading a story from Nepal, they have to be able to bridge that cultural divide in their own minds as they're reading. They should be open to the possibility that the English language I'm writing in is not Standard American English.

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In my language, the way we say a typical "Good morning" would be, "I hope you woke well." Someone would respond by saying, "Yes, we woke well." When translated, it can be confusing. Or, if a character says something like, "This food is sweet," an editor might say, "You should change it to, 'this food is delicious.'" But it's not *delicious. It's* actually *sweet. That's how we conceptualize the deliciousness of a meal.*

Many readers understand this flavor, some are even curious to understand how the language works. The gatekeeping of the past, I think, limited readers. It suggested

that readers were not intelligent enough to go out there and understand the world, so a world of reading had to be created *for them. But that is gradually changing.*

The flip side of that is localizing or indigenizing a language so much that it becomes more superficial because you overdo it. There's a balance, and each story or poem has its own challenges, its own questions, about how you want to approach language.

Of the ten stories in this fantastic collection, which was the most enjoyable to write, and which was the most tasking?

I think the most tasking was also the most enjoyable. (Laughter)

There is a story in the collection called "Diversity Committee," about a middle-aged Nepali professor. The title actually comes into play because he is a Nepali professor teaching at a small liberal arts college in Idaho. He really struggles to know what professional boundaries are when he's interacting with his white female students. There is a mentor-mentee, teacher-student relationship that's healthy and nice, but this student is very frank and honest, and can also be very conscious about her privacy and private space. This professor, who has recently immigrated to the U.S., struggles to understand those boundaries, and he ends up doing something that the student misconstrues as crossing the line. All of this is happening within the backdrop of the *#MeToo* movement. This professor is scared of losing his job, but is also scared of being misconstrued as a person he doesn't think he is. The situation also presents a reckoning for him—it forces him to question his own masculinity, his own ethics, and his own understanding of gender dynamics. Through the course of the story, he is forced into a reckoning where he must question his own biases. At the end, he transforms into a nicer human being.

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>
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"Diversity Committee" was hard for me to write because I think my students, at some point, are going to read the story. What unfortunately happens with fiction writers is that people assume that the story is about the author and that they are drawing from their own personal experience. It's not about me. Automatically assuming that everything an author writes about is somehow based on their own experience negates the power of imagination. Of course, we draw on our experiences, but that character is nothing like me in real life. I felt like I was taking a risk of sorts when I wrote that story, because I was asking readers to empathize with a person who was struggling with his own ideas of masculinity and ethics. I wanted to take on that challenge, and I wanted to write a risky, provocative story. I found it challenging to write, but I also found it very enjoyable.

What about you? How has living in the U.S. changed you as a writer or shaped you as a writer?

I appreciate the luxury of distance. I primarily write about motherhood and about the body. My dad would say, "When a person is sitting in the fire, they don't understand that it's burning, but when they're out of it, they

I appreciate the luxury of distance. I primarily write about motherhood and about the body. My dad would say, "When a person is sitting in the fire, they don't understand that it's burning, but when they're out of it, they begin to realize that was actually a horrible situation." I'm not saying that it was horrible back at home, but the benefit of distance has allowed me the privilege to be able to interrogate my experience, to step away and say, "These were the things we were doing well, and these were the things that we could have done better."

– Ukamaka Olisakwe

begin to realize that was actually a horrible situation." I'm not saying that it was horrible back at home, but the benefit of distance has allowed me the privilege to be able to interrogate my experience, to step away and say, "These were the things we were doing well, and these were the things that we could have done better." *I don't think I would have had this perspective if I had stayed at home, in my situation, dealing with the limitations I dealt with – especially when it comes to postpartum complication. I couldn't envision a world where I could get a different kind of support. But when I stepped away, I had the benefit of distance. Now I can have certain conversations with my family, my immediate community, and say, "This is something that we can actually do. We can borrow from here." Because, if there's something that's true about the Igbo people, it's that we understand that we are constantly changing. We don't believe in the absolute, which is why we have a problem with Christianity and the idea of the Almighty God. You can walk into a compound and see your brother or your sister worshiping different gods; they each have their own gods and mediators, and everyone is accepting of that. No one says, "My God is greater than your God." We believe that when one thing stands, another thing stands beside it; there is a sense of plurality. We can learn from that hybrid form of understanding in the way they approach very personal, intimate situations.*

The luxury of distance allows you to interrogate situations. It gives us space and distance to reimagine our communities in ways that we probably wouldn't have been able to back home. Had I stayed in Nepal, I would have had other benefits. I might have had a different perspective; perhaps it would have been richer in other ways. But living here gives me that space to interrogate things differently.

Thank you so much for your time.

Thank you.

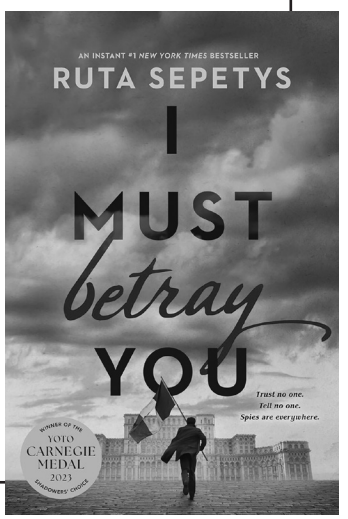


Ukamaka Olisakwe is an assistant professor of English at Weber State University. She is a UNESCO Africa39 honoree, a University of Iowa IWP fellow, a VCFA Emerging Writer Scholarship winner, a Morland Foundation Scholarship finalist, a Gerald Kraak Prize runner-up, and a Nommo Best Novel Award finalist. Her works have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Granta*, *Guernica*, *Longreads*, *The Rumpus*, *Catapult*, *Google Arts & Culture*, and elsewhere. She is the author of *Ogadinma* (2020), *Don't Answer When They Call Your Name* (2023), and she is writing a TV series, *Agoodjie*, for Canal+ and StudioCanal.

Historical Fiction and the Emotions of History



A Conversation with Ruta Sepetys



Susan J. Matt & Daniel Menning

Ruta Sepetys is an internationally acclaimed author of historical fiction. She focuses on the ways that large-scale geopolitical events—from the dictatorship of Francisco Franco to the Romanian Revolution of 1989—have affected individuals' daily lives. Her books include I Must Betray You, Between Shades of Gray, *and* Salt to the Sea. *Though often written for a young adult audience, her works have enjoyed considerable crossover success, have been translated into thirty-six languages, and have been* New York Times *bestsellers. Among many other honors, Sepetys has been awarded the Josette Frank Award for Fiction and the Carnegie Medal for Writing. In October 2024, historians Susan Matt, of Weber State University, and Daniel Menning, of the University of Tübingen, sat down with Sepetys to talk about history and fiction. Together they explored similarities and differences in their approaches and aims.*



Tanks and militia on Magheru Boulevard in Bucharest, during the Romanian Revolution of 1989.

(Susan) *Thank you for being with us, Ruta. I'm Susan Matt, an historian at Weber State University here in Ogden, Utah. I study U.S. social history. I'm interested in the history of daily life and the history of ordinary people. This is my colleague, Daniel Menning.*

(Daniel) *I'm Daniel Menning. I am from the University of Tübingen in Germany. Right now, I am visiting WSU as an international professor with an interest in German-European history in the modern period.*

(Susan) *Your work interests us because of our own research interests. Your stories are compelling and contain a wonderful attention to detail. I will let Daniel start us off.*

(Daniel) *In previous interviews, you've said that you want your books to speak for those who could not speak and who have been forgotten. This reminds me of books by historians like Carlo Ginzburg's* The Cheese and the Worms *and Alain Corbin's* The Life of an Unknown. *Many social historians squeeze sources, trying to discover the voices of lower-class, marginalized people. Do you feel fiction can convey ideas that nonfiction or history cannot?*

I feel that through fiction, I can express a *larger* human experience. What do I mean by that? If I were writing nonfiction, I might have to follow the path of one family, of one person. But in writing fiction, I can interview nearly one hundred human beings, one hundred *true* witnesses. I can pull threads from each one of them and weave them together to create composites. In that way, I am able to represent a larger experience. Let's be clear, fiction stands on the shoulders of nonfiction and memoir, testimony and dissertation, and all of the wonderful nonfiction sources.

(Daniel) *Perhaps, if you draw all these stories together, there is an amplification of intensity. In doing so, you might end up featuring the highlights of the stories.*

I find that the highlights are generally what has already been recounted in history through news reports. What I'm drawn to are the emotional "heart hops"—people who feel that the world has forgotten them, that their story hasn't been told, or might *never* be told. So, I would say that the amplification is in the emotional element of things, rather than in the actual events, because those big events have already been reported on throughout history.

(Susan) *Your books show both the power of individual agency as well as characters living within a set of constraints – whether you're focusing on the laws of the Franco dictatorship, the oppression of the Soviet Gulag, Ceaușescu's reign of terror, or wartime evacuation. Will you talk a bit about agency and the limits of individual power within your books? Is there a particular message you're trying to convey to readers?*

On my journey as a writer, I'm coming to understand my own message. When I meet with writers, I tell them, "I want you to think about your project and what gives your project power. Then, I want you to sum up your project in one word." While writing, I realized along the way that all of my own books are about freedom. At first, I thought it was coincidental. Was it because I'm always writing about oppression? Or was it because of my own *personal* background, and my parents' journey and their struggle? Yes, I'm telling these stories, but how much of this is self-serving? I think as writers, we need to question ourselves. We need to ask, "Where is this coming from? When we feel powerless, do we want to give agency to someone else—even if it's a character in a book? If I am unable to change a situation of a current war, what is my contribution? Can I light my lamp and try to give a character agency with this overarching theme of freedom, while maintaining first amendment rights?" It's interesting, because when I'm writing, I'm not only learning about Spanish fascism and nationalistic communism in Romania—I'm learning about myself as well.

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(Susan) *The character Cristian in your novel* I Must Betray You *offers a lesson in civil courage. He has to make hard decisions about whether or not he wants to inform, and whether he even has a choice about becoming an informer. The question of how much power we have within the systems in which we live has been a recurring theme for me. Do you have an opinion about that?*

Romanians and people from the post-Spanish Civil War era have said, "We never thought it would change." Romanians themselves told me that all it took was a small group of people in Timişoara to rise up. They were not a large group, but a seed was planted in them that they didn't even know was there. They went out into the streets and looked into each other's eyes for the very first time. It was powerful, because in some countries the fight for freedom still continues. When people ask, "Do you think it could happen again?," I say, "Yes. Never say never. Because, you don't know."

(Daniel) I Must Betray You *is set during Romania's years under communist dictatorship. You end the novel with a comment on the fact that those years have never been subject to larger public debates. The novel also ends with an attempt to confront* Securitate *agents. Do you want to encourage those debates? And from a German perspective, do you think there's something Germans, after 1990, did better, or that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa did better?*

This is a great question. Because I am not Romanian, I feel that I would be much more comfortable with a Romanian answering that question. My *perception* of it is that after WWII, there was a process of lustration that the Germans began—responsibly and quickly. But after Ceausescu's regime fell, for fifteen years, the *Securitate* archives were not opened, and Romanians were fighting that. They were struggling to build a democracy while knowing that agents who recruited and blackmailed civilians into being informers were walking among them. This was a wound that was festering and couldn't heal. Many Romanians expressed to me that they were frustrated. I wasn't necessarily encouraging someone to *confront* someone with the ending scene of the novel. What I was trying to do was to encourage readers to discuss what *could* happen. There are still Romanians who are living among their agents and informers. I've noticed, at some of my events in Romania, there is still a lot of anger over the files that they believed were destroyed. They still don't have the full picture. Several Romanians said they believe that their revolution was stolen from them. Young students, with a pureness of heart, rose up, but they weren't quite sure what the truth was. I think that's such a difficult situation. I think when we're dealing with current events, it's as if we're looking through a first-floor window; we have a limited view. But with the benefit of time, and more files being opened, we will have a bigger picture. I would love to see open dialogue—not aggressive dialogue—just a willingness and an openness to talk about it.

(Daniel) *In a recent interview, you said that you want to bring people together from diverse backgrounds. The* Securitate *agent and Cristian are two people of very different backgrounds. As a German, I'm wondering if this bringing-together will cause Romanians to end up with the same perspective, or the same view on history – or if it even* should. *As a German thinking about the Holocaust and WWII, I wonder if I am required to feel a different responsibility for the events that took place, and if I need to look at those events differently from, say, Americans.*

I think it's important for us to have conversations that help us to look through someone else's eyes, and to be open to what others are saying. I remember a story I wrote about the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff—it's a German story. I remember reading a news report about two men—one man had served on the Gustloff, the other was a part of Captain Marinesko's team that sunk the ship—they got together to discuss this event. I think it was incredibly valuable to be able to do that. Even tonight, I would wager we're going to have families, descendants of families, who stood on opposite sides during the war. How do we get to a place where we can discuss these differences, listen to each other, and share observations? You are German. Your lens is incredibly interesting and valuable. I am a Lithuanian-American, first generation American—we have completely different lenses. What would happen if we put our lenses together? We would learn so much.

(Susan) *Daniel and I are both historians of emotion. We're trying to get into the inner lives, the subjective experiences, of how people from the past lived. We want to know how that has changed over time. We both no-*

ticed the common thread in I Must Betray You *of people not meeting each other's eyes, or wanting to hide feelings or commitments. It seemed to us that the book commented on the history of emotions in Romania in that way. How did you go about gathering these telltale signs of how people carried themselves, and how might that differ from another place?*

I had to rely heavily on the interviews I did because I wasn't there. I interviewed dozens of people, and what I noticed was that about 60% of people shared a similar highlight of the events; they also shared things that were unexpected. For example, when they watched American movies, several people told me that they weren't even tracking what was going on with the plot. They were watching the way people looked at each other. The ease of their body language was unbelievable to them. They couldn't understand why no one was looking over their shoulder, or speaking in whispers. These people depicted in the movies were laughing and carefree. I didn't study those things intentionally; that was just a human element that I thought was so interesting. How difficult it must have been for a young person who's coming of age, and is so full of emotional truth, to feel like they can't just *be*! When the revolution came, and they could raise their voice for the first time, it was powerful. I wasn't studying that intentionally, but I was trying to figure out how to tell the story, the point of view—it was a big decision. I'm writing about a history I didn't experience. What right do we have to a history other than our own? So, for my book on Spain, it's about an American in Spain. When the Romanians were working with me, they said, "This has to be first person, because it's got to be tight. It's got to feel suffocating. It needs to be a helmet cam. You need to be in this kid's head. That's how we felt. You can't do this large-view overview." I thought that was really interesting. I interviewed so many people for each book—including *Salt to the Sea*, about the Wilhelm Gustloff—and in the latter they all experienced the same event, but they had radically different interpretations of it depending on which country they were from. So, I decided to narrate the book through the POV of four alternating characters, four viewpoints. Each book is a different decision, a different delivery. I spent way too much time thinking about this—years, and years, and years— but I enjoyed it and I loved

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it, and it's my process. I couldn't write a book in two years; it just wouldn't be possible.

(Daniel) *Where do you see the legitimate border between fiction and actual events? These love stories – which readers ask for – are they fiction or actual events?*

I spent twenty-two years in the music business before becoming a novelist. I was the first one to say, "Another love song? How cliché!" But in meeting with people who've experienced these events, one of the strange phenomena is that they remembered these moments of love and connection even more strongly than moments of brutality and suffering. That was interesting to me on a human level. Where is the line between fact and fiction? It might seem like romance is totally fiction, but it's *not*. Parts of my books are absolutely fiction; the dialogue is clearly heavily fictionalized. I was not there, so I write the dialogue as if I'm watching a movie. I write all the dialogue first, and then I go back and I say, "Okay, wait a minute, where is the scaffolding and the skeleton of this history? Am I hitting these beats?" I study and heavily research on the real events of the story, but what I write first is the fiction. I'm a storyteller, but I also obsess about small details. If it's raining in the book, it's because I checked a weather table and it was raining that day. There are real human beings who experienced this, who are going to read the book. The reader is always right—so, I try my best to make it as authentic as I can. But what is it about love stories? Is it that the human spirit is clinging to something? In these anonymous interviews I do, I cannot tell you how many people say, "I have to tell you something. I met someone. We shared a glass of brandy on the top of the Gustloff." The ship sunk, and all they want to talk about is this person they met; it's very interesting.

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(Susan) *Some talk about social history as "history from the bottom up." The big events of history are filtered through individual experience.*

My hope is that there will be something in this fictional book that makes you say, "I want to know more about that." I hope it makes

you search for the *real* stories. The worst possible thing would be for someone to say, "I know about the deportations to Siberia. I read a novel called *Between Shades of Gray*." No; that would be terrible. But maybe we can interest readers enough that they go out and find the sources themselves. I love when young readers come to me and they say, "I researched this, and I want to discuss what you got wrong." I think it's really great. (Laughter)

(Daniel) *Are you willing to share what your next book is going to be about?*

I am. Some writers don't want to discuss what they are working on. I don't *own* history. These are pieces of history and I'm anxious to talk about them. I am working on an adult novel that is a little bit of a departure from what I normally do. It's set in Detroit, Michigan, and it's about the secret lives of auto barons. I grew up in Detroit—though, not amongst the Fords or the Dodges, or that kind of family. I have discovered some hidden history that was quite shocking and I am writing a novel about it.

I'm also working on a story of historical stigma. About eight million human beings were exiled to remote parts of the world because they were thought to have a very contagious disease. Centuries later, people realized that it was not so contagious after all. It was Hansen's Disease, also known as leprosy. I have traveled to so many different continents and gone to missions and places where there are patients who no longer actively have leprosy, but have been rejected from society. They won't be taken back in the Philippines, in Indonesia, in Singapore, or in Ireland.

Another book that I've been working on for a long time is a book about Czech history that focuses on one family over the span of a century. A theme within Czech history that just keeps coming up is resistance. Right now, my narrator is resistance. I was fortunate enough to be awarded a fellowship at Oxford at the Bodleian Library for next year. The reason I'm going there is because of Shiela Grant Duff, a British reporter who spent much of her life in the former Czechoslovakia. She wrote several books and her whole archive is at Oxford. That's my last step in this Czech research project.

Are there any topics that you think deserve more attention?

(Susan) *What a good question.*

To ask a question myself: So many people ask me, "Even though the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff was larger in magnitude than other, more famous shipwrecks, why don't we know much about it?"

(Daniel) *My guess is because it happened during wartime. It happened in the Baltic Sea, which was enemy territory. I think that sort of limits the interest. If there had been a*



Wilhelm Gustloff, 1940.

couple of Americans aboard the ship, it likely would have been more of a concern, more of an interest to the United States.

Some elderly Germans I've spoken to about it felt their role during the war and during the Holocaust made them think that it was inappropriate to position themselves as victims. I found that so moving.

(Daniel) *I feel, as a German, that I cannot speak about the sinking of the Gustloff without also referencing that Germans were the perpetrators and that Germans caused WWII. It ends up being about what we started and the horror we brought on other people.*

In writing about Lithuanians deported to Siberia, there's a whole other part of the story. Some Lithuanians became Nazi collaborators. 300,000 Jews were killed by their own countrymen. There are all these other pieces of the story. Why do we not talk about these pieces? We don't have the full story, and I struggle with that.

(Daniel) *The memory of the Holocaust, the* living *memory, is disappearing. I was talking to an archivist a couple of weeks ago, and she said she doesn't like this German guilt discussion anymore. I said, "I don't think it has to be about guilt. It has to be about responsibility." Post-1945 Germany is an interesting setting, because the Jews who survived are encountering their perpetrators in a more peaceful and seemingly democratic setting, but there is a long brown shadow over everything.*

I feel emotional just thinking about that. Thank you for these incredible questions. I could speak with you for hours.

(Susan and Daniel) *This has been a treat. We've enjoyed this conversation. Thank you for speaking with us.*



Susan J. Matt is Presidential Distinguished Professor of History at Weber State University. She is co-author of *Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid: Changing Feelings about Technology, from the Telegraph to Twitter* (Harvard University Press, 2019), author of *Homesickness: An American History* (Oxford University Press, 2011), and *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).



Daniel Menning is an associate professor in the Department of History, Tübingen University. His first book was on the German nobility: *Standesgemäße Ordnung in der Moderne. Adlige Familienstrategien und Gesellschaftsentwürfe in Deutschland 1840-1945* (Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2014). He has also published on the history of the "South Sea Bubble" and is editor of *Boom, Bust, and Beyond. New Perspectives on the 1720 Stock Market Bubble* (De Gruyter, 2019).

Navigating Art with Art History and the Local with the Global—

Michael Wutz



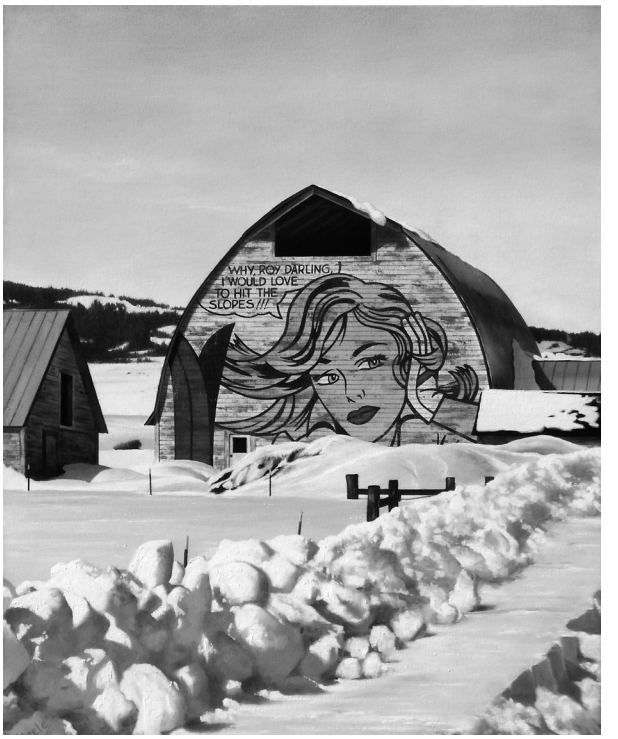
Ben in the studio, image by Christopher Michel

A Conversation with Ben Steele

Ben Steele was born in Kennewick, WA, in 1977 and relocated to Utah in his teens, graduating from the University of Utah in 2002 with a BFA in painting and drawing. He continued his artistic education at the Helper Workshops under the instruction of David Dornan and Paul Davis, eventually moving to Helper, UT, where he has since established Ben, Borrow and Steele Studio. Drawing from his classical training, Steele combines traditional process with a contemporary sensibility to create conversations between the old and the new. He often melds art history or pop culture into a wide-ranging body of styles, allowing the subject matter to frequently shift among still life, portraiture, landscape, and more. He considers anything that keeps the art creation experience fresh and exciting to be fair game.

Ben's work can be found in many personal and corporate collections, including Zions Bank Art Collection, State of Utah Alice Merrill Horne Art Collection, the San Francisco Giants Executive Offices, the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation, and in numerous Delta Airline Sky Club lounges. While Ben and I have had occasion to meet in person several times, this conversation took place via Zoom in February of 2025. I want to thank Ben for his time and generosity in fielding my questions. The following text has been edited for length and clarity.

As you look back on your career as an artist, Ben, how would you describe your arc of development, abstractly speaking? Do you see it in terms of a more or less continuous evolution, with nuanced adjustments along the way, or do you see – especially in retrospect – moments of reorientation in your work and in your practice?



Roy Darling, **oil on canvas, 50" x 40," 2019.**

I would say it has been more of an evolution. There may be a few moments that stand out, but it mostly felt like a flow. During my final semester at the University of Utah, I took workshops in Helper from Dave Dornan and Paul Davis. They both taught at the University of Utah, but had since retired and continued to teach for noncredit. Once I got to Helper following my graduation, I became an apprentice to David. He encouraged me to paint things I liked. The body of work I do today started with crayons—just painting crayons. I was also painting a bunch of chrome objects—anything that was reflective, any object that was shiny. I assembled still lifes and painted those—it was great for learning technique.

So, there was an initial period of figuring things out through school. Once I had my body of work going, what I'm kind of known for now, I'd say a few pieces stood out. ***Doubting Thomas*** was a standout piece when I did it. It was the first piece where I felt like I was critiquing art itself, instead of honoring art history by choosing different parts of it. If there's a piece that stands out in my history, it's ***Doubting Thomas***. It opened a new window of stuff I was doing.

Your work is, of course, well known in Utah and held in numerous public and private collections in the U.S. and beyond. Still, for those of our readers unfamiliar with you, would you briefly describe the media in which you're working, and what a day, or a project, in your studio looks like.

Oil on canvas is my core medium, and then I build around that. In a broad sense, my work is still life-oriented—that's what I trained as. Now I incorporate pop culture imagery where I can. The more my subject matter can vary, the more I can stay engaged. That was something I discovered early on about myself.

I like to sit in my little corner here and think out paintings. My wife has a desk right behind me where she can look over my shoulder and give me pointers. We brainstorm ideas for what we're doing for shows. Usually, I'm working on a show and we have deadlines with the gallery. I'll have a show with a gallery that requires, say, ten to fifteen pieces—those happen about every three months. I tend to make myself overly busy because all of our income is derived from art sales. We put the paintings in the gallery on consignment—

when they sell, we get paid. Out of fear, I tend to overbook myself to make sure that we keep it hopping in that way. We are working on deadlines of, say, six weeks to three months getting stuff out. I also have commissions that I like to work on. I usually have anywhere from five to fifteen paintings going at any one time. Because of the nature of oil on canvas, it's nice to not have to work straight through because of dry times. I'll typically paint a layer, let it dry, then come back and add highlights and shadows that make the painting look rounded, that gives it that trompe l'oeil look, where it looks like you could pick things up off the canvas, that kind of thing.

You mentioned that Melanie is sitting close by. You often use the word "we," rather than "me." There seems to be a strong sense of collaboration and co-creation going on between the two of you. Would this be fair to say? How would you describe that division of labor?

I feel like it's very much a collaboration. The only thing she doesn't do is the painting. Everything else in our business, all the other stuff, she is a part of or does entirely. She runs the social media, the website, the bookkeeping, and we brainstorm the paintings together. Often, we'll have a show, and she'll say, "I'm just going to work up a list of what resonates with me for this show." We vary it based on which location, which gallery, we're doing. Within the past five or ten years, we've leaned into what I would call "regionalism." We tailor the art, using art history images for sourcing. I love art history. I started out by painting crayons. Then, one day, I said, "I did a crayon, why not do a coloring page?" I didn't want to do kids' imagery, so why not include the most obvious thing I could think of—the *Mona Lisa*, a *Mona Lisa* coloring page. It started from there, and then it expanded. I realized that I could change the subject matter. I remember being at Walmart one day, standing in the checkout line, and there were

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Pez dispensers right by where I was checking out. I thought that it would be cool to take a Pez dispenser and add famous art to it—like a portrait painting. I took a Rembrandt self-portrait and made it into a Pez dispenser. I built the subject matter out of art history and said, "This could be on a chocolate bar, a Pez dispenser, or a crayon." The next evolution came when I asked, "What if we use local imagery?" I use a lot of Western art history references in my work. We also have a gallery in Boston, so I like doing Red Sox themes and Boston-related imagery—still pop culture, but with a different angle. I think it keeps us engaged.

You might be interested in the documentary The Pez Outlaw *(2022), about a man's mission to bring rare Pez candy dispensers into the United States, if you haven't already seen it. From what I remember, he used a tax loophole to bring these high-end collectors' items into the country, until the Pez corporation found a way to prevent him from continuing to do that.*

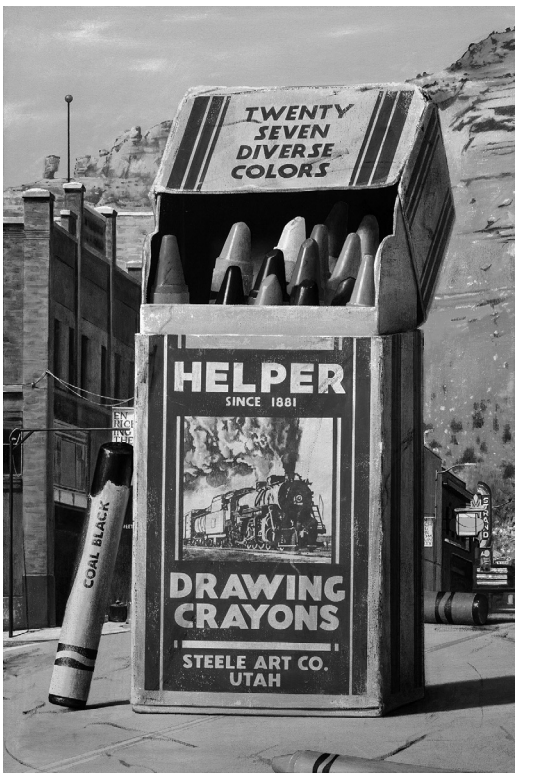
No, I don't know the film, but it sounds very interesting. I need to see it.

Your work is internationally in appeal, but also has, as you just noted, a distinctly regional flavor, whether that's in Utah or New England. I'm referring to your western landscapes and to the way you often comment on the LDS faith. The LDS religion is, of course, foundational to our state. What are some of the comments you've received regarding your presentation of the LDS church?

It's sometimes irreverent or playful—there's a whole bunch of layers there. I would say, generally, it's been very positive. Maybe people just don't tell me they feel negatively about it. We moved to Utah when I was in high school. Having no prior connection to Utah—I only knew a few people in my school who were LDS in Washington state—I had no real reference point, and I just ended up moving to St. George and, eventually, through Mel, have grown to understand the religion better. I mean, there is an element of making fun, but I think there's also a lot of reverence to it, and honoring it. It's the history of the state, and it's very impactful. I think it's a really cool and unique history. The piece I'm most known for is entitled ***Mormon Rockwell***, which is a Norman Rockwell that has been modified as Brigham Young getting tattoos of his wives. It's tongue in cheek, and it's playful. I've had members of the church who find it quite appealing and funny; they didn't find it offensive. It's straddling that fine line, and that's very much what Mel and I want to do with it.

You mentioned your piece Doubting Thomas *being a pivotal painting that marked a level of development in your work. At what point did you begin to realize that you could actually make a living as an artist, which has never been an easy feat, especially now?*

That's why we live in Helper. That is the cleanest answer. When I was at the University of Utah, a professor who taught with Dave and Paul really encouraged me to go to Helper. He said, "You should go to Helper and study with them." He believed they were good teachers of art, technique, and capable of nurturing careers. He also knew that Dave had a big brick and mortar hotel on Main Street in Helper, where they used the main floor as their teaching area. Upstairs, there were twenty-two bedrooms and a community kitchen. People could come and learn and stay at the building for a week-long apprentice program. Dave quit the university because he was making enough money from painting. He reached a point where he no longer wanted to jump through the hoops the university required, and he was happy to live in Helper full-time. He's like the Home Depot of painters. He shares the process of how he paints, but he also recommends how to frame a painting, build a crate, and deal with galleries. He got me started in his main gallery, CODA, in Palm Desert, at an emerging artist show. It took



Helper Crayons, oil on canvas, 36" x 24," 2018.

finding that mentorship to say, "Okay, here's how you actually make a living." It can be very opaque, very hard to tell. An art history professor I had at the university asked me, "What do you plan to do when you graduate?" From his attitude, I felt he was suggesting that art obviously wasn't going to be how I was going to make it. He was asking me what I was going to *actually* do? Finding somebody who was *actually* doing it, to me, was key.

When my family moved to St George, I was in high school. My mom signed me up for golf lessons. I'd never played golf, and I got into it right away; I was hooked. I focused mostly on golf, but I always loved art. My dad has an art degree, so art has always been present in my life, but I didn't pursue it seriously until college. Golf really helped me through the improvement process, and I could translate that into art. I could apply the techniques I got from golf to art, even though there's almost no overlap as far as the *actual* disciplines. The thing that really stuck out for me was the realization that you have to have a good instructor. In golf, when you're working with a great teacher, they can take you so much further than if you don't. You could waste a lot of time floundering around the wrong help.

I've got a lot of friends on campus who are writers and artists. It's very difficult to make a living as a writer or artist. They use their teaching to provide a livelihood and support themselves. In your case, having been able to become commercially successful so quickly, could you eventually see yourself reversing that binary and coming back to teaching? Maybe becoming a teacher, full-time or part-time, and balancing that with your artistic work?

I've taught art a little bit. I assisted Dave on a workshop once. As much as I appreciate having somebody help me, I don't feel this overwhelming urge to teach. I feel the need to share what we do, and to be very open with wanting to share that. If people reach out and want a studio tour to see what we do and to ask about my path, I really like sharing that. I haven't wanted to teach. But, I would say that as I get older, I could see that more and more—I have that desire to give back and to pay it forward.

One of the hallmarks of your style is the whimsical fusion of art history with pop culture. Many viewers are invariably reminded of the icons of the modern art world – from Vincent van Gogh and Salvador Dalí to Norman Rockwell and Andy Warhol, to name just a few – that populate your canvases. These "quotations" are playful, no doubt, but I wonder whether you're also establishing a kind of lineage for you and your own work: artists who have come before and challenged the idea of (representational) art.

Well, ***Doubting Thomas*** is about questioning art, or, in that case specifically, about questioning the value of Thomas Kinkade and the impact he had on the art world. He had this whole hierarchy of prints that he highlighted himself, prints that were highlighted by his team of people, and then his posters. My painting was a comment on that kind of marketing. In a roundabout way, I'm commenting on what it means to be an artist, or what it is to make art. What does it mean to sell work? What are your goals? What does this all add up to?

It was also about trying to find my own place in that—you evaluate, you look through the history of stuff that comes before you, and you use it, in my case, very ***literally***, as reference material. You have to question what our role is in art going forward. At its most basic, it's a way to document humankind, and what's going on. And then, photography comes along, and we don't necessarily need painting in that same way, and you see a shift away from that. For me, we are using it, honoring it, and questioning it a little bit. Most of the work I do is what I would consider reverence for those things. It's honoring them

and appreciating them, taking *The Great Wave [off Kanagawa]*, putting it onto a crayon box, and repackaging it in that way. I like to blend really old stuff with old objects. In a broad sense, it comes down to the question of, "How do you balance making work that you think is good or valuable while making a living doing it?" At first, when I was just out of school, I just wanted to get in the game. I wanted to be able to make money from art, to make a living, so I could keep doing it. I thought the only way I was going to get to work all the time, to paint, is if I could make enough money from it. I didn't need to get wealthy off it, but I needed to make enough so that it was sustainable. Then, I tore my work apart, and we probably had the least productive years financially through that two- or three-year phase. Mel had to put up with me constantly tearing my art down. I was doing a full remodel on the art career, seeing if I could rebuild it. I wondered, if I tore it down, could I build back up into the same thing? Could I come to the same conclusions? I had to feel the loss of it—that I could give it up or do something else—to be comfortable.

You described my work as "whimsical." That's a word that has often been used to describe my art. It doesn't offend me; I think it's accurate. It may be the best word to describe what it is. I struggle with it only because it might not fully represent the playful element of my work, including the comedy puns; it also doesn't fully represent that there is an element of seriousness that I feel about other parts of my process. My personality comes through in my work. I am playful and funny; I was always making jokes as a kid. When people ask, "How did you come up with your style?," I think it's more that your style reveals itself over time. You can't suppress who you are. The more you do something, the more it has to be true to you. When I took classes from Dave, Paul, and other great instructors I've had, I'd see them do their work and think, I want to do that. I remember watching Dave demonstrating in his studio for the first time, and he was using an airbrush and painting with paper towels. It's often mind-blowing for artists to see the process of art, because it's so much more than that. We ultimately think that it's this careful brush work—and Dave does do some of that—but that comes more at the end. In the beginning, he's very open and loose because he's a realist painter; people don't expect to see that. He's painting an abstract, like a de Kooning painting, or something like that, and it's chaos at first. He harnesses that, and then it gets a little tighter over time. Ultimately, your personality comes out when you do something a lot.

My work, I would say, is relatable for people, because it uses things that they're familiar with—whether it's through history or through objects like crayons, gumball machines, and Pez dispensers—things we have fond memories of from childhood. In a university setting, it might be considered less serious work. It's important to find your place in that. Most people don't want to be considered a sellout. I love the balance of

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Red Sox Spray Paint, oil on canvas, 40" x 50," 2024.

needing to make a living off of art, while still trying to do work that is interesting and fun to do, something I'm engaged with, something I want to create. The resistance between those things is good for me.

Like many artists, you are probably walking a fine line between self-expression and earning a living, between being true to your artistic vision and being mindful of the shifting tastes of the art market. Could you describe how this balancing act looks like in your professional life?

Well, I think the sweet spot is going to vary for everyone. I had a fine gallery from back East approach me. We had a phone conversation, and the owner said, "I think we could raise your prices by four times; we could make a lot. You could have a lot bigger career." I think he was very authentic. Some of the artists in that gallery sold at a price point that was one hundred times higher than mine. Then he said, "But the frames you use, we can't do that. They need to be this. This fits my gallery more." He had a list of criteria, so we said, "Let's do a show." He bought a painting from me to show his sincerity, and then I just kept getting these messages, "What about your subject matter? Can we tweak this? Can we tweak that?" I woke up one morning, and I didn't want to go to the studio. I'd never felt that way before. We emailed him the next day and canceled the show. We withdrew from being connected with him. He meant well, but it was not a fit. What he wanted to do didn't match my vision.

We have a store here in Helper called Beg, Borrow & Steele Art Company, and the notion of having our own store came directly from being involved with this gallery owner. Basically, he made me think, what if we have our own store and gallery space? We played with the idea of doing prints on shirts and things like that. The store was a reflection of what we wanted to do. We are so grateful to people who buy our original art—there are certainly artists who are way more expensive than me in the world—but, relatively speaking, my originals are still pretty darn expensive. We're grateful for that support, but I never felt that the only way you can enjoy art is through wealth. We love that there are museums that make art accessible to everyone. My work is relatable in its subject matter, and people can come into the store and buy a $1 or $2 thing. They can buy a magnet or a card or something to enjoy, something that you think is fun. The store offers my work in an accessible way. The store is a passion project, because we don't really sell much there. We also have a gallery component. Our primary sales are with other galleries around the country, in the other markets, but we might be able to build the store up over time.

You've talked about the feedback you've received from galleries and their owners. That feedback was largely tied to commercial considerations. You've also had ongoing conversations with other artists – do you get feedback from them as well? Are you part of a group of artists who share their work and discuss it?

I think that's a big part of what Helper is all about. David Dornan and his wife, Marilou Kundmueller Dornan, would encourage people to come down here with the idea that Helper was a cheap place to live. You could live here and do your art. Marilou was, essentially, the organizer/facilitator/contact point of all things relative to the art workshops (as well as a very competent artist herself), while Dave and Paul did the teaching. She created an inviting vibe in Helper through dinners and a nurturing demeanor—it made students feel welcome to stay and live in Helper. Dave made Helper an inviting place to *learn*, Marilou made Helper an inviting place to *live*—together, they created an art family vibe. In that way, an art community was formed.

Helper, as a town, has really gone through it. It feels like there are different phases of people who are moving to town. It generally draws people who are just excited about the arts in general, not necessarily somebody who went to the University of Utah and studied with these specific teachers and who have a certain philosophy, but it's a big deal having a group of like-minded people. I think that really mattered—who I was surrounded by. You can have critical conversations with people and see other artists working all the time—especially people who have a similar background to your own, who have a similar set of ideals. Helper has been a launching pad for me. It was essential to forming what we became.

The name of your studio is Ben, Borrow and Steele. It plays with the idea of art as creative borrowing or artistic re-appropriation. Is this, let me call it, "creative larceny with a twinkle in your eye"? The way in which you fuse your skill and craft with pop culture – does that say anything about the historical moment in which you're producing art?

If I'm compared to anyone, it's usually Warhol. I think it's because I use pop culture references with graphic qualities. People will say it's like pop art or pop realism. Pop realism makes the most sense to me. What I do is always evolving—for example, I'm referencing art history less now than I used to.

We met at the 2023 Governor's Awards Ceremony. There's an arbitrariness to awards, in a way. People call out the Oscars, or other big awards, saying there's other agendas at play. And yet, getting that award, to me, was so meaningful because it was like getting a stamp of real value. The judges saw my work and said what I had done was relevant. To

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earn something like that was super valuable to me. It felt like completion in a way, or validation that I'm *known*. It made me ask myself, "What does this mean going forward?"

As you are moving away from art history proper, I wonder whether you are perhaps moving more toward history, in the broader sense of the word. How would you describe your work's connection to politics? I know that's a big question you've thought about.

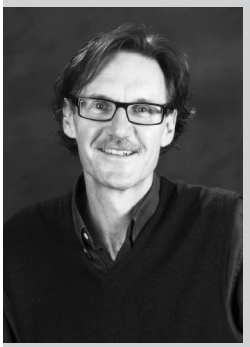
In the most literal of ways, I've referenced President Trump several times in paintings. I've also painted George Washington and Abraham Lincoln—heroes who fit in really well with the Boston gallery I mentioned earlier, with the colonial history of the city of Boston. Trump feels more like pop culture. He's not the first—Ronald Reagan was an actor, so, we've seen all of this before. But Trump being a reality TV star, and having been in the public eye for so long, felt different when I used him as a reference source. We are doing tongue in cheek stuff, but nothing slanderous or sensational—that doesn't really interest me.

We've already talked about *Doubting Thomas*. In the painting, in the original, they're touching Christ's wounds to see if they're real. We've now replaced it with a Kinkade print— they're touching it to see if it's real. When Kinkade was at his height, some people were taking his paintings and militarizing them. They were altering his paintings as if they were dropping bombs and exploding something in them. That was their way of disagreeing with his work. I think we're trying to ask questions that are deeper. My *Mormon Rockwell* painting was meant to talk about Utah's history, its past, and what has been done and what has been impacted. I would like to lean into politics or world history in a bigger way. Using art history as a subject matter allowed me to hone my skills. If you go in museums, sometimes you'll see somebody set up doing a copy of a piece of art. This was my version of that, a copy. Now, I am trying to take it out of the context of just painting a copy and, instead, asking, "How could you play with this, and have fun with it, and contextualize it, while, hopefully, elevating these things?" That's at least my desire.

It comes down to my need for control. We are all clinging to what little control we have in this world. I am trying to be a conscientious narcissist—not *too* self-centered.

Thank you so much for your time, Ben. And also, please extend my thanks to Melanie. It sounds like she's really a collaborative part of this.

Yeah, we think of ourselves as a hive mind in that way. We flow back and forth and spend a lot of time talking, and talking about art and living it in a very collaborative and reciprocal way. She's a renaissance woman.



Michael Wutz (Ph.D., Emory University) is Brady Presidential Distinguished Professor in the Department of English at Weber State University and the editor of *Weber*. He has published in the fields of American literature, media studies, science, and the humanities. Recent publications include a volume of original essays, *E. L. Doctorow: A Reconsideration* (co-edited with Julian Murphet, Edinburgh UP, 2019), and an edition of original essays by the late media theorist Friedrich Kittler, *Operation Valhalla* (co-edited with Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Ilinca Iurascu, Duke UP, 2021).

Ben Steele



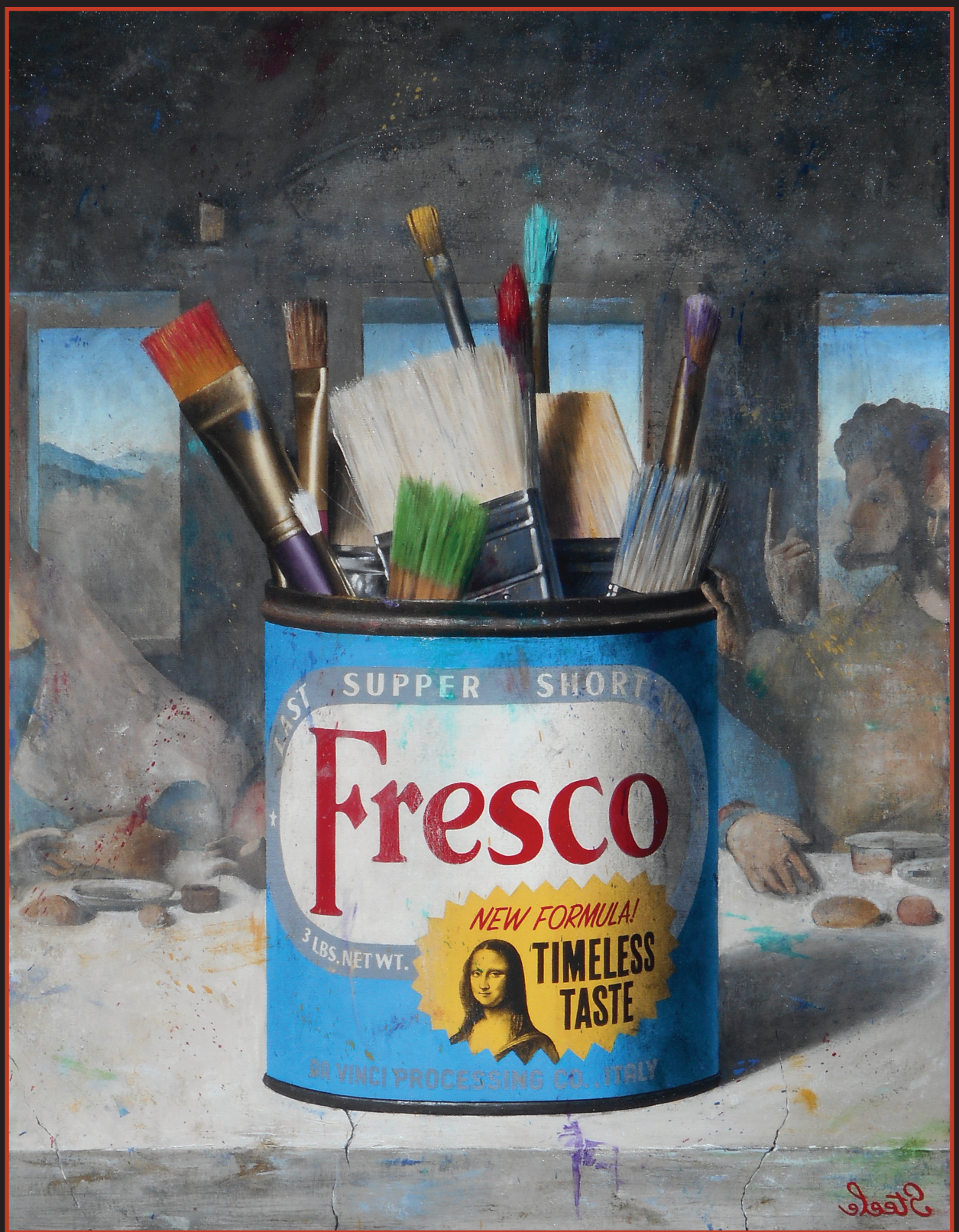
Salvador Soft Wax Crayons, oil on canvas, 30" x 20," 2024.



Typing at Tiffany's, oil on canvas, 60" x 72," 2018.



Distilled in Arizona, oil on canvas, 40" x 60," 2024.



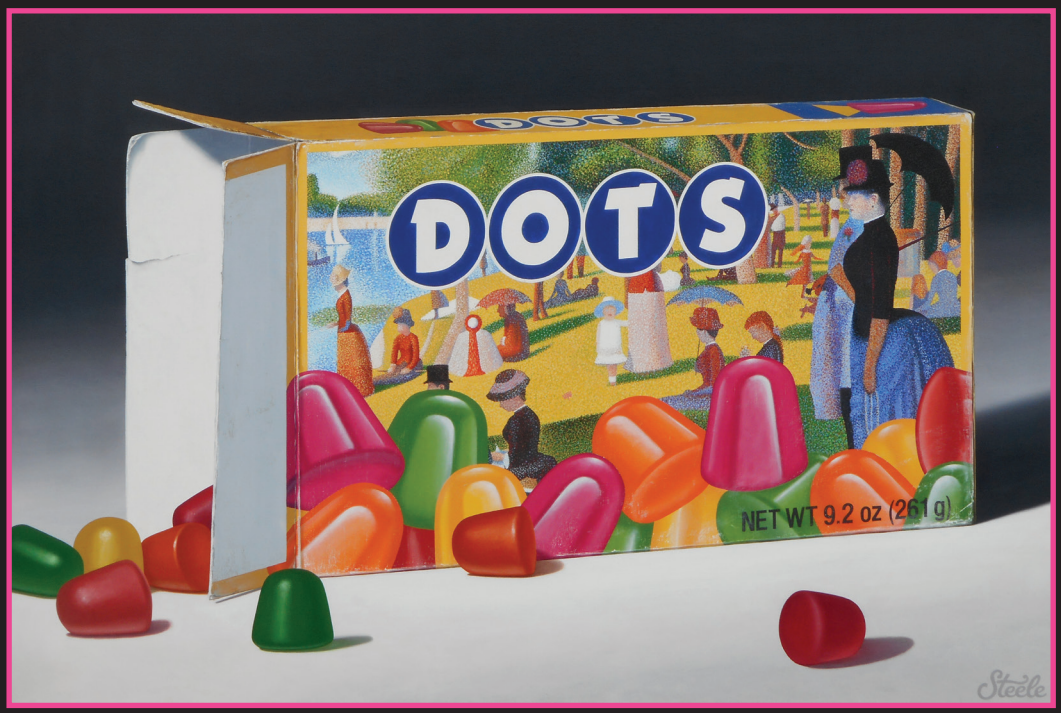
Last Supper Shortening, oil on canvas, 36" x 30," 2019.



Scream Motel, oil on canvas, 55" x 50," 2011.

The Method behind the Art

With an education built upon classical training, Steele combines traditional processes with a contemporary sensibility to ideally create a conversation between the old and the new. Steele often melds art history or pop culture into his wide-ranging body of styles, allowing the subject matter to frequently shift among still life, portraiture, landscape, and more. He considers anything that keeps the art creation experience fresh and exciting to be fair game.



La Grande, oil on canvas, 60" x 90," 2020.



Merill Inn, oil on canvas, 55" x 50," 2007.



Etch in History, oil on panel with fiberglass frame, 24” x 29” x 4,” 2024.



Old Faithful Spray Paint, oil on canvas, 45” x 30,” 2019.



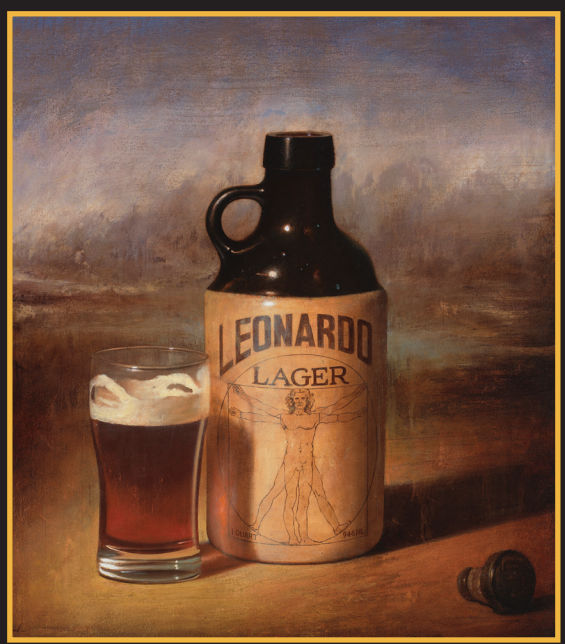
Dali’s Nuts oil on canvas, 60” x 48,” 2006.



Tabooist Mormon Rockwell, 78" x 60," 2019.



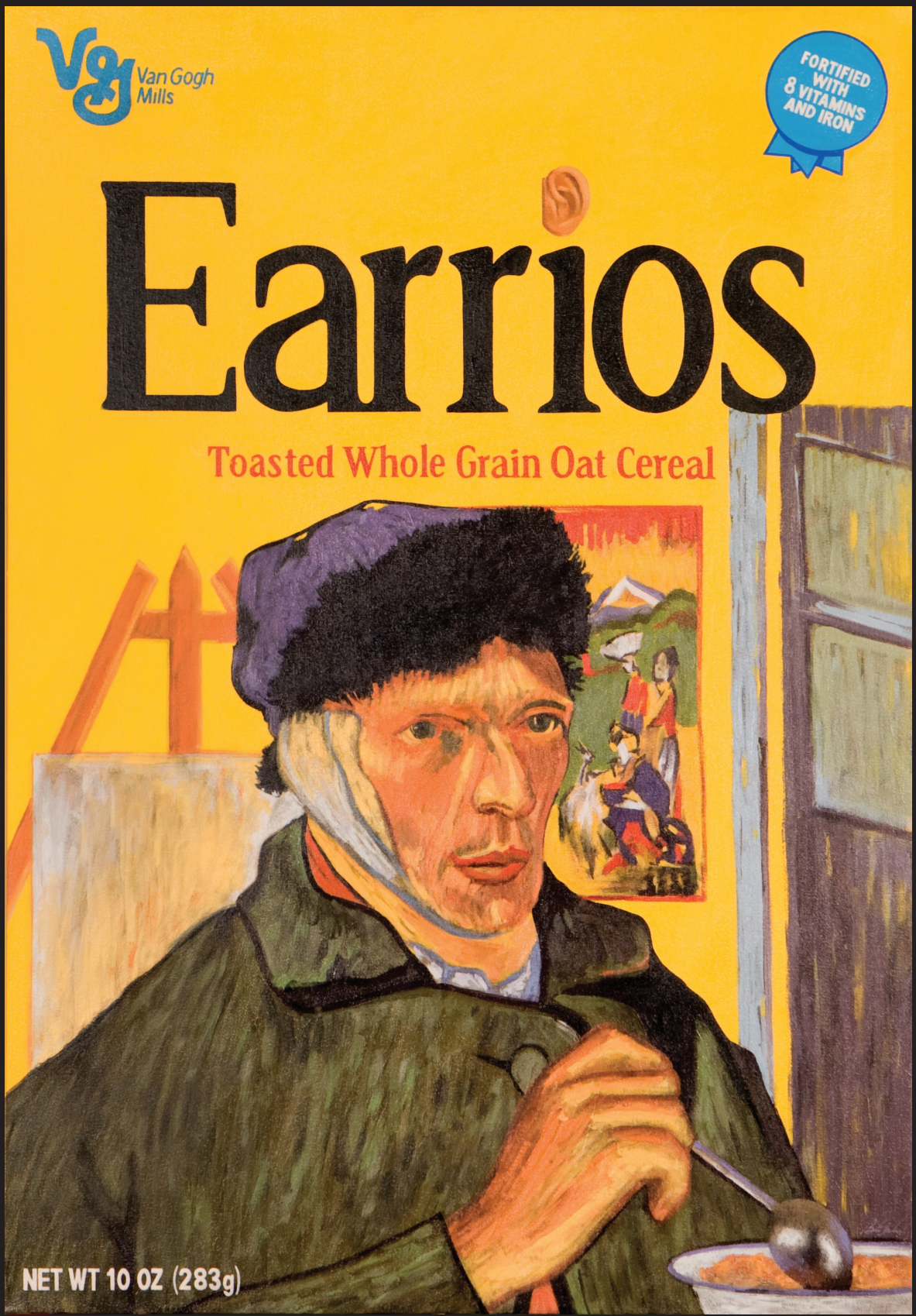
Doubting Thomas, oil on canvas, 42" x 57," 2007.



Leonardo Lager, oil on canvas, 33" x 30," 2013.



Dispensing David, oil on canvas, 40" x 20," 2007.



Earrios, oil on canvas, 34" x 44," 2007.



Curiousity, oil on canvas, 50" x 40," 2009.



Matisse's Pieces, oil on canvas, 50" x 40," 2010.



Phone of Man, 36" x 24," 2017.



Night Blocks, oil on canvas, 44" x 40," 2018.



A Fistful of Popcorn, oil on canvas, 45" x 30," 2020.

About the Artist

Ben Steele was born in Kennewick, WA, in 1977 and relocated to Utah in his teens, graduating from the University of Utah in 2002 with a BFA in painting and drawing. He continued his artistic education at the Helper Workshops under the instruction of David Dornan and Paul Davis, moving to Helper, UT, for a multi-year internship with Dornan. He has been living and working in the small coal and railroad town ever since with his wife, Melanie, and their three sons. You can see more of his work at bensteeleart.com.



Persistence Dairy, oil on canvas, 30" x 36," 2020.

Paul Willis

Mono Pass

Next to a ruined mining cabin
on the crest of the Sierra,
I sit down on a wide, flat rock.
It's the obvious one—I'm sure
the makers of the cabin sat here too.

The gaps between the cabin logs
are only partially chinked with granite:
the weather in would be much like
the weather out. And there's not
much here to block the wind—
a few small whitebark in the pass.

It is gray and overcast today,
the kind of day the miners wished
they were back in San Francisco,
claiming the good life of the gold
they have not yet found in quantity.
Just a hot bath would be nice.
A steak dinner. Maybe a girl.

So, we sit on the rock
as twilight comes, gazing again
at Mts. Lewis and Gibbs,
at the Kuna Crest, at Mammoth Peak,
and wonder when the flakes and ore
will trickle through our blistered
hands like the mane of a mule,
like rivulets of mountain water.



Pioneer cabin along the trail to Mono Pass. Yosemite National Park, California. Photo courtesy of the Yosemite National Park Archives, RL_01537.

—*Yosemite National Park*

George Lake

(Haliaeetus leucocephalus)

Late on a spring afternoon,
  a bald eagle swoops
    and swirls

and lands upon the frozen
  surface of the lake.
    Its great, bald pate

shines white as the sheen
  that still spreads
    over the water,

and there it rests
  those stone-sure talons,
    ready to seize,

if possible,
  the fish still sleeping
    far below.

—*John Muir Wilderness*

Ten Years after the Fire

(Quercus agrifolia)

Curling tangle of limbs
  and leaves—only an oak
    would call this a good hair day.

And checkerboard bark—
  part there, part gone—
    a psoriasis of peeling scalp.

Yet she hangs on,
  not thriving exactly,
    but true, somehow, to her roots.

Wood's Cycad

(Encephalartos woodii)

Golden pollen cones in air, bigger by far
than those of any Coulter pine
on the sandstone ridges just behind,
you belong in South Africa, but Madame Walska
brought you here to Santa Barbara to adorn

her sunlit garden. Your branches play
like prickly fronds of a giant fern
above the trickle of a pool and
below the ordinary arms of a dark live oak
that, unlike you, has been here all along.

Yet here your massive, shining cones,
these lanterns of unearthly light—
thick as my thigh, high as my gaze—
pull winter sun from all directions, a center
of being, a cynosure of visiting rule.

—*Lotusland*



Paul Willis is an emeritus professor of English at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. He has published eight collections of poetry, the most recent of which are *Losing Streak* and *Somewhere to Follow*. He has served as poet laureate of Santa Barbara and as artist-in-residence at North Cascades National Park. Each January for the last fifteen years, he has hosted a community reading of the work of William Stafford on the site of the Los Prietos Civilian Public Service camp in Los Padres National Forest. Learn more at www.pauljwillis.com.

Megan Harlan

This Berlin



Nicolas Vigier

This Berlin follows me into a bar, orders vodka shots
like a disappointed genius bent on a good time,
sliding down the curvatures of forgetting.
This Berlin absorbs sunlight wherever it goes.
It emits a pewter tensity, like silver tarnishing before our eyes.
It never gives the story straight, but leaves the case open:
It's not for us to know. Many days, we'll take this.
This Berlin lends me midnight and doesn't expect it returned.
Then nights turn into years I have lost track of;
stars form faint constellations in my voice. *You'll change forever,*
without witnesses sprawls around me like an unguarded prison.
I turn the corner, and there's this Berlin scattered
with continents, low wildernesses of East and West
sifted into kiosks, iron bridges, pulseless grey canals,
secret faiths track-marked with graffiti and boot treads,
a universe of neighborhoods that defies a perceivable whole,
preparing us for eternity's backstages, stage-sets,
under-attended audience. It arouses metaphors for license.

This Berlin takes all comers, then leaves every last one
hanging. The way Communism and Nazism and Fascism
haunt their own necro-architectures, while the parks
encroach on these pits, tendril greenery's slow heroics.
This Berlin offers spaciousness without any direction—
how to find yourself while usually feeling lost;
how to style, from ground-level, a swamp. And beyond
escape routes of liquid sequins, Prussian blue veins,
destinations of bodiless arterial train-tracks. This Berlin
is a patternless labyrinth we wander, insomniac, past
no horror too ornate, our sweetest glittered decadence,
endless rubble, building plans safely torching the future,
the only solid thing the moon, lighting us in shadow.



Megan Harlan is the author of *Mobile Home: A Memoir in Essays* (University of Georgia Press), winner of the AWP Award Series for Creative Nonfiction, and critically acclaimed in *The New York Times*, *Kirkus*, *Booklist*, and elsewhere. Her writing has appeared in *AGNI*, *American Poetry Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Hotel Amerika*, *River Teeth*, *Colorado Review*, and *Poetry Daily*, among others. She holds an MFA from New York University and works as a writer, editor, and educator in Berkeley, California.

Ann Keniston

A giant fishing hook suspended in Great



Spiral Jetty, located at Rozel Point, Utah, on the shore of Great Salt Lake. Photo credit: Netherzone, Wikimedia Commons

Salt Lake is what Robert Smithson tried first, then
remade in homage to *inanimate crystalline structures*

or a *whirlpool* or nearby petroglyphs, his construction
a memorial to local indigenous people displaced

or killed nearby and an emblem of the empty
Western vista inscribed with human meaning,

a set of contradictions the spiral represents. Or
he just liked that shape, and I'm overthinking this,

especially since *entropy* is how change mostly appears,
the stone construction submerged for a decade

but since 2002 exposed, *a useless berm, raised driveway,*
widget on a stalk, its changes in appearance documented

in annual photos taken by the foundation tasked
with looking after it, though they can't intervene even

if the thing unravels or collapses or gets vandalized
by the curious who arrive in the gas-guzzling SUVs

the rutted washboard road requires. Pilgrims or weirdos,
I'm not sure which. In any case, I've decided not to make

the trip, which might be why this is my favorite work
of land art, though apparently it underwhelms

up close. *Self-defeating*, says one critic, *purposeless,*
an anti-ecological *emblem of catastrophe*. By now

the elements once hidden under Great Salt Lake
are blowing into town in *plumes*, a *toxic cloud* abetted

by farmers who still grow thirsty crops, *Spiral Jetty*
these days not a metaphor or thing of beauty or elegance

but a harbinger, a bellwether left high and dry.

[Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (1970)]

To locate the rift, then mark it using stones or native plants



Celilo Falls east side of Columbia River Gorge, 1900s. Photo credit: Forest Service—Pacific Northwest Region

or words plucked from the journals of explorers or to build
a bridge for animals over the interstate can't restore
what's lost, the artist who designed these installations knows,

so she set these *art landscapes* onto corrupted earth, not
memorials but *memory work* though those first
explorers meant not to harm but map a new terrain.

She's carved the names of plants, animals and places
they recorded so faintly into stone they're hardly
noticeable, a journey changed into a set of stillnesses left out

in weather. A confluence is joined waters and stories
no ancestor survives to voice. Nor could anyone
list the names of the original inhabitants on a plaque,

their languages all also gone. A basalt stone for fish cleaning
was one of her attempts. A bird blind made from slats
on which are marked the previous abundance. *No art*

could fill this loss is the point and stumbling block.
It's useless to undam the former river even for a single afternoon,
though some alive remember when it was Celilo Falls,

nor should a viewing window be cut into the earth
to reveal what's left, the absence still concealed by traffic noise
and the noise of motorboats that long since overcame

the sound of water over rocks. Or the form keeps changing
despite art's wish to hold on tight. Art's just a facsimile
affixed too late, beholden to the *master narrative*,

arrogant no matter how gently it's deployed.

[Maya Lin, *The Confluence Project* (2006-2015)]



Ann Keniston is a poet, essayist, and critic interested in the relation of the creative to the scholarly. She is the author of several poetry collections, including, most recently, *Somatic* (Terrapin 2020), as well as several studies of contemporary American poetry. Recent poems and essays have appeared in *Gettysburg Review*, *Fourth Genre*, and *Five Points*. She is a professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Elizabeth Birch

Our Infinite Exodus



I.

Wisps of feathers and twigs scatter underneath
where her nest once was, so the mourning dove
abandons her annual home in the holly bush. Next spring,
she finds a new spot in the cozy crook of the umbrella pine.
I watch her coo as she breaks from collecting needles for her cradle,
but in the last days of April, I find her eggs beneath the tree,
cracked—one hollow, one leaking,
remnants from a reckless predator.

II.

On Seder, we peel eggs and chop apples and drink wine. We celebrate
our home and our ability to invite others inside.
We sit around tables recounting some of the worst
of humanity, of God. We sing
and dance and smile about things that should scare us, as if survival
is something to celebrate, as if God / Hashem / Adonai appointed us
as special / chosen / worth saving, ignoring what else that might imply.
We sit on dead trees, eat dead animals, drink dead grapes, and forget
if only we went outside on this warm evening and laid in the grass,
back flat / limbs extended / silent / open,
we might feel a pulse.

III.

Another sea duck washes ashore on the beach.
I notice each—bodies whole or half gone,
wings splayed across the sand as if flying from death,
or curled inwards as if hiding, flesh and feathers
intact or exposed bones holding hollow carcasses.
Knowing little,
I wonder why—if
they are natural deaths
carried in by the tide and collected in a bend of the bay
or if they are the result of something sinister, something worthy
of our shaking fists, something more our fault
than seals, coyotes, flu, old age. I wonder
if I should count the dead,
keep track, tell others—if I have the hubris
to play God.

Ducks float amongst waves. One closes its eyes
and never wakes up. Do the others notice?

IV.

On Seder morning, a man on the sidewalk asks if we are celebrating Easter.
We say Passover and he says the Jews had it all right
except one thing—the true messiah. He invites us to worship
and then walks away. When the sun sets,
our mother lights a roast duck on fire
and everyone cheers. We are okay
with never finding Jesus. But perhaps
we are missing something else, something
fragile as a dove's egg.

Just

High over a beige desert spotted
with shrub, cacti, and a million little rocks,
black ravens float
in gusts of wind—wings spread wide
with uneven feathers. No effort,
no destination. Alone
for miles, I walk below them and wish
to learn.

My therapist told me to throw out my to-do lists on my time off from work, time off that I long awaited but did not expect to come so soon or so forcefully. She told me to "just be." I laughed. I had plastered plans across the past year—every obligation, every errand, every activity, every day of nothing. I had questioned every decision over the past decade—my job, my relationships, my purchases, my plate—determined to do the most good for the world, distracting myself with so much doing. I read that ravens used to stop only briefly in Coachella Valley on their way to other places. Now, because of humans (and our trash), they stayed—an upsetting fact for folks who care about the fragile ecosystem and how the ravens ravage it, beaks breaking garbage bags and the shells of endangered species.

But beneath them,
a smile builds from my belly like water leaking from a cracked dam.
I see the ravens
land on dirt cliffs, poke beaks in holes for desert snacks, and then
as if weightless,
lift off again.
The wind carries them high enough to view the entirety
of the dry kingdom around them,
then throws them into free fall towards the sand
until their wings stretch out again,
hold steady. They hang in the air like dark ornaments, unaware
of their beauty, uncaring.

An article tells people to pick up their trash and secure their bins so that maybe the ravens will leave, and then all the desert creatures—humans included—can live undisturbed by so many prying beaks, and maybe these wild souls will continue with their migration elsewhere. (It doesn't say where). *Just keep going*, the world tells them, as if the ravens seek a singular purpose.

I walk along the dusty path on the outskirts of nowhere,
stretch my arms out wide and hope
the wind will lift me.

Tethered

Running through Sacramento's Capitol Park,
where all the trees are named,

I stop to learn from small signs and placards
so that later I can write poems

with cedar, cypress, hackberry, and palm,
sweet gum, sycamore, redwood, and ash,

capture their immensity, fragrance, and feel
with the quick combination of letters.

I used to not care about names, but now
I collect these knots in my mind,

each tying me
to something I should remember

about living and how it felt
before I knew any labels.

A falcon flies above me—calls
something better understood in the sky's echo.



Elizabeth Birch lives in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Her poetry has been featured in previous or forthcoming issues of Y*ellow Arrow Journal*, *The Tiger Moth Review*, *Nixes Mate*, *Writers Resist*, *Willows Wept Review*, *Stirring*, *Third Wednesday*, *Portrait of New England*, and *Footnote*. You can find her on Instagram and Facebook at ebirchpoetry.

Kimberly O'Connor

Poem in which the Future is Foreshadowed by a Depression-Era Dust Storm

Wagons west. Tumbleweed.
Oklahoma panhandle. Bumper crop.
Despite what politicians promised,
storm clouds don't follow planted fields.
Russian thistle. No rain. Rabbits
in the garden. Rabbit drives
to catch and kill the rabbits
with clubs or guns. Rabbit screams.
Dust on school desks. Parched rows
bake for days and days turned months,
turned years. Pray for rain,
say the preachers and the papers.
The end is nigh. The end is night
in daytime, dust on pillows, dust in ovens,
shoveled from schoolhouse floors,
swept from desktops. Thousands dead.
Masked children listless in barren yards.
In eyes, in lungs: decades later,
doctors can tell from shadowed X-rays
who grew up there. Market crash.
Fierce winds. The winds never ended.
Black blizzard: one, then another,
and another and another and the drought.
Dust in the mouth, the lungs.
Rabbits, horses running ahead of the plume,
chickens going to roost at noon.

And we looked to the west and we saw a black cloud.
There was nothing we could do but try to hide.



Homestead during the Dust Bowl in Texas County, Oklahoma. Photo credit: USDA Farm Service Agency via Wikimedia Commons

Protest

A friend described the actions of Wynn Bruce, of Boulder, Colo., as "a deeply fearless act of compassion to bring attention to climate crisis."

– *New York Times,* April 24, 2022

As wildfires took hold—
it was a Friday
afternoon in April—

not Good Friday, but Easter season—

I had just signed my will.
The sky above the bank's parking lot,
while the notary recorded my name, my address,
the date—

April 22, 2022—

turned gray—

not the gray of clouds but the gray of smoke
blown in from southwest—

thick, like soup, and scented, like despair—

and thousands of miles away a man
started his own fire on the steps
of our highest court—

that sham—

a symbol, a protest.

An acquiescence—as we will all

burn, soon enough.

The Future

Yesterday I asked my engineering ethics students
if they are optimistic or pessimistic about the future,
as if such questions can be easily discussed
with peers between physics exams
and calculus exams. Sometimes my students' eyes
look made of glass, as if the weight of knowing
how the world works is too much to bear.
I try to draw them out in my various ways:
stickers, bad jokes, t-shirts with scientific puns,
like an empty flask says to an overflowing one
I think you're overreacting. They never ask me
to answer my own question, maybe because
they have been trained, when told to jump, to ask
how high, or maybe because they simply
don't care to know. Still, because one of my
pedagogical goals is to remind them that
they are alive, that despite the supposed
"decline of the humanities," human interaction
is in fact a key element of the human experience,
I feel this morning that I owe them an answer.
Maybe I'd tell them, if I answered, that this morning
the sun rose on the mesa below a line of heavy clouds
that started black, bloomed plum, then faded
to lavender. This one cloudless spot of sky
shone, whitish-yellow, the color I imagine
people see at the end of the fabled tunnel
of near-death experiences. When I try to weigh
the recorded miseries of history against the potential miseries
on the horizon, I am interrupted by the sound of running water
and a frying egg. Am I optimistic
or pessimistic about the future? Yes.
Did the sun rise yesterday, and today? Yes.
Are we here together, shaking off sleepiness?



Kimberly O'Connor was born and raised in North Carolina. She now lives in Golden, Colorado, where she teaches for Colorado School of Mines and Community College of Denver. Her book *White Lung* (Saturnalia Books) was a finalist for the 2021 Colorado Book Award.

Juned Subhan

Home I



My grandmother's home:

where her lung cancer cackled and blossomed across
her flowered living-room walls like chokes of white forsythias,

growing as sharp as teeth
gnawing at her walls, through to the kitchen
where I used to stand beside her
by the sink as a tiny girl,

whilst she scrubbed and smothered her bloody,
pet owl in a bowl of tepid water
as if she was smothering a weary, feathered blanket.

My grandmother remained silent peering out of
the kitchen window, until she whispered:

I'm seeing ghosts, Anne, and beyond her
own backyard,

down

the disappearing footpath,

she saw her own mother shuffling
half-naked in Auschwitz in winter, her
flat breasts frozen with milk. As she marched ahead,

my grandmother's mother dreamt of an
apple tree pregnant with silver apples,
and young girls from her own childhood danced
under the apple tree,

in circles, singing together and grasping hands
as winter lifted and raged beneath their dresses and
their long, sandy hair turned into ribbons of

steel-blue flames, their entire heads shrieking with fire.
My grandmother's mother's mouth became
filled with burnt hair and milled bones.

Then, my grandmother turned away, and rinsed
her pet owl in gushing, cold water

leaving the owl

hanging on a rack,
its stunning, white wings expanded like arms.

I accepted it was dead, as everything
eventually is in this world, though its

eyes were fully open,
and I saw myself on the surface of them
until there was nothing left to see.

Home II

Cautiously, I tiptoed through my grandmother's kitchen
and above me:

her cancer dangled down from the wooden ceiling rack,
in ringlets of white flowers which slowly bloomed
and unfolded like a wreath of pale jaws,

and now—

her empty cupboards, the empty drawers,
and her empty refrigerator humming low

and filled with blinding emptiness:

a whistle of bright, white light as I opened
the refrigerator doors, devoured by its utter emptiness.

Then, as I turned—
a tiny girl again famished for the empty, glass cookie jar
too high to reach,

winter lifted in silver strings,
and I noticed my grandmother outside,
by the edge of the disappearing footpath

while she dreamt she herself was a quivering
little girl again, almost gagging and shuddering
in the attic closet,

entombed in darkness with her own mother who'd muffled
her mouth with an old sock as they hid, clinging onto each other,
and her mother had whispered, before shutting her eyes
and feeling the world recede:
They're only ghosts. Don't be afraid; just go to sleep, my love.
They'll go away soon.

Still, my grandmother could see her mother in Auschwitz,
tearing off plucks of sparkling, white feathers
off a frozen, dead chicken by a grave of snow,

swallowing each one of those feathers
as she giggled like a crazy girl—
and in the distance,
the ghosts of bald women and children danced
with shattered arms and brittle hearts in the gas chambers
as if they were in a fiery ballroom,
masked in folds of burning, white silk—

and my grandmother's mother thought
she heard those women and children singing in falsetto
voices with horror or love, or both.

Then, I shut the refrigerator door,
tiptoeing out and
sensing my grandmother's footsteps chattering
up the curved staircase,

as her shadow followed behind me.

Home III

Stunned, I gazed as my grandmother lay on her sunken
bed and tied a clear plastic bag over her head, nuzzling
her dead, pet owl under her thin arm,

while up along her staircase the cancer braided around
the banister in plaits of white forsythias,
throttling the banister.

My grandmother's face appeared blotchy like a
sobbing clown, screams of cerise rouge, egg-white
foundation and thick,

black mascara screaming off her papery face, blotting
the inside of the bag, while a garland
of those white flowers

crept over her bed, silent as a copperhead, and
snuck around her waistline in a tight
knot. Still, inside

the bag – slow, dying light and of course, the
winter sky too, arching over and above my
grandmother's mother as she tottered

forward across the final stretch in Auschwitz,
counting every footstep buried in snow – the
bare footsteps

of children and girls she knew, and when she
glanced back she counted her own footsteps
before they filled with snow,

seeing for the last time through a contracted
gaze the distance she'd travelled from her
own home, and the receding footpath.

Then, I noticed beside my grandmother's bed,
the closet positioned up against the wall,
where she'd once hidden,

sealed in with her mother in the dark with thinning lungs, and slowly, she counted each slow breath:

Just shut your eyes, my love, and fall to sleep. You have nothing to be frightened of. They're only ghosts visiting our home.



Juned Subhan is an English teacher and writer from England, and a graduate of Glasgow University. His writing has appeared in *Louisiana Literature*, *World Literature Today*, *North American Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Ontario Review*. He is currently working on a novel.

Klaus Andrieu

Göbekli Tepe



Rajeev Ramdas on Unsplash

Show me fields of rye
gilded and wavering in summer wetlands.
Show me how grain domesticated us. Show me how culture accumulates,
slick like mud on the riverbed. Show me priestesses. Show me women's
coal-streaked faces. Before Holy Water
the rivers were holy. Before the high court there were brass
scales and dark feathers. We touched everything then. Before
self-reliance we venerated shepherds. We venerated
flax threshers, thread makers. This slight era. There should have been
a better way to do it. If there was, we didn't know. You gave us
this way alone, only this one way. Show me every ruined
empire shed along the snaking hills. This trophic scar
that connects us enemies. Tempt the pulse
of athletes. Embolden experts of erotic touch. This is our want
which builds our towers high. Every mistake caught
between human knowing. Show me what dominion is. Show me
our god's degradation. If you gave us holy folk,
show me. Show me the crammed altar
and there I will lie prostrate.
You gave us the one
who writes. Show me the hero
enduring.

Berryessa Vase

We found it beside the rural cemetery's dumpster.
Its scene displaces paradise:

Blue larkspur mottles the shepherd's bed
in a shepherd-less world. Antelope
slip between the grass's thick, shy ribbons.
Green folds upon the earth.

The scene reveals no warm clay.
The antelope sniff pale freesia in half-bloom.
Mouths shut. Eyes open.
Their pleasure abstains itself.

Arcadia, fruitless. No pollen crumbs,
no straying breeze.

Its relief like a museum display, behind
the plexiglass blockade.
The antelope are taxidermied mannequins,
hooves stuck to conveyor belts.
They stare stiffly east.

They watch us
dawning,
though cannot see us.

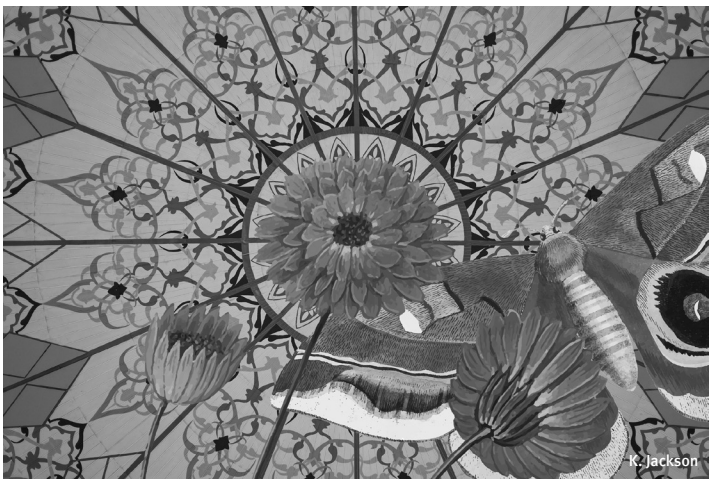
Bright vines fence off this world
from the living. Crimson anemones revolt
their blossoming.
This vase believes it is a garden.



Klaus Andrieu is a poet and editor living in Berkeley, California. He holds an MFA in poetry from the University of California, Davis. He is an associate editor of poetry at *Narrative Magazine*. More of his work can be found in *LARB's PubLab* and *Open Ceilings Magazine*.

David Koehn

Full Stop



Picture the most pleasurable moment of your wildest dreams.
Go ahead. I'll wait.
You have become a thing concealed. A part of the kaleidoscope.
Between the field and the pasture is the meadow.
Unwind meadow, find mead. What is behind Isabelle?
Pixelate 1939 and read about fire. Where hope collides with smoke.
Everything I have ever done will be forgotten, the speed of absence,
Of remembrance, is the half-life of the afterlife.
The etymology of death is the death of what you love.
Unwind the second person, unwind Isabelle, and find the meadow.
What is behind me?
A paper fir on a toothpick trunk stuck in a wine bottle cork.
Unwind, find Isabelle, and the insides of your worst memory.
A mason jar full of dried calendula in your mother's hand.
Cork the wine bottle and stick a toothpick in a paper box.
Build each birdcage with a full stop, each wire the stuff off
Of the cutting room floor. Go ahead. I'll wait. Unwind Isabelle.
Inside your worst memory, find me. The moth, gold and silvery black
Caught in the green net of the lace lichen. Build your cutting room floor
From the stuff of songbirds.
Between the field and the pasture is the meadow.
A picture of the most pleasurable moment of my wildest dreams.
The green net of lace lichen, the moth's body, the wings.
Dried calendula in a mother's hand, where hope collides with smoke.
Everything you have ever done will be remembered.

Halfway

Walking the earth makes it clear our gods are overrated.
There is no order. Start at the end. Finish halfway through.
Walk the world with a watch that loses some time every few minutes
Prickly in the fingers, borage in the mouth is cucumber on the tongue.
The trail ends here. There is an order to finishing when through
The gap under the cone cupping the sun's arrival time in pink
Flowering, nasturtium on the tongue is radish in the mouth.
Being here, this is how it is. I can't control it. Nasturtium:
naris 'nose' and torquere 'to twist'. The cone under the sap

Sunning the cup's arrival time in ink. Pigweed flickers like a green
Hairstreak under my uvula. Begin here. This is how it is. I can't
Control it. A Fairbanks Morse windmill, only the gears remain.
Pigweed flickers like a green hairstreak. Under my uvula
There is a cave I have lost myself in, devoured my sins
In a Fairbanks Morse open-gear windmill. What remains
But to walk the world with a watch that loses some time every few
Minutes. The cave that devoured my sins is in it, in that time
Walking the earth makes it clear our gods are overrated.



David Koehn's writing has appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, *New England Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Rhino*, *Volt*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *North American Review*, *The Rumpus*, *Zyzzva*, *Prairie Schooner* and elsewhere. He earned his BA in ceative writing at Carnegie Mellon and an MFA in creative writing at the University of Florida. David is teaching online graduate poetry workshops for *Omnidawn*. His newest book, *Sur*, appeared in 2024.

Lois Marie Harrod

My Nature Poetry Workshop Has Pre-Class Queries



Can I bring a husband?

Yes, bring a husband.
Having one male among us
will add piquancy
to our poetry.
Is he good-looking?

Are the themes announced compulsory?

Holy sonnets!
There were themes announced?

The Nature Center just asked me
to do a workshop.
They didn't mention *theme*.

Migration? Going, going, gone?

Well, I didn't see the publicity.
I am planning my usual—you know,
write what you want, but include
these words: ***wrench, shoestring,***
Carolina Wren, faucet, wench, screwing,
fire, fox of the quick brown sort,
snot, phlegm.

Is there wheel-chair access?

Yes, there is an elevator to 2nd floor
where fading thrush eggs
are displayed in the dilapidated nests
and the stuffed eagle
has lost his left eye in the dust.
If that wheel-chaired husband of yours
has allergies, he may want
to wear a mask.

And perhaps you should tote along
his oxygen too.

Are you doing the same thing
as Mary Oliver—or was it
Emilu Dickinsonian?—did in her workshop,
three years ago last June?

No, I doubt it,
but it sounds like you
have been participating
in writing workshops
for some time. . .

Do we have to write *nature* poetry?

Well, considering we are all animals,
I'd say everything we write or have ever written is,
in a sense, "nature poetry," but actually
I'm not sure what kind of sense *in a sense* is in.
So, no, I won't ask you
to write an ode to the pileated woodpecker
in the pin oak unless you feel compelled
because a branch from that rotten *quercus palustris* slammed down
on your lime-green Malibu and now it's damn difficult
to get a wheelchair in and out
of the back seat.

Will we have to write about
those pathetic sketches
of beavers and muskrats
that have been fading on the Center's walls
since 1952?

No, bring your own paper and pastels.

The Space Between Us

Do you remember
how you measured the distance
between your pillow

and Jacob's, the light bridge
between Beckett
and bewilderment—

what did you say?

It's farther than you think—
the distance between tenderness
and Lord Howe's Island?

It's the length
we so often make,
the space

we unfold—
for are we not
space making up itself.

We can't spot it
as we might find
particles inside a detector.

We can't measure it.
It's the backdrop,
the void

where our little play
The Universe
opens, unfolds.

Yes, opens, folds.

The Yogini to Her Heart

Oh, heart,
some mornings

curled in my chest,
Balasana, a child sleeping.

I do not want to wake you
to another starless day—

my little Gretel without her Hansel
dozing in the dark trees—

such a baby
despite your years,

and that witch out there
her cribs and cages.

And say it too—
oh, heart, with your rumpled tantrums

and gray hungers,
you must be done with stirring—

and yet
you flip on your back

Ananda Balasana
the happy baby—

can you still
roll the stone away?

You grab your feet
spool side to side,

the sun in its slow spin
from east to west,

the long night,
west to east.

“Once again, we face extinction”

says a poet[1] worried about her eggs,
which have always been in one basket,

6 million when she was a fetus,
1 to 2 million when she was born.

400,000 at most by puberty
but who wants 400,000 babies?

Mama Uganda with her hyper-ovulation
is having trouble keeping her 44 alive—

all by the same man, who—*need I say?*—
absconded.

It’s the basket he forgot—
we are all in that basket.

1. Cathy Linh Che, “Marriage”

Those Things I Haven't Told

And it came to pass
that a great teacher said

tell those things
you have never told

But I could not say
such things, I was

like the virgin who pondered
the world in her heart.

Oh, you know which virgin I mean,
the one with the impossible birth.

Perhaps that is the mystery
of this poem,

of what springs
from nothing

into my mind, nothing
I knew I had conceived.



Lois Marie Harrod's recent publications include her 18th poetry collection, *Spat* (Finishing Line Press, 2021), and her chapbook *Woman* (Blue Lyra, 2020). A dodge poet, life-long educator, and writer, she is published in literary journals and online ezines from *American Poetry Review* and *Weber* to *Zone 3*. See more information and links to her online work at www.loismarieharrod.org.

Connie Wieneke

Mitchell Springs

the cold, clear water. . .
still seeps from the cliffs
—From an historical marker
Cortez, CO

1

once lived and loved
thrown out
the window

at 40mph it's easy to say so long
been good to. . .

a garter snake stretched between guardrail and chipseal
prayer-nudged
back to its hidey hole

2

Some might make a home of what's fallen
to this borrow ditch. Ribbed washcloths hung
on PVC. Tiny glass airline bottles, metal twist
tops intact, refilled with maybes, like dried
thistle seeds, dusted-off hopes. Pocket-sized
Marlboro boxes strung for a child's mobile. Its
nothing keeps birds from hitting the window.



Reed Mattison

3

Hard to distinguish tuna from tobacco,
upside-down tin, label parched&peeled
by what's taken for wind.
We only drank Dr. Pepper and here's this
single can, drained of its Bing cherry
fake-perky color.

My mother's precious Instamatic shrugged off
in country like this. Who remembers
what can't be untaken?

Hawkins Preserve

1

Almost passes for quiet here.

The wind rustle of needle&thread
grass.

A crow scold. A red-tail taking note.

Gunshots rankle the air.

O! for the hell of it—
the wind the crow the gunshots
my walk this sage steppe.

2

Imagine the pueblo's stones
carried elsewhere, reshaped
into walls now a Gen X yard,
that pile of cairns that misleads
devil and angel. Hard to picture
what once here—a doorway,
a place grain wintered over
rooms
where children were born—
the shelter of a roof never enough.

3

Lavenderleaf evening
primroses come sun-break
tighten into fists, could be
mistaken for Witch's butter.

My uncle called every yellow
flower coreopsis, this simple
his catalogue. Groundsel
or ragwort? Greenthread or
a rose a rose a rose? Nomen-
clature, claptrap of ownership
a plague. Why even sacred?

No Outlet

1

Between asphalt and culvert
a rust-colored snake warm as blood.
Between disaster and luck she comes
a-courting. With a bit of stick I urge her
home. Every day I wish the snake
foresight. Point to the other
garter, metallic and squandered,
on the road. Time for only one devotion.

2

That lone and broke thunderbird of a tree
        A ridge that overlooks the Wind River
                A river not yet ripping
Always been more rocks than pronghorn
        More rocks than angels
                More dust in heaven than stars

A needle no eye without a thread
        A needle still claims the way

3

Each day we follow the same country
        road. Right. Right. Left.
                Then all right(s).

The "T," *No Outlet* lures me forward.
        Like the snake.
                Like the low-flying

finch. Who thinks wings
        will only come
                to grip the road?

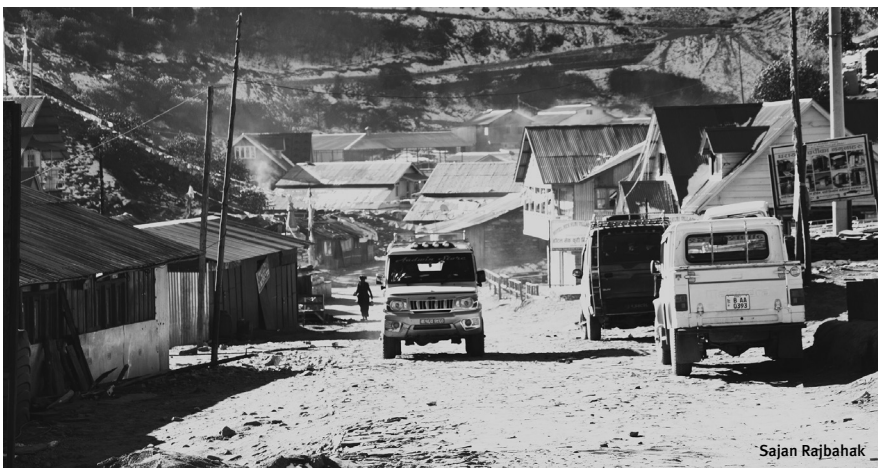
All this longing.
        Is the end of a road
                anything but?



Connie Wieneke has lived in Wyoming since 1983. Her writing is fueled by place and family, by the ways in which memory sometimes gets it wrong. In 2024, Seven Kitchens Press published *What Couldn't Be Fixed*, a chapbook of poems about her mother. Recent and forthcoming work appears in *Stand*, *Barzakh*, *Pilgrimage*, *High Desert Journal*, *Camas*, and *Talking River Review*. In addition to an MFA from the University of Montana, she has received literary fellowships from the Wyoming Arts Council.

The Smuggler

Ranjan Adiga


Sajan Rajbahak

The smuggler drives out of the darkness from the Indian border into Nepal. His Nissan van is old with peeled off paint and dents but otherwise unremarkable—no colorful lights or plastic flowers swaying for attention. In the back, five crates of AK-47 are hidden underneath a tarpaulin.

It is a sweaty, humid night. Patches of tar shine in the glare of headlights on the narrow strip of road. The smuggler's belly hangs like a sack. He rubs it, unearthing threads of muck, which he rolls into little balls and flings out the window. On the empty seat next to him is a pistol.

He can't shake off the feeling that Maoists are waiting to ambush him, those guerilla fighters that have infested the hills like a disease. They'll slay anyone that reeks of city wealth. A rags-to-riches man from Kathmandu, the smuggler *is* their target. They'll rob him naked and slit his throat with a rusty khukhuri. The duller the blade, the more agonizing the death. The smuggler wonders if his eyes will roll the same way as a goat's; if his blood, black as tar, will trickle down and seep into his killer's nails.

The Maoist trouble was hatched gradually in the hills that the highway winds through. Unaware, the smuggler would wave at women scrubbing children at roadside taps, smile at farmers who squatted on boulders with their mud-crusted hoes. These simple gestures eased the tension that came from weeks of dealing with pimps who sold everything from crude handmade guns to imported whiskey in

the Gorakhpur black market, the Indian side of the border. He was always relieved to make the purchase and cross the border into Nepal, away from petty criminals. His country had always been greener, more peaceful. This started to change when young men and women with rusty rifles and bandana-covered faces appeared on highway boulders. They walked up the hills in small groups as if they were onto a deadly secret. They dug up poles with red flags painted with a hammer and a sickle, including in the little patch outside a teashop where the smuggler usually stopped for a chat. The last time he was there, a group of twenty-somethings sat by an open fire, wearing ill-fitting army fatigues, their faces covered with bandanas. They looked at him from over the brims of their cups, taking a direct aim at his Ray-Bans. The smuggler had left without finishing his tea.

"Fuck your revolution. Get a job," the smuggler mutters. There had always been infighting in Nepal. Mallas, Gorkhas, Shahs, Ranas, the country had always been a messy map. But no one made the motherland their target until the Maoists.

"There's a difference between rulers fighting for territory and people fighting for food," says a woman on the radio. The reception is so bad, her voice sputters as if she were losing breath. The smuggler enjoys Radio Nepal, which only airs news sponsored by the government, not these private stations that have come leaping out of nowhere like bandits. He turns off the radio and picks out *The Best of Rajesh Hamal* from the dashboard. The old van doesn't have a CD player, and the tape squeals from overuse, so he thumps the player with his fist until the superstar's "Goli Sisako" slips into tune. He continues driving with the window open, swats mosquitoes dead on his face. He likes Hamal, a man's man, a patriotic superstar who shoots anti-nationals with his dialogue like well-aimed missiles that never miss. The smuggler tries to remember a dialogue, but he can't. Language has never been his strength, preferring, as he does, the easy accessibility of radio to the deceptive words in a newspaper. The smuggler likes Hamal, who speaks without twisting his words and whose movies end on a simple message: love your motherland. Respect your traditions.

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On a bend, the smuggler stops the van. He tucks the pistol under his belt and gets out. There's not a sound except the snarl of the river. He walks to the edge of a deep gorge and takes a piss. The Trishuli river, so calm in the day, roars like a demon at night. The smuggler's skin crawls. The darkness in the hills is absolute, no ifs and buts. Maoists take shelter in these parts, plotting to blow up schools and markets with pressure cooker bombs, killing people in the name of a people's war. The smuggler, on the contrary, is a patriot. The guns that he sneaks into the country are trophies for the rich, a hobby like procuring starlets. The worst crime they might commit is to shoot a bird with a stray bullet during celebratory gun fires in barbeque parties. The rich like to show off their guns and their jeeps, the smuggler has observed, from outhouse kitchens where he is fed dal-bhat with other servants. The masters love to feast on wild boars that roast over

coal fire and fondle young girls who serve them whiskey. Once his own master, Dhirendra Rana, a rich hotel owner and a distant cousin of the queen, smashed a girl's face with the butt of his gun because she spilled whiskey on his shirt. No one interfered, including the smuggler, who watched from a distance, scared that Rana would come after them. The girl's face had to be patched together with fourteen stiches. The smuggler reasoned that the girl was a butterfly fluttering on a rock underneath an avalanche triggered by the forces of nature. Her own wings had failed her. If you're born on a steep slope, your only hope for survival is strong legs.

Not fully formed, the smuggler's guilt is like a mild, annoying pain that dribbles in his toes trying to inch its way up, but he doesn't quite know what he should feel guilty about. He is not a traitor, and he wouldn't hurt a fly if he could help it. Having run away from the shame of poverty as a seventeen-year-old, the smuggler dreads returning to a life where the anxiety of not having money is greater than the risk of a violent death. His mother cleaned peoples' houses; father worked as a postman just outside Kathmandu, delivering letters on a cycle all day for a humiliating salary that forced six people in the family to eat, dress, and sleep in a single room. How often had he seen his mother's sagging breasts, nipples cracked with breastfeeding. The spots her periods made on their bedsheet never washed away, and the air in that room was thick with arguments about money. When the smuggler fled the room, his boyish heart pumping three times its normal rate, he left behind siblings whose faces he has sealed off from his mind. With no cash on him, the bus conductor let him sit on the roof atop sacks of grain, setting him off on a life of handiwork for Dhirendra Rana's family. They raised and fed him in return for fixing odds and ends, and knowing how to speak only at the correct moment.

After filling up petrol in the tank from a jerry can, the smuggler settles back in his seat and hits the pedal. An hour later, he sees a faint light in the distance. The smuggler drives on, squnting ahead. There are two men, one with a rifle strap slung on his shoulder. He takes quick steps toward the van, aiming the weapon at the smuggler. The road is too narrow to make a quick turn. The smuggler slows down. He reaches for the pistol, tucks it under his belt. They don't look like Maoists; they're in blue police uniforms, and as the van draws closer, the smuggler notices a shed made out of sacks. It is a police check-post. The smuggler stops the vehicle but keeps the lights on.

The one with the rifle comes to the window and flashes torchlight in the smuggler's face. He is sucking on a mango pit. He scrapes the pit clean, tosses it away, then wipes his fingers on his jacket.

"Where to?" he says. He has a very young face.

"Kathmandu," the smuggler says, offering a Namaste. "Nice warm weather."

The other one walks slowly toward them. His boots crush the crunchy tarmac. He stands in front of the van. He wears a police cap, his face

covered with a scarf. There's something odd about him. The jacket is too big. He points a rifle at the smuggler, but his arms aren't stiff. They're the arms of a young woman.

"What's in it? Money? What's in it?" The man with the torchlight says. He kicks the side of the van.

"Nothing, just some statues."

"Get out."

The smuggler steps out.

"Open the trunk," the man—a boy, really—says. He smells of sleep, but his eyes are alert.

"Look, bhai, why don't we talk? We can settle this," the smuggler says forcing a smile.

The boy grins. "Open it," he says.

The smuggler hesitates. "It's just statues of Lakshmi," he says, walking to the back of the van. The boy lowers his torch at the wooden crates filled with hay and porcelain statues stacked on top of a tarpaulin. He throws some statues to the side and removes hay from a crate. Underneath the tarp, AK-47s glitter like a prize.

The boy stares transfixed. A slow smile breaks out on his face. He caresses the rifles and relaxes his shoulders for just a moment, which causes the strap of his gun to slip off. The smuggler takes a step back, wraps his fingers around the butt of his pistol, and with a trembling hand, he shoots him. Twice.

He turns and fires at the other one.

The shots echo in the hills. Then there's complete silence.

The pistol slips off the smuggler's hand, drops on the ground. Breathing slowly, he stares at the dead body, of the one whose face is covered. After a moment of hesitation, he walks to the body and slips off the scarf. It's the face of a young girl.

Inside the shed he sees two policemen in their underwear, sprawling on the ground with slashed throats.

The smuggler drives away calmly, but suddenly jams on the brake, opens the door as the bile from the pit of his stomach unleashes and splatters on the road. After quick gulps of water, he rubs his teeth with his finger and drives on as the river gushes with a maddening force below. This stretch of highway is tilted over a gorge. The smuggler, who knows every curve on the road like a woman's body, feels his concentration slipping. The image of the dead girl keeps flashing before him. He was jolted back when he squeezed that trigger.

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At the break of dawn, the smuggler approaches the last stretch into Kathmandu. The red flags begin to disappear. The road becomes busier with a smattering of trucks and buses. A police van is lazily parked on a side next to a check-post.

Two policemen approach his window. The smuggler pulls out two crates of imported whiskey from underneath the backseat. No words are

exchanged. The drill is always the same. As he drives away, he sees the cops in the rearview mirror, walking happily to the shed with their crates.

The smuggler pulls over under a peepal tree.

Across the street, a group of children, dressed in dirty school uniforms, sit in a circle throwing dice. The smuggler distributes a handful of toffees like an uncle who comes bearing gifts, but as soon as a woman pokes her head out of a window and yells "Go to school!," the kids scamper away in gleeful delight. The smuggler smiles, washes himself at a roadside tap, and drives to a petrol pump. Tied to a pole is a fading three-month-old banner—Happy New Year 1998! As a man goes about filling up the van, the smuggler opens the hood and inspects the oil level. From a jerry can he tops off the transmission fluid, then pokes around the spark plugs and radiators. When he presses a fuse, the car honks a symphony of trumpets. The smuggler likes honking from the hood, showing it off to the pump attendant, who says it sounds like a mating call to creatures of the hills.

At a roadside restaurant, empty except for a young woman whose face is half covered with a shawl, the smuggler asks for dal bhat. She is reading a book. He hasn't seen this girl before.

When she drops her veil, the throb of his heart moves through his muscles. He guesses her age to be around eighteen. The restaurant is typical for this area, with a kettle of rice cooking over woodfire and the mud walls damp from the smell of rice wine. The woman serves him a plate of rice with a bowl each for dal, pumpkin shoots, alu, and fried chicken with radish pickles on the side. What a delight it is to let the rice wash over with dal, mush it with vegetables, form it into balls, and eat it with the magic of one's fingers. A second helping of everything later, they go into a backroom after the girl summons a boy to attend to the shop.

The smuggler makes love tenderly, looking into the girl's eyes. He finger-kisses a scar above her lip with a light touch.

"I need to get back to work," she says afterward.

"Stay for a while," he says.

"It'll cost you," she says.

He doesn't let her put her clothes back on. They linger in bed, and he watches her lying on her stomach, naked, reading a newspaper. He knows he is lonely and dispensable in this business, and it is that echoing loneliness he is increasingly scared of. He has heard that a woman can transform a man into anything. He wants a fair shake in love and marriage before he ends up in jail or dead, and such thoughts tend to leave a heavy effect on his brain.

"What do you do?" she asks.

"Handyman."

"Easy for you, city folks. We have to cross seven hills just to find work, and then we're forced to fuck truck drivers."

When he doesn't speak, she says, "You're not that different from us. Everyone is trying to escape from the same gutter."

"I don't point the finger of blame on others," he says.

"Why are you so fat?" she asks, startling him. She sits up. "I fuck so

many men every day, I lose count," she says. "I put you in the worst category. Quick and flat. If my scar gave you a hard-on, I didn't see it."

"I don't like your tone," he says.

"How should I speak?"

He tries to gather his thoughts. "You're free and you make money. What more do you want?"

"Being free and claiming your freedom are different things," she says. Her face is contorted in agony. The bitch has ruined his mood. He gets out of the bed and catches his reflection in the mirror—the paunch, the flaccid penis. He is bothered not so much by her words, he thinks, but by her underappreciation of his lovemaking. He sees her looking at him. She must have enjoyed what she saw because her lips curl into a smile. It's all the junk she reads in the newspaper, he thinks, for such a young girl to act like a spinster. He reasons that she is envious of his ability to rise above their class by means of his unorthodox ploys. He takes time putting on his clothes, combs back his sleek hair, and leaves a big tip on the bed.

"Come back soon, fat brother," the girl says and puckers her lips for an air kiss. The smuggler scoffs.

The van has been washed sparkling clean by the pump attendant. The smuggler's mood has turned foul. The man stands with his hands clasped. His is poor and barefoot, without a pair of breasts to give him bargaining power.

"Who's the girl?" he asks.

"From over the hills, master."

The smuggler is annoyed by the man's acquiescence and decides against giving him a tip. He shuts the door and settles back in his seat, lighting the only cigarette he allows himself after the completion of a successful mission, and in a rare display of anger, he hits the steering wheel with the heel of his palm. As a round of gun shots echo in the hills, he starts the ignition and drives into the city.



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The Date Farmer

Russell Brakefield



Josh Sanabria on Unsplash

Slab City, USA, 2020

We were halfway through Utah when Dad let slip that he needed to take a quick detour. "It's barely out of the way at all," he said. "I swear." He was pushing the upper limits on his old LeBaron, his right hand hooked over the wheel, his left hand resting on the partially open window. All my clothes were piled in the back in trash bags, along with a tube full of posters I planned to hang in my dorm room, a second-hand desktop computer, and some books and-DVDs in a Tupperware that said "X-Mas Decs" in faded sharpie on the lid.

The desert sped by outside the window, orange mesas shadowed by a single long cloud, a battleship lurking in the distance. We were meant to be in L.A. by dark—my college orientation started in the morning—but I knew as soon as Dad started talking that was no longer in the cards.

"It's just an alternate route," he said. He clicked the lighter into the dashboard and fished a cigarette from his shirt pocket. "So I can see an old friend." And suddenly it became clear why he'd agreed to drive me halfway across the country to college, why after years of near absence he'd decided to swoop in and act like Father of the Year. I felt sick, my stomach eating itself. I wanted to tuck and roll, take my chances hitching the desert instead.

He lit his smoke and fumbled to seat the lighter back in its port. "Leon's been out here in the desert for years. I haven't seen him in almost a decade."

"Leon?"

"I've told you about Leon before. He's the farmer. The date farmer?"

"So what, this is another one of your schemes?" I couldn't bear to look at him, so I watched the alien horizon slip by out the window instead. I sat forward in my seat and leaned away from his cigarette breath, shifted the old seatbelt so it wasn't cutting at my neck.

Dad stared at the road. "It's not a scheme," he said, his smoke bobbing between his lips. "Like I said. He's a friend."

"You don't have friends." I knew it was a cruel thing to say as soon as I'd said it, but I didn't regret it, at least not immediately. And besides, it was the truth. As far as I could tell, he'd never been close to anyone he didn't need for something. He nodded his head but didn't respond. He turned up the radio. The Nuge. "Great White Buffalo." Fuck.

"It's just one night," he shouted over the music. "Maybe two. We will still have you there in time for classes."

The quick detour Dad promised turned out to be a six-hour trek out of the way to a farm community on the edge of the Salton Sea. He'd marked it in red pen on the big road atlas he kept in the glove box, a dark red streak leading directly into California's eastern elbow. He asked me to "navigate"—the only concession he would give, the only thing that might resemble an apology—but I was boiling by then, barely speaking to him, and I had no desire to trace his sloppy red line and tell him where to turn next.

He finally hushed the radio when we hooked off the highway—smaller and smaller roads, fewer and fewer houses, the occasional horse barn rotting into the earth. His friend's farm, he said, was near Slab City, one of the largest off-grid communities in the country. "I tried to get your mom to move there," he said. "In the nineties. But of course she wouldn't."

We didn't stop at the Slabs. My dad rolled right by, gesturing like it was a road sign, only a marker on the way to somewhere better. As we passed, I craned my neck and watched the colorful flags and painted trailers, old men in lawn chairs and children on rusted bikes, the beautiful, ruined desert rocks made up in layer after layer of graffiti murals, layer after layer of searchers leaving their mark as they moved through and moved on. Dad turned west again, passing a few makeshift houses of worship—an arc made of bicycle wheels, totems built of broken-down Volkswagens and car-part crucifixes. He drove on through a sleepy town center where day laborers sat on upturned buckets, rakes and shovels piled at their feet, and on into the fields of fruit and fronds that followed.

Eventually, he found the house he was looking for. He slowed beside a multi-colored mailbox and turned up the drive. Both sides of the driveway were lined, as far as I could see, by date trees. Each tall, skinny trunk was scaled like the back of some ancient lizard, and at the top, below the fanned green leaves, hung vibrant bunches of fruit. Thousands of red and yellow globes hung like lanterns in the groves on either side of us, vibrating softly in the desert wind.

Eventually, we pulled up to a small, olive-colored rancher, flanked by several outbuildings—two small garages and a trailer painted the same multi-colored pattern as the mailbox.

"What is this place?" I said.

"This is it," he said, putting the car in park.

The date farmer looked how I imagined he would, how you are imagining him now. Tall and bone thin. White but sunbaked, almost rust colored. Long—I mean knee length—dreadlocks bundled over his shoulder and twisted into a basket shape at his back. Gauzy linen pants and a terry work-blouse exposing prominent, sun-kissed collarbones. Work boots. Huge blue eyes. On his belt he wore a machete, which dangled by his knee and glinted in the sunlight. He walked from the house with one hand raised. Up until this point I had assumed my dad was pulling the old stop by trick, that the date farmer would not have been informed we were coming. But the man was smiling. It seemed he was pleased to see us.

"Skunk!" The date farmer wrapped my father in a hug. I hadn't heard anyone use my father's nickname in a long time. It made me think of some good times from when I was a kid, when my folks still lived together in the trailer in Pueblo, my dad's hair still cut in that strange black mohawk. It made me think of some bad times there too. My father pulled in his skinny comrade and bear hugged him. Apart from my mom, I'd never seen him maintain contact like this with anyone before, not even his old biker friends, rough guys who were unusually effusive with one another—always hugging and grabbing each other's shoulders. But not my dad. He'd barely ever hugged me at all.

"And this must be David?" He turned to me and extended his hand. I shook it and felt the sandpaper callouses pull at my palm. The fact that he knew my name was even stranger than the hug. The fact that my father had told him, at some point, of my existence.

"Davey," I said. "Sorry to drop in on you."

The date farmer waved me away. He looked me up and down, then looked to Dad, then back to me again. "Where's the rest of him?" The two men laughed. "I guess you must take after your mother then." Another shock, that he'd met my mother, that he knew just by looking where I got my skinny frame, my small hands. He turned towards the fields, towards the rows of towering date palms. "Let's walk."

Over the next hour, the date farmer walked us through the groves, talking mostly in parables. The one about the monkey gardeners. The one about the boar and the lion. The one about the farmer and the horse. When he wasn't talking in riddles, he was talking about the dates. He named them alphabetically like hurricanes—*Black Plum, Carmelita, Desert Gem.* It was well after noon, and the sun was high. Sweat stained my t-shirt and my legs chafed in my jeans. Flies bothered us, dive bombing at my neck and face, but the date farmer seemed not to notice the heat or the bugs. He didn't even bother to brush the flies from his skin as he wandered the

fields, pointing to the plants that needed to be pruned, naming the ways he'd made this life work.

And my father, for his part, had morphed into an entirely different human. Usually he'd be talking fast, using the same string of platitudes he always used, bragging about some deal he'd done or gearing up for a new pitch, talking money even though he'd never had any. But here, he was quiet. He walked in the date farmer's shadow and listened, the two men staying close together, laughing at jokes and stories so inside and specific and ancient I could barely understand them at all.

That night, the date farmer unfolded two army surplus cots in one of the trailers beside the house, and my father and I put down our sleeping bags. For a while, we lay in the dark together listening to the night sounds—nighthawks and poorwills, an occasional owl clearing its throat. Then my father got up and started lacing his boots.

"You ok?" I asked, thinking maybe he'd decided now was the time to move along. Hoping, even, that he'd had a change of heart about getting me to school on time.

"Fine," he said. "Great actually. You stay here. Just going to chat with Leon for a bit. Maybe some cards. Like the old days."

When he left, the trailer door squealed back into its latch, and I was left alone. Somewhere in the night, I heard a howl. A dog or, more likely, a coyote. Some lonely creature screaming at the wind.

I woke around dawn to the sound of birds singing in the eaves of the trailer. Dad was sleeping on the cot beside me, a huge Mexican blanket draped over him. The trailer smelled like stale dirt and pot smoke, the pungent scent curling off my father sleeping beside me, and I understood immediately where he'd gone the night before and what he'd meant when he'd said, "like the old days." I thought about the trailer in Pueblo. The big frisbee ashtrays that used to live on the kitchen table. Mom shooing Dad outside when he lit up.

I walked outside and pissed beside the big garage, what the date farmer had called "the drying shed" the day before. As I leaned against the battered building, dumping my bladder into the knapweed, I peered through the window at the farming implements stacked inside, crates of dates waiting to be sorted and boxed, mounds of shriveled fruits glistening in the early sunlight bending through the windows. I stepped to my right and tried the door to the garage. It gave easily, pushed open with a squeak. I looked around me; no one seemed to be awake but the birds. I could still hear my father snoring in the trailer.

Inside the garage, I plucked dates from the piles and tossed them into my mouth like popcorn. The sweet, fibrous fruit filled my cheeks and stuck in my teeth like sugary jerky. I tried a date from one box and then from another, their flavor's differing slightly based on the tint of their shriveled skins. I nudged a few cleavers and saws, picked up a long machete and swung it around like I was in a jungle heist movie. Then, a

rattling sound spilled out from the back of the garage, a clicking and sputtering coming from a row of plastic trash cans. One of the trash cans was shaking, moving slightly. I stepped towards the barrel and was about to lift a lid when I heard a voice.

"Stop." The voice was not loud, but there was a hint of panic in it, a strained pitch the date farmer had not possessed the day before out in the fields.

"Stop there," he said and moved towards me. I froze. He floated beside me and put a hand on my shoulder, not as to comfort me but to keep me from moving. Then, slowly, he lifted a lid off the nearest trash can. At the bottom, coiled together like a long length of rope, were three snakes, their backs patterned with unmistakable brown and tan blotched mosaics. Rattlers. Big ones. Shaking their warning signs at me.

The date farmer put the lid back on and took a step back. He nudged the bottom of the barrel with his work boot and the can began rattling wildly again, the snakes inside jolting and spinning their tails, aggravated, ready to strike but with nowhere to go.

The date farmer still had his hand on my shoulder. He took the machete from my hand, turned me and steered me back towards the garage door. "They are like rodents out here. Everywhere. And they get at the dogs." He opened the door and motioned me through. "I don't have the heart to kill them though. So I collect them." He sighed. "I don't know a better word for it. I collect them and drive them out and drop them in the desert. Some people mark them with spray paint to make sure the same ones don't come back, but I don't care that much." We were standing in the sun now, both of us squinting. "I like being part of it all. I like knowing what I'm dealing with." The date farmer looked back behind him, as if making sure the snakes didn't follow him out. "Go wake up your Dad. We'll get some food going."

In the trailer, I shook dad a few times and then rolled up my sleeping bag. He grumbled but tucked his head down beneath the blanket and kept snoring. I went out of the trailer and headed towards the house. The date farmer and his wife were sitting in silence on an old bench swing on the porch.

"Good morning," they said to me in unison, two sparrows competing for the day's first words. It was as if my encounter with the snakes hadn't happened, as though it were a dream or another of the date farmer's parables. Something to be gleaned from it, I thought, but wasn't sure what.

"Did you sleep ok?" the date farmer shielded his eyes from the sun.

"Fine. Thanks."

"And your dad?" He squinted at me, as if he'd asked me more than what he'd asked. "How's he doing?"

I looked back at the trailer but didn't know what to say.

"You know, your dad has been a good friend to me. He was there for me when no one else was." The date farmer looked at his hands, remembering. "He really saved me a few times."

I was trying to work out what this meant, trying to decide what to say. Instead, I let the moment pass in silence. Just the three of us feeling the morning sun on our faces, this other history, this other version of my father, out there somewhere for me to imagine.

"What about breakfast then?" said the date farmer's wife, standing up and heading for the house. "We have good avocados right now."

She brought out a gallon jar full of orange juice mixed with honey and poured the sunny blend into coffee cups for each of us. We ate sitting on the steps of the porch, cold rice and avocado wrapped in lettuce, dates and almonds, orange juice and honey and then some bitter black tea. Eventually my father came out of the trailer holding his shabby old sleeping bag and joined us. He refused to eat but took tiny sips from the tea he'd been given, his demeanor darker than the day before, the buoyant energy he'd had seemingly drained out of him.

"Thank you for this," I said, after we'd eaten. "We should get moving."

When we left, my father hugged his old friend again, then leaned in and said something into his ear that I couldn't hear. As we pulled out of the driveway he honked and waved, like a normal father greeting another father in the neighborhood, like a normal father cruising the cul-de-sac, taking the kids to baseball practice or karate or to the community pool.

I made it to college, though two days late and smelling like desert sweat. I missed move-in day and the orientation on underage drinking. I missed the welcome week activities where I might have made a few friends.

I'd occasionally call my dad that first year, from my cellphone in the courtyard below my dorm room where the smokers and skaters hung out. We never had much to say, and I often put off calling until things were even more strained than usual between us, both of us fighting to find a tolerable rhythm on the line. I'd call and talk about school, and then he'd go quiet on the other end, not able, for whatever reason, to tell me the particulars of his life. Sparing me or spurring me? I'll never know.

I didn't see him again after that. He didn't visit and I didn't go home, and then he died in my sophomore year, officially of a heart attack but actually of a malady or incident that no one would tell to me straight, not even my mother. In this way the end of his life matched the rest of it—unnamable darkness followed him almost everywhere, as it seems to follow me. But then there's not a shed in this whole damn world without some snakes in it. I know that now.

When I think about him these days, I often picture him embracing the date farmer in the desert, arms around his old friend, the two of them vibrating in the shade of the magnificent date fronds. I hear him laugh as he walks among the ancient, alien trees, hear him say words like longing and memory and even regret. I still exhume him occasionally to walk among those trees again, to search that lost bountiful landscape for answers.

But that was all later. When we left the farm that day we headed east, then north again to connect with the freeway. We both wreaked of sweat and dust and the shabby trailer, but also of the road, the miles we'd put

in before that. And somewhere beneath all of it was a sort of wet, moldy smell that I would always, for the rest of my life, equate with leaving a place behind. The date farmer had said there were free outdoor showers at The Slabs. He'd even drawn us a little map to get there. I thought for sure my father would suggest it, and as we drove I shuddered thinking of the two of us stripping down together in the sun, leaning in beneath a trickle of water running down the red rocks. I shuddered thinking of my dad's saggy ass wagging in the desert, his bony white knees knocking like day moons on the horizon.

Thankfully, Dad headed back towards the highway instead, letting us roll on in our cloud of stink. In the passenger seat, he'd turned gloomy and stoic, back to his usual self. He looked older than ever, all the youth and energy displaced out into the wide desert. He flipped down the vizor and looked straight ahead, as if tracing a straight line to the Pacific Ocean. Out on the freeway he cleared his throat. "Atlas?" he said, pointing at the glove box, and I got out the big red book and turned back to the creased map of California.



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Sister CES Letter

Robert Bennett



Bailey Burton on Unsplash

I wasn't his companion, of course, but we were close, closer than you might expect. Sure, the Elders and the Sisters needed to work together, but that doesn't mean we were allowed to form intimate relationships, not like we did. There were strict rules about that, but in the end Elder Eccles and I ultimately ended up talking to each other even more than we talked with our own companions, if you are talking about deep meaningful talk and not just superficial conversations. I mean, don't get me wrong, our relationship was completely Platonic. This wasn't some fleeting missionary crush, let alone a budding romance. We weren't planning to get together back at Brigham Young University (BYU) and get married, like so many missionaries did. Maybe we were just thirsty to be with our intellectual equal, and Elder Eccles and I were at least that: We were both intellectuals. I had studied comparative literature at BYU for three years prior to my mission, emphasizing complex modern movements: French existentialism, the theater of the absurd, and poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida, Foucault, and, of course, Deleuze and Guattari. They were my favorites. There was something about their bold daring and their brazen creativity. In fact, that was how Elder Eccles and I first connected: over Deleuze and Guattari of all things, and how many missionaries can say

that? Elder Eccles made some comment about how the Prophet Joseph's brave new Nauvoo-era theology was decidedly rhizomatic. Did he just say "decidedly rhizomatic"? That caught me as rather pretentious. I don't think anybody else had any idea what he was talking about, but I instantly queried him, "You mean, like in *A Thousand Plateaus*?"

"Exactly," he replied before stopping himself to ask me in return, "Wait, how do you know about Deleuze and Guattari? What are you? Some kind of philosophy major?"

"No. Comparative literature, actually," I said defensively. "We read poststructuralists, too, you know. I can't claim to be an expert, but I am a legit fan. I really like their recklessly Nietzschean playfulness." Oh, my heck! Did I really just say "recklessly Nietzschean playfulness"? Now I hoped *I* wasn't the one coming across as pretentious.

But pretentions aside, just like that we became instant friends. A mission can be an intellectual desert, and we were each other's oasis. We compared reading lists. Turns out I had dabbled in contemporary French philosophy, which immediately impressed him, and he was enthralled by international modernist literature, which was my specialty. We had wild, inventive conversations about literature and philosophy, the deeper mysteries of the gospel, and the meaning of life. It felt like being back at the university, which is definitely where I belonged.

I guess it was bound to happen. I don't mean to brag, but sooner or later all the Elders sought me out, or at least the intellectual ones did. It wasn't so much that they were interested in me personally. After all, aside from maybe excelling academically, which wasn't all that exceptional among my missionary peers—there really were a lot of very smart missionaries—I didn't particularly stand out. My looks were nothing special, I didn't play any sports, I was something of an introvert, and I was from Utah. Who wasn't? There was nothing special about me that enticed them. It was more that they couldn't resist the theological mystique that I had carefully shrouded myself in. You see, I had a clandestine copy of the infamous anti-Mormon diatribe, the *CES Letter: My Search for Answers to my Mormon Doubts*, written by Jeremy Runnells, and pretty much everybody knew that I had it. I kept it secret from the mission president, of course; he would have instantly confiscated it. But I didn't exactly go out of my way to hide it from the Elders. In fact, you could say that I was practically advertising it to them, sending out theological pheromones to draw them in. It was my calling card. It was what made me special.

On a mission everyone largely blends together into one big undifferentiated homogenous mass. Your personality gets erased. You become just a nametag, reduced to a title: *Elder* this or *Sister* that. You really needed something significant—maybe a dramatic breakup with a serious boyfriend or girlfriend back home, a state track record, being a recent convert yourself, the occasional checkered past as a black sheep of your family, or something like cancer—if you wanted something to talk about that might make the other missionaries really take notice of you. Perhaps, most of us

eventually found something distinctive about ourselves, something that transcended our identical name tags, but sometimes it took a while to discover what that really was. Sometimes it took practically your entire mission to find your personal distinctive gift, but eventually most missionaries did gain a reputation for something or other, and then they would end up being given a new name, a name that was truly your own: Sister *this* or Elder *that*. You might as well have called me "Sister *CES Letter*." That was my trump card, and there was nobody, not even Elder Eccles, who could beat it.

Sure, Elder Eccles had the mission's largest subterranean library of forbidden works of philosophy and literature. I heard that it had gotten confiscated once, back in the Missionary Training Center, but recently it had been growing again uncontrollably. It wasn't exactly a secret; he talked about it all the time. And he didn't just abstractly reference titles back from his days at the university; he would pull out hardbound copies of specific texts right from his enormous two-ton missionary suitcases. He had long ago lost the fear of God that was put into him back in the Missionary Training Center. Now he no longer saw any problem with, or felt the slightest hint of guilt for, once again accumulating books of all kinds. Not all his books were, strictly speaking, theological in nature; in fact, most of them weren't. He had a mad menagerie of theology, philosophy, and literature; archaeology, literary theory, and world religious texts. He may not have been the mission's outright official scriptorian, but he was at least its own in-house resident philosopher. He held a daunting full house of books, but I was the one with the theological royal flush up my sleeve. I had a strictly verboten copy of the most comprehensive and most controversial anti-Mormon tract of our generation. If Elder Eccles got caught with a stray volume of Kafka or Agamben, then the mission president would have just taken it away, but if president Young found out that I had the *CES Letter,* it would have been a death sentence. It was probably even enough to get me stuck as a junior companion for the rest of my mission. It was that serious, so no wonder everybody found it a little edgy. Elder Eccles's books may have broken mission rules, but my *Letter* was outright dangerous—not just intellectually provocative, but potentially testimony-destroying. And like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, everybody was dying to get a bite of it.

It's not that missionaries were heretics; to be honest, most of them had little interest in theology. They didn't care about history, Egyptology, or archaeology. Hell, most of them weren't even particularly troubled by polygamy. It had all happened so long ago; it had all been so whitewashed by the church's tightly correlated curriculum. They just knew that the *CES Letter* was off limits, that it was mysterious and edgy. Not quite edgy enough to get you sent home, like maybe alcohol and sex were, but certainly something that disrupted the humdrum everyday routine of missionary life. If there was such a thing as intellectual, even theological, flirting, the *CES Letter* was the closest thing you could get to an aphrodisiac. And besides, no self-respecting Mormon intellectualista was going to

turn down a hall pass to freely cavort with the Elders. Every Elder in the mission was dying to read my Scarlet Letter. They responded as if I had a tattoo. They didn't really want one themselves, but they were very curious to see mine. Sure, some of them were maybe harassed for being a Mormon here or there back in high school, but few of them had actually seen a real work of anti-Mormon literature, let alone the Holy Grail of Mormon heresy. It made them curious, slowly inching them out of their narrow orthodox closets, but it made me feel like a real theological bad ass. And that felt good for a shy, unassuming, slightly wonky girl from Provo.

I'm not even sure how it all happened. I hadn't intended it to be this popular, and in fact I was more than a little confused, even outright bewildered, when I gradually came to realize just how much other missionaries wanted to see it. It wasn't even my own idea. My boyfriend back home, Steve, had sent it to me. He wasn't a heretic or anything like that. He had just been off his mission for about six months, and he was getting back into the university lifestyle when he came across it. He had started reading it and was genuinely curious. A little of it he had been exposed to before, but most of the *Letter* was entirely new to him. It may have even made a good point here or there—like that Native Americans do not have Middle Eastern DNA, which suggests that the *Book of Mormon* never happened, or that there are some vague parallels between Joseph Smith's 1830 *Book of Mormon* and Ethan Smith's earlier 1823 *The View of the Hebrews*, which implies that the *Book of Mormon* may have been plagiarized—but Steve didn't really believe any of that, and he certainly hadn't sent me the *Letter* to convert me to anti-Mormonism. He may not have been a completely orthodox Mormon himself. In fact, I think he even drank coffee, but the *Letter* hadn't really shaken his faith. He was just an intellectually curious person, and he thought that the *Letter* might prove intellectually challenging; you know, as something to think seriously about, maybe even as opposition research, to know what the other side was saying, so you could better defend the faith yourself.

Meanwhile, Steve was happily attending his ward back home and living the gradually secularizing life of a returned missionary. He was perhaps too easily attending church and falling too enmeshed in the returned missionary lifestyle. He had even met a girl in his home ward who he had taken some interest in. They weren't exactly dating, and he hadn't told me anything about her yet. I heard about it from a mutual friend, but who was I to throw stones at his budding romance and his slow return to R-rated movies. That *CES Letter* that he sent me had made me downright theologically promiscuous, and in more ways than one: Not only was I partaking of the forbidden fruit of an unorthodox, even apostate, text, but I was also using it to intellectually flirt with missionaries of the opposite sex. I did have a genuine intellectual curiosity in dealing with the issues themselves, but I must admit that I probably enjoyed the attention that it brought me more than I appreciated it as a theological punching bag. I had never been all that popular, but now I was the Belle at the Ball, or at least the Sister with the kick-ass theological tattoo. In the end, my possession of the *CES*

Letter was probably something less noble than mere rigorous opposition research, but also something more righteous than outright apostasy. Ultimately, it simply got people to think, to consider other perspectives, and to take themselves a little less self-righteously, and on a mission that was generally a good thing. Of course, we weren't trying to be anti-Mormon. Why would you go to all the trouble of going on a mission if you were trying to tear down the church. We just needed something to spice things up a bit. The *Letter* broke up some of the monotony, but in the end, it wasn't as dangerous as it seemed.

Most missionaries are practically immune to arguments against the church. Years of seminary and the quasi-indoctrination of the missionary program conditioned us—in a *Brave New World* kind of way—to reject even the hint of apostasy. This extensive training was like Teflon, or even Kevlar; nothing stuck to it, nothing could penetrate it. If anything, hearing counterarguments just makes missionaries more believing, more convinced that the outside world has gone astray and fallen into sin and darkness. Anti-Mormon arguments were just the fiery darts of the adversary, and all you had to do was to put on the full armor of God and parry them through your righteousness, drawing upon His strength to vanquish an inferior foe. You didn't have to work through the complex issues; you didn't have to provide clear, compelling, logical rebuttals. Within the world of Mormonism, all you had to do was bear your testimony and reaffirm the church's foundational articles of faith: I know the church is true; I know that Joseph Smith was a prophet; I believe the *Book of Mormon* is the word of God; I sustain President so-and-so as a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator. I love my family. Even the most virulent anti-Mormon viruses had little chance in the hospital-room sterility of the mission field. There wasn't even enough intellectual or theological topsoil for their seeds to take root.

Besides, the *CES Letter,* theologically provocative as it may be, was poorly written. Sure, it made sense, as much sense as anything we taught, but it didn't really fire the imagination. It was too long and unfocused and more than a little boring, mostly harping about minor details and arcane irrelevancies. It wasn't so much Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* as it was a pedantic laundry list of minor grievances by overexcited church historians or disillusioned archaeologists. If you really wanted to attack the church, there were more interesting ways to do it. There were much better arguments which mattered on a more personal level. Ultimately, the *CES Letter* wasn't so much heretical as it was a kind of counter-orthodoxy of its own. Its criticisms had become as routine, predictable, and practically clichéd as its canonical counterparts.

Most importantly—at least from my perspective as a strong, intelligent, independent woman in a patriarchal church—you could tell the *CES Letter* was written by a man. It never seriously addressed the all-too-obvious issue of sexism in the church: the all-male priesthood, the lack of meaningful female leadership positions, the endless scripture stories almost exclusively about men, the "boys go on boy scout high adventures while the girls do crafts" youth programs, the rigid—even so-called eternal—gender roles

which kept women confined to the home, and the outright sexist, practically misogynistic, nature of Mormonism's most sacred temple covenant: I, as a dutiful, subservient woman, covenant to thee, my god-fearing husband, instead of directly to God like the men do. Sure, the church broadly extended the priesthood to all men, eventually, but it hasn't yet extended it to a single woman. And if that wasn't enough, there was still the sordid history of polygamy, the elephant in the room, with its creepy residual afterlife. Like a zombie, it seems almost impossible to kill off, at least as long as Section 132 remains in the *Doctrine and Covenants,* and apostles and prophets keep marrying eternal plural wives.

Moreover, it was this sexism, in particular, that was so obvious and palpable in the mission field. It was so infantilizing that women had to wait longer than men to go on our missions and weren't allowed to stay as long. How could a mission be the best two years of our lives when we only served eighteen months? And then there were the subtle and insidious ways in which the Elders lorded over us Sisters with their exclusive boys' club priesthood authority, the mission leadership positions that were reserved only for men, the way in which the mission president talked about the grand principles of missionary work while his wife only cooked meals and discussed personal hygiene, and above all the belittling fact that you had to get men to baptize your own converts for you. After *you* put in all the work to lead some humble soul down the covenant path to conversion, after *you* helped some dyed-in-the-wool eighty-year-old Catholic woman to disavow two millennia of Catholicism and gain instead a testimony of Joseph Smith and the Restoration of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the Lord's one and only true church on the face of the earth—which was all-but impossible—then you had to turn the fruits of *your* labor over to some know-nothing nineteen-year-old Elder from Provo. Technically speaking, *I* didn't baptize *anyone* during my entire mission. Nor did *any* Sister. No matter how hard we worked, no matter how hard we prayed, no matter how many discussions we taught, no matter how many people we converted and committed to baptism, it was only the Elders, and younger Elders at that, who could ever baptize anyone. As proselytizers, we were not only the proletariat; we were also the Elders' servile Stepford wives. It was enough to make a Marxist feminist out of Ayn Rand.

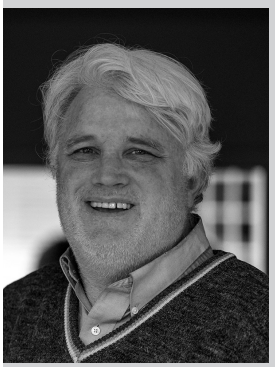
Unbelievably, this blatant sexism didn't destroy my faith at the time, but I would eventually have my own personal faith crisis a few years later. After I'd read Gloria Steinem's "If Men Could Menstruate" and its Mormon counterpart: Amy McPhie Allebest's "Dear Mormon Man, Tell Me What You Would Do." After I'd joined Mormon Feminist Housewives. After I'd read Ann Eliza Young's *Wife No. 19*. After I'd started praying to Heavenly Mother and wearing pants to church. After I'd learned that women were not allowed to pray in the church's annual general conference meetings until 2013. After I had begun reading Mormon feminists, and after so many feminists had been excommunicated. Not to mention after I literally burnt my mother's copy of *Fascinating Womanhood*. And af-

ter I burnt my holy garments, the magic underwear that served as a token of the sexist temple covenants that I was forced to make before I was even told what they were. (I was so mad that I almost burnt my mission journals, too, but I'm glad I kept them.) After you finally leave a cult, there is such a long list of things that you need to burn, but don't burn everything. Those dusty old journals may give you good material for a novel someday. After. After. After. After so many things, I was a completely new person.

In the end, except for using the *CES Letter* to flirt with a few Elders, I ultimately could have cared less about it. I didn't care whether the horses in the *Book of Mormon* were or weren't tapirs. I couldn't give a rat's ass how Egyptologists translated the *Book of Abraham*'s arcane facsimiles and hypocephali. Sure, I didn't really believe that Kolob was the planet nearest to the throne of God, but none of this affected how I lived my real life. What ultimately got to me was feeling like my contributions to the faith—as a strong, intelligent woman—were minimal at best. The church made it abundantly clear that, except as mothers, they didn't really have a significant, meaningful place for women. We never led church congregations. Even in our own homes, men presided over us with their priesthood authority. We received no revelations. We never ordained anyone. We gave no mother's blessings. We never healed the sick. We couldn't even bless and pass the sacrament. Like you need a penis to do that! We had no say about church doctrines or policies. We made no decisions about church curriculum or finances. We were never the presidents of church universities or directed the church history department. We came along for the ride, sure, but we sat clear at the back of the bus. Separate but equal wasn't good enough anymore. Something needed to change—and with all deliberate speed. This wasn't your polygamous great, great grandmother's church anymore. People of African descent had to wait until 1978. How much longer were women going to wait? Ten years? Twenty years? Fifty years? I didn't have that much time.

Just think about all the leaders you sustain in general conference. You sustain literally dozens of men before the first woman's name is even mentioned. I just wanted to be treated with basic human dignity, to be treated as the equal to a man. I wanted to be listened to. I wanted to fully participate. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to hold the same priesthood that men held, and you can't blame any of that on the *CES Letter* and its corrupting influence. If anything, anti-Mormon arguments probably helped keep me in the church. At least they gave me something to think about, a way to use my brain. In the end, I did briefly join the Ordain Women movement before I left the church for good, but I ultimately gave it up because it seemed like such a lost cause. The church—with its eternal gender roles set in stone in its "Proclamation on the Family"—was never going to change, so I wasn't going to be a part of it any longer. Mormonism, I have given you my all, and now I am nothing. Ultimately, I had the Kirton McConkie law firm confirm that I had legally resigned my membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, effective immediately, and that I wished for no further contact from representatives

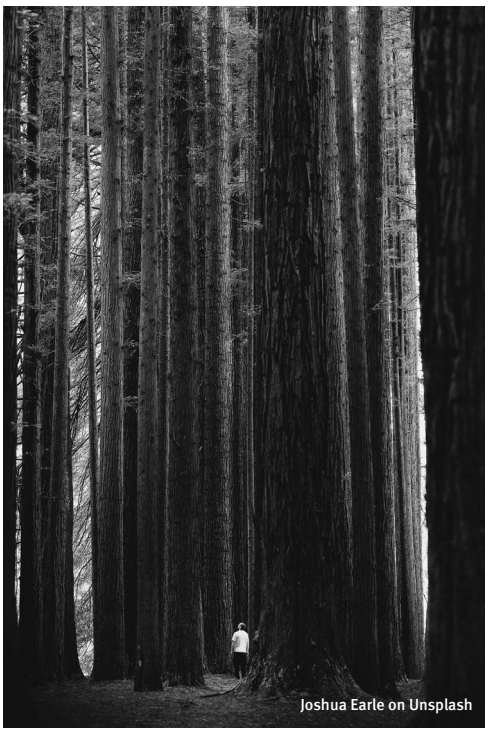
of the church, including missionaries. I had served a mission, and I served it honorably, but I would never do it again. In the end, it wasn't what they had promised. It wasn't the best eighteen months of my life. It wasn't even close.



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The Mother Tree

Joanne Furio



Joshua Earle on Unsplash

I.

"I wish they would take that redwood down," my husband says one Saturday afternoon, as we sweep up twigs and branches that blanketed our patio, our lawn, our green canvas umbrella, our gravel and our stepping stones. With the paths obscured, if you don't know where things are, the footing is dangerous. The redwood, the wildest tree in these parts, is not meant to be pruned. Nor do they like it. Tree people describe the redwood as being "deciduous" with its lower branches. The winds provide the chance to drop them.

I shush my husband, lest my young neighbors hear, the ones with the two daughters, seven and five, who delight me. I come from a house of girls and became a mother of two sons. The girls remind me of what it is to be a girl, in all those typically gendered ways. We like coloring, purses, and sparkly things. They occasionally come for tea.

The twigs and small branches range from a couple of inches to a foot. They fly down with such ferocity that they pierce the giant leaves of my two elephant ear plants. I retrieve the twigs carefully, like a thorn from a wound. I wonder if this hurts the plant, especially if I make the initial hole larger during the extraction. The elephant ears are almost as tall as I am, so maybe it doesn't hurt them so much. Maybe that's not so for the smaller gryphon begonias, an unusual southeastern plant I had shipped west. Their delicate polka-dotted leaves look as if they'd been stabbed.

II.

The redwood's deposits are a seasonal occurrence. They happen in the fall, when dangerous hot winds remind

me that this is how all the October wildfires have spread. They happen in the spring, after rains that people here think are such a big deal, but to me fall short of an East Coast thunderstorm. The rains often arrive quietly and continue through the night. If it does rain during the day, it doesn't last long and sometimes morphs into hail or fog.

Though the tree's twigs bug my husband, the thought of its roots practically unhinges him, in the way most unseen threats do. "I bet those roots are coming right up against our foundation," he says one morning, while I sip my coffee. I am not going to worry about things I can't see, control or anticipate, I say. Besides, to build our house eighteen years ago, they had to cut the roots of that tree. But some clearly remain.

When we first moved in and replanted the yard the previous owners had neglected, our shovels kept hitting redwood roots in the flower beds along the fence, making us select new locations for shrubs and perennials. We also had to accept that a six-inch length of root rises like the back of a boa constrictor in the grass.

III.

The redwood is my neighbor's yet is more my tree than hers and more the neighborhood's than mine. Four feet from our fence, it rises to the height of a four-story building, double the height of my two-story home. It hovers over my outdoor table like an extra umbrella.

The redwood resides in the back of my neighbor's double lot, previously owned by husband-and-wife landscape architects. They weren't the ones who planted the tree far from the 1910 house—the tree's too tall for just one generation—but they did the underplanting. There are several Japanese maple, another popular Berkeley tree due to its Craftsman aesthetic; a forest of tree-sized camelias with pink blush flowers, one of whom reaches over my fence; and clusters of agapanthus, the famed Lily of the Nile, so prolific they're considered a gas-station plant yet remain exotic to my formerly East Coast eyes. Thankfully, my neighbor and her husband leave the back lot "wild," devoid of play structures or patios or buildings, even though they could easily slip in another building in this neighborhood of million-dollar cottages. Instead, I look out on a small piece of Eden.

The girls sometimes play there. We started the habit of passing bags containing candy, strawberries and small gifts over the fence, using string tied to a redwood branch. Because their property is about two feet higher than mine, and we have a retaining wall, we sometimes talk through the fence, unable to see one another. Once, they pulled themselves up the fence to talk face to face, their heads bobbing as they struggled to hang on. Their Lab has also put her head over the fence so I can pet her, along with a new Australian shepherd puppy. Even the dogs know that reaching out over the fence is the essence of being neighborly.

IV.

When house hunting in Berkeley, I marveled at the number of redwoods that had been planted, mostly in the hills. At one house we liked, a redwood was planted next to the garage, dwarfing it and buckling its foundation. I envisioned the garage as a studio for my husband's music or a guest house. "That tree should come down," I said, in homeowner mode. We echoed that statement at many houses, where redwoods took up too much

Westward expansion had fetishized all the new flora and fauna for the East Coast and European émigrés. In a country that favors the biggest and the best, postcards showed trees so large, early cars could drive through them. Redwoods became a symbol of the primordial West, representations of steely strength and magnificence, even while they were commodified and felled by the millions, creating place names like Stumptown and the prolific picnic tables found in campsites and, ironically, the wilds of the suburban backyard.

real estate, raised sidewalks or patios, separated stairs or turned a backyard into a shady, needle-covered mess. We couldn't imagine buying that house and not cutting that tree down.

But redwoods are considered sacred here. Removing one requires permits, approvals and the potential scorn of neighbors, even if that tree rains down branches in their backyards. A neighbor across the street told me how upset she was that the owners behind her had taken down their redwood to get more sun in their yard. "That tree has been around longer than we all have!" this tree hugger shouted, as if that were a good reason. And I, who has written about gardens, even ecology at times, responded, "Yeah, but the redwood is not exactly a backyard tree." If people are so worried about losing a tree, just plant another one. A tree that won't grow so tall. A tree that can be pruned. A tree that can be controlled. We aren't in the wilderness, but a densely packed city. That redwood, like the others in my neighborhood, was planted when my property contained a store that delivered groceries by horse-drawn wagon.

My position on redwoods was bolstered during a talk on Berkeley history. During the Q&A, someone asked what the city looked like when settlers arrived. Was it all redwoods? No, the historian said. Berkeley's terrain was mostly grasses, oak trees and bay laurels near the streams. Many of the redwoods now in suburban Berkeley were planted.

What was the attraction? Why did these homeowners plant such backyard behemoths? There was the symbolism. Westward expansion had fetishized all the new flora and fauna for the East Coast and European émigrés. In a country that favors the biggest and the best, postcards showed trees so large, early cars could drive through them. Redwoods became a symbol of the primordial West, representations of steely strength and magnificence, even while they were commodified and felled by the millions, creating place names like Stumptown and the prolific picnic tables found in campsites and, ironically, the wilds of the suburban backyard.

Plus, there were no backyards at the time. When recently arrived Berkeleyans began planting the trees in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the city was semi-rural, with plenty of land between lots. Still, some made mistakes that are in evidence today. In one of those man-versus-nature scenarios, some couldn't accurately anticipate

the repercussions of their acts: that the six-foot sapling a dozen feet from their front door would dwarf their house—and everything else in the neighborhood.

Which my tree does. Because it's so close to the fence, and my house is as close as three feet from another neighboring fence, we are packed in here. Layers of luscious greenery soften the hard edges of fences and rooflines. A fireman's nightmare. The redwood, during its seasonal dumps, affects not only my backyard, but three others as well. During the last drop on an unseasonably hot October afternoon, I saw redwood twigs on the roof of my neighbor's backyard cottage, a fire hazard. Their landscaper blew them off a few days later. I don't know what the other neighbors do: the twigs land in unused parts of their yards. Though I don't keep an overly tended garden, I do rake up the layer of redwood deposits. Redwoods are among the trees most suited to surviving wildfires, yet their highly flammable droppings will feed the flames.

V.

In *The Overstory,* a novel that incorporates the latest tree science, a centuries-old redwood named Mimas is the starring tree character. As the wise matriarch of the forest, she alerts other trees to fire danger or drought through the fungal networks at the tip of her root systems. The very roots that are the bane of gardeners and foundations make up a vast communication network connecting the tree to others in the vicinity: the old oak in another neighbor's yard that hangs over my fence; the many Japanese maples whose saplings spring from my beds and flower pots. I wondered if my neighbor's redwood had reached out to the *Tristaniopsis laurina*, a compact Australian tree we had planted. And what would she say? *Welcome, stranger. This is how we survive here.*

I imagine my husband's wish coming true. On the ground, I would gain a twig-free yard. The tree is north of my fence and my house, so it does not cast shade. I look out of my second-floor windows. Without the tree I would see a row of Craftsman houses on the street perpendicular to mine. I would see my neighbor's jungle gym, their deck and the backyards of those other houses. Five homes would be impacted by the loss. Here I was thinking selfishly as a homeowner. But what else would be lost? The owls that come seasonally with their call-and-response. Squirrels that treat the redwood's four-foot diameter as a vertical race track. Myriad birds and insects that call the tree's branches, roots and trunk home. On the cellular level, the neighborhood trees would lose a being that had reached out and shared wisdom and chemicals. Without the tree, the bulging root in the grass would rot away, creating a level lawn.

VI.

My neighbor with the girls invites me to her birthday party. This provides an opportunity to check out the redwood in person. During a lull in the adult conversation, I ask if the girls could take me down to the Mother Tree. I suddenly called it that, internalizing the title of the book *Finding the Mother Tree,* the nonfiction counterpart to *The Overstory*, by the Canadian forest ecologist Suzanne Simard. She describes mother trees as trees that act as central hubs, increasing seedling survival by sharing the excess carbon

and nitrogen through the mycorrhizal network. I liked how Simard, too, describes tree society as matriarchal.

The girls lead the way. Leaving the gravel, the deck, and the flower beds behind us, they fly down a few wooden steps into the wild part of their yard, and I had to look up, marveling at the layers of canopy. Camelia. Japanese maple. Redwood. I'm in a forest. The new perspective disorients me. This is what the girls see when they pop their heads over the fence. This is what their dogs see when they stand on hind legs. There is my house, looking tall and modern in the moonlight, so close to all this nature, yet clearly in the suburbs. I put my hands on the tree and tell the girls to do so.

It was a Californian who told me about "earthing," a concept that advocates hugging trees and walking shoeless to ground ourselves. Though this movement involves selling products like "grounding mats," the idea still makes sense to me. I put my hands on the trunk and concentrate. The girls follow. "Can you feel anything?" I ask. They remain a few seconds before flitting away, back to their friends. Maybe they didn't feel anything, but I did. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to take down a redwood.



Joanne Furio is a writer originally from New York and, despite living in California since 2005, still in awe of the West. Her creative nonfiction and literary interviews have appeared in *Craft Literary*, *Believer*, *Catapult*, *Juked*, *Panoply*, and the *Cumberland River Review*, among other publications. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Saint Mary's College of California. She also does the books coverage at *Berkeleyside*, the online news platform in Berkeley, California, where she now lives. For more on Joanne's work, visit www.joannefurio.com.

Richard Romney, Fawn Brodie, and the Unsolved Mystery of Richard M. Nixon

Val Holley

In a forthcoming group biography of pre-Stonewall gay Mormons who fled the farm and migrated to Manhattan, I examine the lives of three individuals who made themselves important in New York cultural circles. One of them, Richard Adams Romney (1918-2009), grew up in a Mormon orphanage, the Lund Home for Boys, in Centerville, Davis County. In World War II, he served in the Coast Guard Reserve in and around Manhattan, and moved there after his discharge in 1944. His good looks ensured that he would attract talented men in the arts such as novelist Christopher Isherwood, artist Paul Cadmus, and maestro Leonard Bernstein. Romney's chief claim to fame was bringing W. H. Auden's epic poem, *The Age of Anxiety*, to Bernstein's attention and suggesting that he write an orchestral work based on it. Bernstein recognized the soundness of Romney's inspiration and soon composed his second symphony, naming it *The Age of Anxiety*.[1]



Richard Adams Romney in the Coast Guard Reserve, 1943

Romney's quirky charisma also had a bewitching effect on prominent women, most notably the wealthy but reclu-

sive heiress Alice Delamar, of Weston, Connecticut. Delamar adored Romney and for forty years gave him a monthly allowance. Another woman with whom he formed a notable friendship was Huntsville native Fawn McKay Brodie, one of the great authors and historians to emerge from Weber County. Brodie became prominent after the 1945 publication of *No Man Knows My History*, her biography of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, for which the Mormon Church excommunicated her. According to historian Gary Topping, from the outset of Brodie's biographical career she had a "natural gift" for psychology. Her books, Topping said, are "models" of psychobiography because the psychoanalysis is seamlessly merged with the biographical narrative.

Romney was excommunicated from the Mormon Church at his own request at age twenty-two, but maintained a keen interest in Mormon history, especially where his great-grandfather, Isaac Chauncey Haight, of Mountain Meadows Massacre notoriety, was concerned. In the summer of 1969, a friend at publisher Alfred A. Knopf, knowing of Romney's curiosity, slipped him an advance copy of *The Lion of the Lord: A Biography of Brigham Young*, by Stanley Hirshson. Romney objected to Hirshson's failure to consult Isaac Haight's diaries, which Romney had studied intently, and composed a petulant letter, transmitted to Hirshson via the Knopf friend.

The *New York Times* tapped Fawn McKay Brodie to review *The Lion of the Lord*. Brodie praised Hirshson's prodigious original research but found his perception of Brigham Young's character "undistinguished." When Romney spotted Brodie's review, he wrote to her at UCLA—where she was a senior lecturer in the history department—enclosing a copy of his own letter to Hirshson.[2] Saying he was one of her "greatest admirers," Romney introduced himself as Isaac Haight's great-grandson and confessed his aspiration to write about Haight with the "strength and scholarship [and] vivid portraiture you so beautifully achieved with Joseph Smith." Brodie replied that she was unfamiliar with Isaac Haight, but encouraged Romney to preserve the material he had collected and—as if he were her student at UCLA—urged him to write Haight's story, which "sounds like remarkable drama and tragedy."

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(Romney had not mentioned Haight's involvement in the Mountain Meadows Massacre.)

The April 1974 publication of Brodie's psychobiography *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*—the book that made her wealthy—prompted Romney to write again. After praising the book lavishly, he opined that Jefferson's absolute silence on the subject of Sally Hemings, his enslaved concubine, by whom he begat many children, was neither embarrassment nor denial. "Discretion," Romney wrote, "became a protective gesture of deep respect, not hiding."

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Fawn McKay Brodie, 1931. WSU Archives, courtesy Sarah Langsdon

Of all the letters Brodie must have received in reaction to *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*, Romney's stood out. Telling him she had read it several times, she asked permission to quote his observation on Jefferson's discretion. "It is a profound insight, beautifully stated," she wrote, "and I hope to be able to use it sometime in another paper or book." The real import of her letter, however, came in the next paragraph. "I have thought recently about writing a book on [Richard M.] Nixon," she asserted, "but I have the uneasy feeling that I would end up tarnished." Her mulling of a Nixon biography enthralled Romney, who for unknown reasons was himself curious about the thirty-seventh President. A shared compulsion to discern what made Nixon tick eventually transformed Brodie and Romney into devoted friends.

After the Watergate investigation prompted Nixon's resignation from the Presidency in August 1974, Romney wrote Brodie again, urging her to

undertake that Nixon biography. Any treatise she produced, he assured her, could be nothing short of monumental and would remain definitive in perpetuity. Nixon's farewell speech had been "drivel. . . all fireside mawkishness, the fire coming from natural gas." He believed that Nixon possessed neither humor nor taste, and was, "for want of a better word, psycho!"

However, he would not contact Brodie again until February 1977. His benefactress, Alice Delamar, had banned him from her homes in Connecticut and Palm Beach for chronic rude behavior towards other guests. (Luckily for Romney, Delamar's monthly checks kept coming.) His ensuing mental breakdown prompted him to move to Los Angeles, holed up in a rented apartment on Wilshire Boulevard—unemployed and seeing almost no one for six months. When he finally announced his presence to Brodie, he apologized for his 1974 letter (whose statement on Jefferson's discretion Brodie had asked to quote), explaining he wrote it "under the stress of an oncoming deep depression." He had recently completed two years of psychotherapy and absorbed the jargon of that discipline, which would now spill onto almost every page he ever wrote to Brodie.

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Romney had learned that she was now well underway on the project that would become her *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character*. His own ruminations on his lifelong quest for a hero had prompted him to wonder who Nixon's heroes could have been: "Who has ever sensitively arrested his attention?" Nixon had always seemed to be "an extreme oddball," Romney opined. "His sexuality must be most revealing." Remarkably, Romney came out to Brodie: "During my life, I have often had to view the variety of relationships as well as styles of male homosexuality."

Brodie was already exploring a Nixon relationship that some observers assumed was homosexual: his curious bond with Miami businessman Bebe Rebozo. She knew that White House chief of staff Alexander Haig had mocked the Nixon-Rebozo friendship as homosexual, but dismissed Haig's gibes as sophomoric. To explore the possibility seriously, she turned to Dr. Jolyon West of the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, and Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker, a therapist whom Nixon had consulted about stress. West, who had not treated Nixon, failed to see any evidence that Nixon and Rebozo were more than friends who enjoyed each other's company. Peremptorily, West stated that Nixon, as an adult, had never indulged in homosexual contact

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with a man. Brodie turned to Hutschnecker for a second opinion. Unlike Welch, Hutschnecker did not categorically rule out the possibility of relations between Nixon and Rebozo, but merely said, over and over, that he could not be of help on the topic.

Romney's February 1977 letter, rambling and occasionally incoherent, surely struck Brodie as strange. But the coincidence of receiving his speculations on the nature of Nixon's sexuality just as she was exploring the same topic must have seemed like a stroke of luck. It arrived soon after she had contacted George Reedy, a former White House press secretary, who stated that the Nixon-Rebozo friendship was "the most important unsolved mystery in Nixon's life." Brodie regarded Reedy's statement as a challenge. She was no stranger to reading against the archive, a process that had been critical to her work on Thomas Jefferson. But to discern clues invisible to the heterosexual eye, she enlisted Richard Romney.

"I should like very much to see you," she told him. They met for lunch at UCLA's Faculty Club. After comparing notes on growing up in northern Utah, they turned to the thirty-seventh President. Brodie cited Nixon's inner rage, which stemmed, she believed, from "his conviction that he was not truly a man." Romney said that if he were hunting for clues to homosexuality in Nixon, he would delve into Rebozo's proximity to Nixon in times of crisis, when Nixon's defenses would have been weak. He also suggested scrutinizing Nixon's secretary, Rosemary Woods (whom he labeled a "fag hag") and the male friendships she enjoyed before working for Nixon. As her boss's power increased, Romney felt sure Woods had been forced to drop male friends who knew too much about Nixon. That would be, Romney said, "a telling indiscretion that only the homosexual community might catch."

Their discussion of intimate topics at lunch secured Romney's "gay best friend" status in Brodie's life. She appreciated his compliments and saw poetic justice in befriending a dis-



Romney in Paris, 1948

Their discussion of intimate topics at lunch secured Romney's "gay best friend" status in Brodie's life. She appreciated his compliments and saw poetic justice in befriending a dissenter whose surname radiated Mormon prominence on par with McKay. She had followed Michigan governor George Romney's rise in national Republican politics in the 1960s with keen interest, because she suspected the Mormon Church (i.e., her uncle, church president David O. McKay) might view a revelation rolling back its then-prohibition on black men holding its priesthood as a fair swap for boosting a Mormon's chances to become President of the United States.

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"Let's have lunch together again," Brodie wrote. She wanted to discuss two new interviews she had just held, and to hear Romney's ideas on how to treat the gossip about Nixon: "I simply don't want to be the first to discuss the evidence." Brodie asked him, when they met again, to eyeball a 1971 letter to Rebozo from Richard Danner, a former FBI agent, which she had located in the vast Watergate archives. Unlike Nixon's stilted, cautious letters to Rebozo, Danner's was full of "oblique banter," she noted, and Danner used the phrase "straighten [you] out" three times. To Romney, the Danner letter—with its offers to cook meals for Rebozo while staying with him—was a smoking gun. "The Rebozo homosexuality is plain and certain in the correspondence with the FBI agent who shacked up with him from time to time," he concluded.

In August, Romney moved to Montecito, near Santa Barbara, having spotted a "sudden listing" for a former chauffeur's quarters "that fit the bill perfectly." The move was an escape from Los Angeles. "I was really very unhappy [there], in a very sad daze most of the time," he explained to Brodie. "Your friendship meant more than you could know." That his landlady was Virginia Cherrill Martini, the first wife of Cary Grant, filled him with delight. Montecito's quick rise from the sea to mountains reminded him of "the eastern boundary of my confined childhood at Centerville."

As he had hoped, the dark clouds of his depression had begun to dissipate. He felt like he had "crawled out of an ashcan. . . I haven't felt so well in five years." He was meeting people who were friends of his New York friends, which he found "reassuring." Yet he also reported purchasing a cemetery plot in Santa Barbara, indicating feelings of melancholy still troubled him.



Richard Romney and George Romney, second cousins once-removed, at Alice Delamar's Palm Beach, Florida, home, Easter Sunday, Apr. 1, 1956. George Romney was then president of American Motors Corp. and six years away from becoming governor of Michigan.

"For a man with no family left save for an elder sister it was quite a natural thing to do," he wrote, "even though it made new friends there [Santa Barbara] give me the most peculiar looks."

His Montecito relocation seemed to liberate Romney from earlier notions of reserve. He mentioned his therapist's warnings of the pitfalls of manic highs and depressed lows, not realizing that his theories on Nixon were now sounding quite manic. The former President, he asserted, had "a genital inferiority complex. . . . There is something wrong with Nixon's penis—or at least he feels so, which amounts to the same thing." A new area of exploration, he suggested, could be what Nixon wanted done with his body after death, in light of instructions other Presidents had given for burial and headstone inscriptions. As for Rebozo, "I think we both are way beyond any doubt of [his] sexual style and drive."

Romney wanted to treat Brodie to lunch on his next visit to Los Angeles, but after a year in California, he still had no wheels. "I don't know how you can live in California without a car," she wrote with mild exasperation, as she wanted their meetings to continue. "I trust that eventually you will get one and then pay us a visit at Pacific Palisades." She wanted to give him a photo of Nixon while in the Navy, which she said reminded her of "many things you told me about your own war experience."

Having unearthed no evidence of homosexuality in Nixon, Brodie turned to Bebe Rebozo. Applying the same painstaking chronological reconstruction she had wielded in her biography of Thomas Jefferson, Brodie discovered that Rebozo had been with Nixon roughly one out of every ten days of his Presidency. She found that Nixon ordered Rebozo's frequent visits to the White House not to be logged in, to preclude embarrassment.

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She began looking into Rebozo's past, realizing that indications of homosexuality were more likely to have been unguarded in his youth. A 1970 *Boston Globe* article, "Bebe Rebozo's Search for Machismo," contained an apparent typographical error placing the words "pervert" and "Bebe" next to each other. Brodie sent the *Globe* article to Romney. "There is some kind of slip here," she noted. "I would greatly value your comments."

Romney sent a four-page typed, single-spaced letter analyzing "Bebe Rebozo's Search for Machismo." He devoted several paragraphs to guessing what the missing words before "pervert" might have been. The article revealed that Rebozo had secretly married a high school girlfriend, Claire, when both were eighteen years old; Claire had the marriage annulled three years later. By marrying secretly, Rebozo "was shielding himself from himself," Romney inferred. He told Brodie he knew "so many successful marriages between straight women and homosexual men where the clarity of their individual conveniences [is] sincerely and openly motivated."

"When I begin to write about Rebozo," Brodie replied, "I am especially impressed by what you write about the early marriage, and what kind of security this would have meant for him." Ominously, she informed him that her husband, Bernard, had suffered from an "inexplicable swelling" in his face, which doctors initially diagnosed as cancerous. But then they found "no malignancy, not even a benign tumor."

Life in Montecito continued to have salubrious effects on Romney's psychological health. "It has been a long, dark passage, indeed," he exhaled. "I'm surprised I have a friend left." Yet he had made new friends, including "many safely and successfully married [gay] men, who hang together in enjoyable safety! The wives and women are protective because they have as much to lose!" He had finally bought a car, a barely-used 1971 Cadillac Brougham, at an estate sale, and was working as Christmas-season help at J. W. Robinson's department store. (The Cadillac had been a steal at twenty-two hundred dollars, but Romney did not tell Brodie that Alice Delamar had sent him the money for it.) Now that he was mobile, he asked when he could visit Los Angeles and meet Bernard Brodie, and reciprocate in treating her to lunch. She drew a map to their house in Pacific Palisades, in case he should travel

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Richard Romney's snapshot of George and Lenore Romney and their children, Palm Beach, Florida, Easter Sunday, Apr. 1, 1956. On the right is 9-year-old Mitt Romney, whose hat was a gift from Richard.

south. The Brodie family still held out hope that Bernard would recover.

Circumstances never permitted Romney to visit the Brodie home. His final meeting with her occurred on his turf. At UC-Santa Barbara, Brodie delivered the annual Corle Lecture on April 27, 1978. Her topic was Nixon's attitudes towards lying, death, and other concepts as formed in his childhood. Staying at the Santa Barbara Biltmore, she invited Romney for breakfast the following morning. "We sat under an umbrella on the patio, neither of us stopping jabbering for a second, all laughs, but in all seriousness," he recalled. He said her observation that morning, that "We will never get away from the Mormons!" would forever make him chuckle. (A ward meeting house had just been built near her home.)

Romney had apparently expected his 1976 move to southern California to be permanent. At the time, he had shipped all his furniture from New York, keeping it in storage, on the assumption he would buy a home. But despite his fondness of Montecito, he returned to the east coast in November 1978—not to Manhattan, which he could no longer afford, but Wilton, Connecticut. It was close to Alice Delamar's estate, for which he was nostalgic and ever hopeful that he might charm her into reconsidering her edict.

To Brodie, he had occasionally mentioned aspects of New York that he missed—for example, the ease in locating out-of-print books in Manhattan antiquarian haunts—but his telling her of his planned departure was abrupt. "I didn't come west to live, obviously, but to die, and somehow I survived," he wrote. He said he would simply walk away from the cemetery plot he had purchased (on an installment plan). He had not written for several months, and Brodie had been consumed by her husband's worsening lymphoma. They would apparently never discuss the Mormon Church's June 9, 1978, recession from its ban on ordaining black men to its priesthood.

While Romney was moving, Bernard Brodie died. To Fawn Brodie, the loss was "insupportable." Romney's being in Connecticut, at least, brought back to her the pleasure she and Bernard had taken in the beauty of their property in that state before relocating to Pacific Palisades. She waded back into the Nixon project in the winter of 1979. In vice-presidential papers she had just located a small file of "guarded and brief" correspondence between Rebozo and Nixon. Acknowledging

that the letters appeared innocuous, she nonetheless asked Romney to evaluate them, as "there may be some material I am overlooking."

Romney did discern interesting meanings between the lines of Nixon's notes to Rebozo, but they had to do with White House protocol, and even he had to admit the letters were taintless. While snowed in at his Connecticut rental that winter, he had plenty of time to write pages and pages of speculations, and to clip articles on Nixon from magazines such as *Playboy* or even *Oui* that Brodie would not have seen otherwise. At this point, she yelled "Uncle." Trying gently to discourage him, she explained she had amassed far more information than could possibly be included in the book. Although she planned to be in New York in April, she advised him that her time would be entirely consumed with interviews and National Book Award meetings.

In their final exchange of letters, Romney shared the seed of an idea from Rollo May's *Psychology and the Human Dilemma*. The critical question with Oedipus, May asserted, was not his murderous deeds but whether he would recognize what he had done. Romney pointed out the parallel to Nixon. Brodie was impressed. She promised to "ponder the idea you have handled so perceptively, that Nixon cannot be a tragic figure because he refuses to discover the truth about himself. This is really a wonderfully apt idea, and captures something I have been trying to put into words but never could formulate properly."

Brodie's death from lung cancer in January 1981 was a blow to Romney, who "had counted on [her] to be my friend for the rest of my life." To her daughter, Pamela, he wrote, "As I began to recover [in California], Fawn's understanding and camaraderie [were] decisive in this without question."

When *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* was published late in 1981, a pleasant surprise awaited Romney. "Her farewell nod to me, unexpected, was including my name among the contributors of her Nixon biography," he revealed. "When I noted my name, it was a searing recognition of how much she cared." Brodie's biography hewed to responsible scholarship and did not allege that the Nixon-Rebozo relationship was homosexual. She merely marshalled the evidence of its mysterious nature that had baffled George Reedy and many others.

Romney made a rare (and final) visit to Salt Lake City in 1984 to explore

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the Utah Historical Society's holdings relating to Isaac Haight. Owing to a crisis of confidence, he never did write the biography of Haight that he had envisioned for most of his life. In his final residence, an upstate New York nursing home, he taped a photo of Haight to the wall of his room. He died on his ninety-first birthday in a Troy, New York, hospital. Some years earlier, he had sold his personal papers to the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Letters to him from such prominent persons as Fawn Brodie and Leonard Bernstein are in the collection.

Notes

1. For more on the Richard Romney-Leonard Bernstein relationship, see Val Holley, "1947: Tales of Tanglewood," *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, vol. 117, Nov.-Dec. 2024, https://glreview.org/article/1947-tales-of-tanglewood/.

2. Brodie became a tenured professor of history in 1971.

This article is adapted from *Slouching Towards Gotham: A Gay Mormon Example*, forthcoming from the University of Utah Press.

Fawn McKay Brodie's letters to Romney are archived in the Richard Adams Romney Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University. Romney's letters to Brodie can be found in the Fawn McKay Brodie Collection, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Suggestions for further reading: Fawn M. Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character*; Gary Topping, *Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History;* Newell Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer's Life.*



Val Holley is the author of *25th Street Confidential: Drama, Decadence, and Dissipation Along Ogden's Rowdiest Road* (winner of the Utah Book Award in nonfiction) and *Frank J. Cannon: Saint, Senator, Scoundrel* (winner of the Utah Historical Society's Juanita Brooks Best Book Award). He lives in New York City.

Eight Hikes and One Drive

Leath Tonino

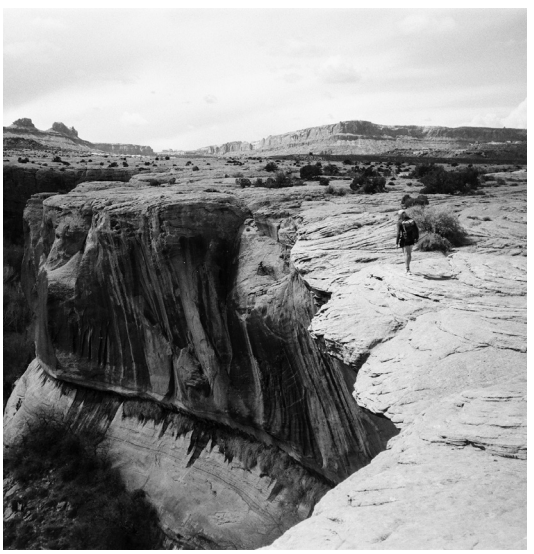
1. BREATHING

The canyon was hanging, blocked from below by a polished, hundred-foot pour-off. After substantial climbing and contouring and backtracking and scheming, he managed to gain access from above, via one of a dozen lateral feeder slots—an extremely circuitous route, but functional, quasi-sane.

Late, cold, the sun lost behind clouds and a few snowflakes slanting, he jogged up the wash, jumping gardens of cryptobiotic soil and dodging the rare juniper's spiky branch, driven by a mixed energy, part anticipation, part anxiety. *What's concealed in the secret twists at the head of this warren? Will I have the intelligence, the discipline, to quit and turn around if some definite obstacle doesn't force the issue?*

A door opened. Another door opened. Pale orange stone bulged, forming an hourglass, and without hesitating he ducked through, daypack snagging, releasing with a violent rasp. That was troubling, geology restraining the body while curiosity raced onward, an indication that, indeed, he lacked intelligence, discipline, a quitting instinct.

More doors opened. More doors opened. A hall became a room. A room became a hall. And then, finally, thankfully, he hit the mandatory stopping point, the farthest chamber, an austere silo, cylindrical and deep, with a black crack in the floor.



Arches National Park, Utah, 2024. Photo credit: Forest Woodward

A crack linked to mysterious lungs. A crack exhaling snowflakes at the rate of approximately three per second.

Blood rushing my temples,
heart pulsing in my chapped lips,
I put my mouth to it,
drew a long breath.

2. BUSHTITS

Shy of a mile into the twenty-mile hike, aware that he'd gotten a sluggish start, that darkness would fall earlier than expected, that the clock was ticking, he nevertheless lingered—stupid idiot, inspired fool—with a shrubby pinyon pine.

Really, you shouldn't linger, a voice said. *Giddyup. Hop to it. Squiggly canyons of sand and shadow and jumbled boulders and backcountry uncertainty ought to be dealt with in broad daylight, duh, and November's broad daylight is pretty damn slim.* But another voice, the wing-flutter of a bushtit gleaning insects, gently disagreed, and a second bushtit added its wing-flutter in support, as did a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth, a seventh.

On tiptoes, he approached the tree and pressed his face to a scratchy window. The intricate space within was busy with tiny bodies, eyes and beaks and feathers, inverted, sideways, airborne, and it was busy with perches just abandoned, too, clusters of needles bobbing, twigs trembling. The intricate space was animated. The intricate space was alive with vibrations.

Might the erect hairs on a neck, to a super-responsive ear, sound rather like wing-flutter?

I held the position
until the flock departed,
vanished one by one,
and everything went still.

3. THIS SIMPLE FAITH

Pushing up a scrappy drainage, broken red slabs to the right, sheer red cliff to the left, rubble in heaps, the thought was steady, synced to his body.

This daily quest.
Always alert, even if tired and hungry and effort-addled.
Sentry duty. Prepared to register whatever, prepared to receive.
This simple faith. This conviction, this belief.
That each excursion holds something you'd never dream to ask for or actively seek.
A snap, a shimmer. A taste, a gulp.
Danger, goofy laughter.
Dramatic pause.
Could be big, obvious, megafauna or the neon sunset.
Could be small, subtle, patterns in dust, how a cloud divides and reforms, the bracelet-tickle of a lizard darting over my wrist.

He kept pushing, thirty minutes, an hour, and the thought hushed, language displaced by the difficulty of finding a forward path. The drainage tightened, insisting that he scrape against buffaloberry bushes, squeeze into the murky triangles where leaning boulders met, scramble dicey ledges. Afternoon turned to evening and the sweat on his spine turned to a chill. Pushing turned to acceptance, a nonnegotiable alcove, a dead end.

It wasn't a dead end, though, because a damp seam grew maidenhair ferns and a faint star hung on the twilight sky.

Because the walls
echoed and echoed
when I shouted.

4. LAVENDER BRAIN

The wash curled him into the Chinle Formation, a million-crease basin of grays and gray-greens and greeny-

purples, crumbling, soft-edged, strange. He moved at the slowest possible pace, wanting to truly feel the slide between colors, the textures emerging from textures.

Ten minutes rounding a bend—pausing to crouch and stare, pausing to graze the palm of a fleece glove over loose grains—delivered him to a hemispherical slope, elaborately wrinkled. *A lavender brain? A semi-hollow brain with a hatch at its base? A place-brain that thinks what?* Excited to learn, he unshouldered the daypack and crawled in, ate a snack, twiddled his thumbs.

The brain was apparently thinking *lavender* and little else. Or maybe the brain was thinking nothing and he was the one thinking *lavender*. Or maybe the brain was thinking *man thinking lavender, cramped and bored, granola clinging to his beard.*

He brushed the granola away and thought about other snacks. He thought about scorpions. He thought about petrified wood. He thought about stiffness, an achy knee. He thought about leaving but opted against it, and that led him to question who had opted, who was calling the shots, who was boss.

A proper autumn morning, temperature flirting with freezing, overcast, moody, he thought about skulls, how they house brains, armor them, keep them secure.

I pictured spitting rain,
sharp sleet, rowdy weather,
lavender mud.

5. HEY BUDDY

They were spoken before he knew it, the first words in hours, the first words all day, but the chipmunk, quicker than his quick salutation—*hey buddy*—had already bolted.

He continued walking, deeper into the winding arroyo, deeper into the breezy quiet, and it occurred again, a raven and a second spontaneous, half-conscious greeting.

Nah, this is more than a mere greeting, he thought, overhearing himself a third time, twenty minutes on, encountering a spider. *Or is it that a greeting is more than a mere hello? Is it an acknowledgement of another's existence? Is a means of recognizing that no matter how dissimilar our bodies, our minds, our lives, we're in*



Colorado River & Lake Powell, Utah, 2021. Photo credit: Forest Woodward

this together, this home of sediment and weather, this eating and sleeping and shitting and traveling and surviving and dying? The alternative would be what? To address these animals with a condescending tone, from a stance of superiority? To see in them only pure difference? To outright ignore them?

Later, lounging in the arroyo, butt to the ground, a brittle cottonwood leaf rattled past. *Hey buddy*. A wispy cloud drifted east, masking the sun, flaming silver. *Hey buddy.* The phrase was constantly on the tongue's tip, he realized, primed to spread goodwill, camaraderie, fellowship.

At dusk, the rising moon crested a distant mesa, catching him off guard.

Dude!

6. WISHING FOR AN ANT

Trotting along a bench of naked Wingate Sandstone between canyons, a familiar shortcut, he was stunned, despite having passed it repeatedly, by an odd erosional feature, and dropped to all fours, nosed in close.

It was a yard square, nubby, peachy-pink, the cleanest, awesomest micro-maze of inch-high pedestals and thrones, zigzagging ramps and coiling corridors, intersections and choices and blind corners and surprises. The desert in miniature, that's what he saw, a diorama, not representational but impressionistic, capturing the quality of detail and excess. And that seeing charged him, instantly, with a hopeless electric yearning to scale every summit, peek around every bend, spend an hour or a day studying each piece of the puzzle, spend a lifetime or five learning how such a confusing whole meshes together, harmonizes, symphonically hums.

Gestalt. Sum greater than the parts. Two plus two equals seven, thirteen, infinity.

He wished for sensitive feet, quivering antennae, a shiny ant to explore as his proxy.

To feel this beauty fully requires the slow absorption of touch, the tracing and retracing of shapes and volumes, a tactile engagement beyond looking.

Of course, his pockets were empty, no ant to deploy.

The best I could muster
was an index finger,
thicker than the slots,
taller than the towers,
calloused, sort of numb.

7. TOO FAST

The tank was thirsty, the gauge on E, so he exited the wilderness for the first time in three weeks. *A car ride might be fun. Fresh views. A bag of chips or an ice cream sandwich. Right?*

Wrong. Cruising the pavement, westward to town, fiddling with the radio, searching the static with one hand while steering with the other, he felt nervy, overwhelmed. *You honestly are incompetent, a loser in many regards, grossly out of practice with normal modern life. Do you remember how to use a debit card? Will you remember to say hi and thanks to the clerk?*

Because he'd postponed the errand until the end of day, the sun was low, an inch off the horizon and sinking, the smudgy, bug-gut windshield a chaos of brassy explosions. The road curved a bit, curved a bit more, and suddenly he couldn't see the centerline, the gravel shoulder, the ditch, anything beyond the dashboard.

An invisible truck screamed past.

What is the real world and what is the realer world?

He decelerated—forty, thirty, twenty-five, but even fifteen seemed sketchy, too fast. The radio locked into reception, news of the riven nation, the sick and suffering, the fires and drought, then fuzzed back into static.

Forget ice cream and chips—
do you remember how
to find the brake?

8. JACKRABBIT

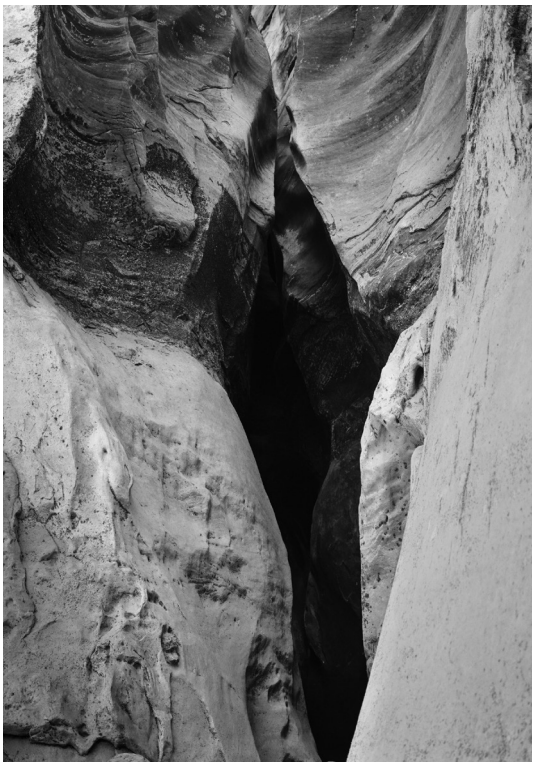
He'd been wandering the white domes, the swells and plunges of Navajo Sandstone, for a surreal hour, for an eternity, when a jackrabbit, all legs and ears and speed, burst from the perfect statuesque calm that was her out-in-the-open hiding place.

Somehow that image of her streaky darting, her blinking escape, was with him as he wandered another mile of bald slickrock, and then another, and then another. And somehow it was with him as he ascended, descended, stemmed a chimney, circumambulated a fin. And somehow it was with him as he sat on the rim of a scooped dish, drinking water, disoriented, and hot.

How weird, how sweet. That a black-tailed jackrabbit running away from a human can be a black-tailed jackrabbit running toward a human, running into a human, running through a human.

Sitting there, drinking, dazed, she kept fleeing, running, trying but failing to disappear, to merge with the sprawl of stone. He was the sprawl of stone.

There was nowhere for her to go
and no way to communicate
she was safe.



Glen Canyon, Arizona, 2021. Photo credit: Forest Woodward

9. LAST HOUR

Last hour of last hike, last minutes of low gold light, last canyon's last mile, last chance to pause, take a piss, take it in, and who should appear, just then, precisely then, initially in ears as hoof against rock, then in eyes as leaping body, landing body, leaping body, but a burly ram, horns huge and spiraled and glinting. The ram traversed a mess of talus skirting a shattered cliff so easily—so efficiently, so gracefully—that the distinct, isolated leaps were one fluid motion, and this one fluid motion was flush with stillness.

Tracking the ram's progress, he revisited in a flash all the vivid stillnesses that together composed the month now concluding, all the midnight con-

stellations and black-coffee dawns and blustery squalls and pictograph panels and prickly pears and northern flickers and precarious hoodoos and nameless hues and parched potholes and sparkling veins. All that he'd poked into and lazed beside and peered over and never possessed. All that he'd reluctantly kissed goodbye.

Perhaps this will stick. Perhaps this will be an exception to the rule of loss, change, erasure, the rule of life supplanting life, moments erasing moments. Perhaps this desert bighorn, his tremendous haunches, his gliding muscled fur, his stillness backdropped by eons of stone, everything glowing, everything glowing brighter, everything glowing brighter and brighter before fading, perhaps this will become the place's poem, song, celebration, the memento I carry forever, the keepsake I cherish. Perhaps his leaving will stay. Perhaps we'll meet again on my deathbed.

The ram was out of view, already gone, and the low gold light was going in a hurry.

I grinned and shook my head
at such preposterous thinking—
at such incredible luck.

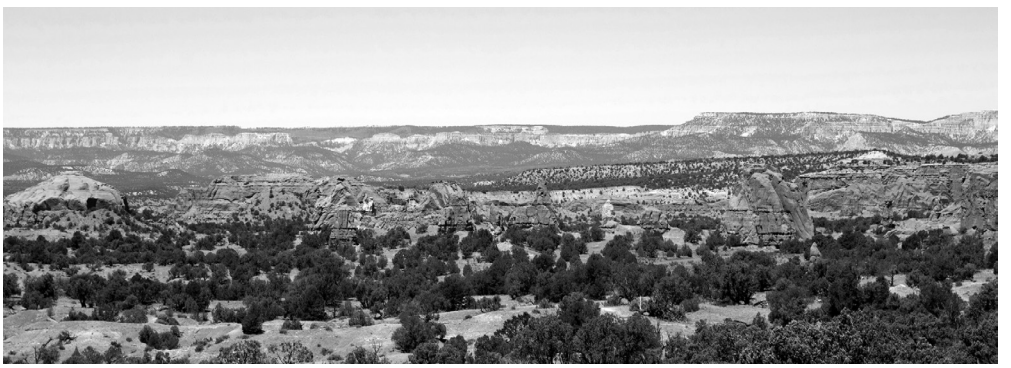


Leath Tonino is the author of two essay collections about the outdoors, most recently *The West Will Swallow You*. He lives at 9,000 feet in Colorado.

READING THE WEST

read-ing [from ME reden, to explain, hence to read] – vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

STATE PARKS



Kodachrome Basin State Park, Cannonville, UT, 2024. Photo credit: Zoshua Colah on Unsplash

A recent article in *The New York Times* lauded state parks as good alternatives to the national parks. Cuts to the National Park Service suggest that visitors at many of the most popular destinations may face long waits, large crowds, and unexpected closures.

. . . [S]tate parks, which are run and funded separately from national parks, offer comparable landscapes, wildlife, and experiences – often with fewer crowds and lower fees.

There are more than 9,800 state parks, forests, preserves, and other sites, said Paul McCormack, the president of the National Association of State Park Directors. In 2022, state-run parks collectively welcomed 877 million visitors, Mr. McCormack said, compared with 332 million at the 433 N.P.S. sites.

. . . And many of them, it turns out, are not far from national parks, making them alternative destinations for an outdoorsy summer vacation. Here are several state parks within a three-hour drive of their national park doppelgängers.

Source: Prevost, Ruffin. "5 State Parks That Feel Like National Parks." *The New York Times*, 21 May 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/21/travel/state-parks-visit-colorado-nc-florida.html. Accessed 28 May 2025.

All of these parks are in the West: State Forest, Colorado; Snow Canyon, Utah; and Hot Springs, Wyoming.

STATE FOREST STATE PARK

This park is located in Walden, Colorado, about two hours from Rocky Mountain National Park. Its website states:

In 1965, a tour of the area with legislators, stakeholders, and Colorado Game, Fish and Parks representatives started the effort to create a new state park on the Colorado State Forest. In 1972, a lease was signed with the State Land Board to create State Forest State Park.

Known as the Moose-viewing capital of Colorado, the park opened the Moose Visitor Center in 1997. Today, State Forest State Park hosts well over 330,000 visitors a year.



North Diamond Peak, State Forest State Park, Colorado, 2017. Photo credit: Jeffrey Beall

"State Forest State Park." *Colorado Parks and Wildlife,* https://cpw.state.co.us/state-parks/state-forest-state-park.

SNOW CANYON STATE PARK

Snow Canyon State Park is located just northwest of St. George, Utah, about forty-five minutes from Zion National Park. An entry on its website observes the following:



Snow Canyon State Park, 2021. Photo credit: Jorge Salazar on Unsplash

Created in 1959, Snow Canyon has a long history of human use. Artifacts reveal the presence of people in Snow Canyon by 500 B.C. It is likely that humans have used this canyon for more than 10,000 years, from Paleoindian mammoth hunters to 19th-century settlers. Modern-day the canyon has been the site of Hollywood films such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, The Electric Horseman*, and* Jeremiah Johnson*. Originally called Dixie State Park, it was later renamed for Lorenzo and Erastus Snow, prominent pioneering Utah leaders.*

"Snow Canyon State Park." *Utah State Parks,* https://stateparks.utah.gov/parks/snow-canyon/.

HOT SPRINGS STATE PARK

Hot Springs State Park is less than 150 miles southeast of Yellowstone. It encompasses part of the town of Thermopolis, Wyoming. According to its website,

the Hot Springs State Park bison herd is the central herd for the Wyoming State Parks. During the late fall and winter months, the park bison are fed a daily supplement to insure good health. This feeding usually occurs at 8:30 a.m., giving the off-season visitor the unique opportunity to view the "Monarch of the Plains" up close.

"Hot Springs State Park." *Wyoming State Parks*, https://wyoparks.wyo.gov/index.php/about-hot-springs.

According to Leo Heit writing for *Wyoming*,

Native American tribes considered these springs sacred ground long before European settlers arrived. John Colter discovered them in 1807-1808 during his winter exploration of the region.



The travertine terraces of Hot Springs State Park in Thermopolis, Wyoming, along the Bighorn River. Photo credit: Acroterion, Wikimedia Commons, 2018

By the late 1800s, settlers had begun developing the area into a health resort. The site became Wyoming's first state park in 1897, marking the beginning of its public stewardship.

Before becoming a state park, the area was known as "Bah-gue-wana" or "smoking waters" by local Native American tribes. The town of Thermopolis itself got its name from the Greek words "thermo" (hot) and "polis" (city). . . .

The park exists thanks to a remarkable agreement. In 1896, Chief Washakie and the Eastern Shoshone tribe sold the land with one important condition: the springs must remain free and accessible to the public forever.

The treaty specified that "when this land ceases to be used as a public park, it reverts to the tribe." This forward-thinking provision has ensured that for over 125 years, anyone can experience the healing waters regardless of financial means.

Source: Heit, Leo. "Thanks to the Shoshone Tribe, Bathing In These Ancient Hot Springs Is Free to the World Forever." *WhenInYourState! Wyoming*, 1 April 2025, https://wheninyourstate.com/wyoming /thanks-to-the-shoshone-tribe-bathing-in-these-ancient-hot-springs-is-free-to-the-world-forever/.

NEWEST UTAH STATE PARK: UTAHRAPTOR

The Utahraptor State Park is located about fifteen miles northwest of Moab. Within the park's 6,500 acres is one of North America's largest dinosaur bone beds. During the 1930s, it was the site of the Dalton Wells Civilian Conservation Corps camp. For a time during World War II, the abandoned camp was used as an internment camp for Japanese American citizens. The site is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. According to a recent report for *KSLNewsRadio,*

the Dalton Wells bone bed will soon become a major feature of the new Utahraptor State Park. The finishing touches are being made to the park, which sits northwest of Moab.



Utahraptor State Park. Photo credit: Utah State Parks, https://stateparks.utah.gov/2022/05/06/new-camping-fees-coming-to-utahraptor-state-park/

The Utahraptor dinosaur and the armored Gastonia dinosaur were unearthed in the bone bed, and State Paleontologist James Kirkland said there may be many more discoveries there. . . .

The state park designation has been thirty years in the making, Kirkland said. The Utah Legislature created the park in 2021. Kirkland believes the Utahraptor name will bring people to the park, and he hopes it will one day become as well known as the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles.

During World War II, Japanese Americans were interned in the area. Letters from those internees were found that detail how they also looked for dinosaur bones. "The state park did dig up letters from the Japanese internees talking about climbing up the hill to look for dinosaur bones."

Source: Kikuchi, Tammy, "Utahraptor State Park Will Feature a Big Dinosaur Bone Bed." *KSLNewsRadio*, 11 March 2025, https://kslnewsradio.com/utah/utahraptor-state-park/2191555/.

EDITORIAL MATTER

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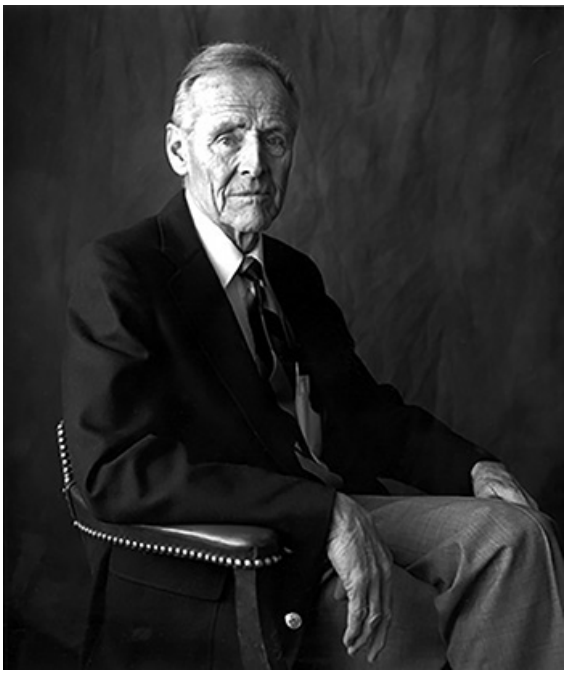
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