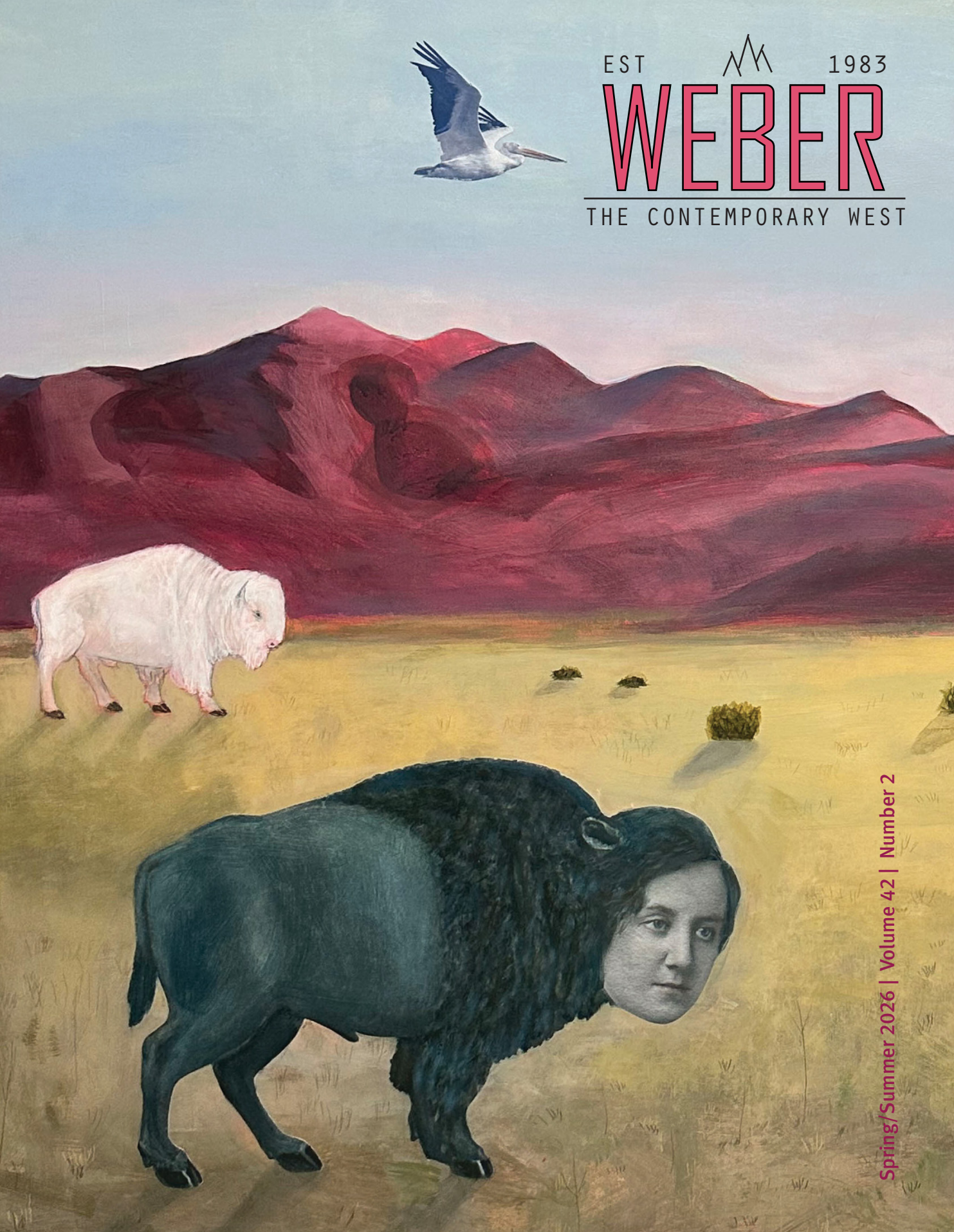


EST 1983

WEBER

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

Spring/Summer 2026 | Volume 42 | Number 2

EST 1983
WEBER
THE CONTEMPORARY WEST

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.

So Long, Farewell, Auf Wiedersehen, Good Luck

Nineteen years ago, when I had the privilege of assuming the editorship of *Weber*, I wrote that I wanted to take a moment to direct my gaze forward into the future and backward into the past. I acknowledged the achievements of the colleagues who preceded me and left me a distinguished editorial legacy; and I mapped out my own editorial plans—from a substantive conversation series, a sustained spotlight on the environment, and a regional focus on the (Intermountain) West complemented by international features—which have been the hallmark of many of our issues since. In this, my last, issue, readers will indeed find a mix of contributions that reflect the changing American West, our ever-shifting geopolitical landscape, and the vibrancy of the postcolonial diaspora. And while the journal was even then available online, I wanted to build on *Weber*'s print-based legacy and emphasize the aesthetic sensibilities that come with the haptic heft of a material publication, such as a regular art feature in color and innovative design changes. Through it all, I have had the privilege of working with an exceptional editorial board, who unfailingly offered incisive critique and instructive suggestions in selecting and shaping the content of each of our issues. A most profound thank you to them all, including our superb managing editor, Kristin Jackson.

Well, a lot has happened since. In 2025, the Utah Legislature passed H.B. 265, the "Higher Education Strategic Reinvestment" bill, which required public colleges and universities to cut their state-funded budgets by 10%. Its ripple effects throughout the system of higher education were and continue to be numerous, including the impact on the journal. What started as a tri-quarterly journal and eventually became a cost-efficient bi-annual will in the future appear as a once-a-year publication only. What is more, while the physical journal was intended as an ambassador for Weber State University throughout the region and beyond, budget cuts have made it necessary to reduce *Weber* to an on-line publication only. Such a trend may, I acknowledge, not be completely out of synch with the decline of the publishing industry (and be in the spirit of the journal's ecological focus), but print artifacts—once considered archaic leftovers—are once more seen as becoming increasingly important (literal) counterweights in a media ecology tilting evermore toward blinking screens and flickering signifiers.
The good news: the new, electronic-only journal will be newly electrified by my colleagues, professors Ukamaka Olisakwe and Sunni Wilkinson, who will take the journal in new and exciting directions.

Best wishes,

Michael Wutz

Cover art: Suzanne Sbarge, *Herd* (detail), mixed media on panel, 36" x 48," 2025



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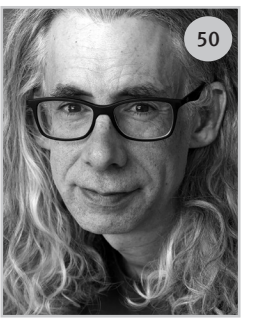
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“The Most Noxious Hierarchy”—Caste and/in Global India

Sri Craven



Yashica Dutt, also known as Yashica Dutt Nidaniya, is a Dalit journalist, activist, and the author of Coming Out as Dalit. *First published in India in 2019, the memoir won the country’s prestigious Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puruskar in 2020 and was released in the United States in 2024. She is also the founder of the Tumblr “Documents of Dalit Discrimination.” Dutt received her bachelor’s degree from St. Stephen’s College, New Delhi, and her master’s degree from Columbia University. She has worked as a journalist in India prior to moving to New York City, where she is currently based.*

Dalit describes the politicized identity of a number of socially oppressed groups within the Hindu caste hierarchy. The term refers to the political challenge mounted against the social, economic, and cultural marginalization and/or corporal and psychic violence experienced by Dalit people in India and the Indian diaspora. Dalits face discrimination and violence on the basis of purely invented ideas of inferiority that at times correlates with the African American experience, which has many historical intersections with Dalit activism, including Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s work.

This interview is anchored by an interest in caste's reigning power in the context of contemporary globalization and transnationalism. It was first published in the Indian journal The Riveraine Muse *(vol. 2, no. 1) and is reprinted here in shortened form. We express our gratitude to Debasish Lahiri, the journal's editor, Yashica Dutt, and Sri Craven for their permission to reprint.*

Congratulations on the U.S. publication of your memoir, Coming Out as Dalit*! Could we start with how you position yourself and what project you're involved with currently?*

I'm a Dalit journalist, I'm an author. (Laughs) I did not plan on writing a book. I think if I look back at 2016, writing a non-fiction memoir was really not on the agenda. You might know this about me— I ended up here as the result of a Dalit Ph.D. student at the University of Hyderabad, Rohit Vemula, taking his own life in 2016, or, as we call it, his institutional murder. (Visibly emotional) When Rohit left this realm, he left behind a really powerful and moving last letter in which he noted his dreams and hopes. The letter captures the unrealized potential that he had in abundance. This letter was circulated online. I was in the United States at that time, just having completed my journalism degree, which I moved here for in 2014. And for a lot of us Dalits, that letter was a clarion call, it was a lightning charge. It forced us to reckon with our own lives, our own identities, especially people like me who were not engaged with our caste, who were, in fact, hiding our caste and afraid of being found out. Rohit left something that induced so many of us to reflect on who we are. For me, that meant acknowledging the relative privilege I had as someone who was able to come to the U.S., and not be in India, where caste is so actively and visibly practiced. It also led me to do something about my own identity as Dalit. Identity was a massive question in the U.S. and across the world at that time. It still is. But, if you recall, 2014 was perhaps especially charged in terms of this conversation. I realized then that I wanted to create a safe space for Dalit people. I wanted to create a space where we wouldn't be judged, or questioned, or asked to prove our caste, but, instead, just experience solidarity and community. And in order to do that, I realized I needed to explain why I'm doing this, who I am.

So, I wrote a Facebook note saying that Rohit's life has been incredibly powerful, that what he left behind moved me so much that I want to acknowledge this truth that I've hidden from everyone, which is that I belong to a Dalit community, and one of the lowest at that—the manual scavenging caste community. I released that into the world, hoping to solicit other Dalit people to send in their stories, and I started a Tumblr called "Documents of Dalit Discrimination." I collected quite a few stories, until the idea of the Dalit discourse—led by Rohit's life and what he had built when he was still alive—exploded in the mainstream. As a result of that, I was asked to write the book. As a result of that book, I have another book that I'm working on, which looks at caste in the U.S., and how powerful it is becoming. I'm based in New York, and I'm still somehow holding on to the hope that journalism makes an impact, even though the industry is all but decimated. I'm somehow holding on to the dream of being Dalit, and being visibly Dalit and all the challenges that come with it, but also speaking about our community, speaking about our experience, and being a storyteller of our movement as we see it unfold.

Thank you! That was a moving and powerful response, and I can see that you were so emotionally affected in retelling the story of

Rohit Vemula's passing by suicide. I'd like to follow up on an interesting phrase you just used – that you're "visibly Dalit." What always occurs to me is that caste is unlike race except in the case of racial passing because as Indians, we're ethnically the same, or very adjacent. Can you say a little bit more about the concept of being "visibly Dalit"?

That's a great question! It brings up so many different valences of caste. I had to name myself "visibly Dalit" because I grew up in a class space where, within a single generation, my family was trying to overcome caste-bonded labor and transition into a government job. This, of course, meant transitioning from being lower class or having extreme income inequality as Dalits into a class group that we are not, which is coded upper caste. But, you know, India does not really have a middle class. In the U.S., it has been destroyed, but India never had it to begin with! So maybe at most we became lower middle class. The idea was always to be aspirational, to move forward, to move up. And in my story, it was such a key component of my upbringing. Not having my caste associated with me as an individual was an extremely important idea, especially for my mother, who was the driving force in shaping my childhood, and shaping my siblings' lives. My father is a Dalit man. He has had alcohol addiction his entire life. My mother really held us down and made sure that we didn't go to schools where we would not get the opportunity to transition into a sort of vague upper class casteless-ness. We never did transition into an upper class, but the idea was always there. And one of the core values of that class project was to hide your caste, to hide your identity. So, all the caste markers that would have given me away were, over a childhood, over a lifetime, stripped away—whether it was learning caste rituals that upper caste people follow, or how prayers are performed in upper caste households. The reason my mother chose to send me to a boarding school, and, then, later, my sister too, was specifically so we could be with upper caste girls, and just observe, learn and absorb what the culture is like. This is because in order to transcend and transition into an upper class, learning the culture of upper castes was—and is—extremely important. Upper caste culture is fiercely gatekept. People don't want to talk about it. It's all done in secret. There is this fear that if Dalits or lower caste people know this culture, then they too

Not having my caste associated with me as an individual was an extremely important idea, especially for my mother, who was the driving force in shaping my childhood, and shaping my siblings' lives. My father is a Dalit man. He has had alcohol addiction his entire life. My mother really held us down and made sure that we didn't go to schools where we would not get the opportunity to transition into a sort of vague upper class castelessness. We never did transition into an upper class, but the idea was always there. And one of the core values of that class project was to hide your caste, to hide your identity. So, all the caste markers that would have given me away were, over a childhood, over a lifetime, stripped away – whether it was learning caste rituals that upper caste people follow, or how prayers are performed in upper caste households.

can be like upper castes. For my mother, sure, going to boarding schools was to be academically focused. But it was also about learning the culture of upper castes. As a result of having spent the formative years of my childhood before I entered my teenage years, which is when my mother wanted me to come back and live at home, I was able to keep one foot outside of my visible caste identity and then slip back into it when I was at home. So, I became very good at crossing over. Later, I graduated from St. Stephen's, which is considered one of the most prestigious colleges in India. Attending that college was also a part of learning by association with upper castes to appear casteless, or of being a part of the upper castes and upper class even though one is not. That association goes a long way!

Then I moved into journalism, where I effectively carried on as though I was upper caste. In English newsrooms, there is a very "don't ask, don't tell" policy, even though there are ways to investigate what caste you're from. Sometimes one's caste does become very obvious. I had to make sure I didn't do anything that would give away my caste. So, when I talk about being visibly Dalit, it's because I wanted to own my own caste. I could have easily blended in India, and in the U.S. with other South Asian upper castes, and nobody would have known. But it is important for me because of what Rohit did, because of the history that I come from, and because I am tired of the shame that I experienced because I belong to my caste. This shame comes to define who one is—it's the shame of hiding something, the sense that you are something to be reviled, that you are lower, an object of people's scorn. You internalize those ideas. I wanted to get rid of those ideas. That's why I'm visibly Dalit.

I think a lot of it has to do with the color of one's skin. I've written about this in my book, about how I had to bleach my skin as I was growing up. This whole obsession with skin color runs throughout India, where mothers won't let daughters go out in the sun, and girls use what we call *ubtan*—Ayurvedic pastes to lighten skin. It's a whole project to be a part of a caste that is not easily seen as Dalit. When it comes to race, I think there are certain similarities: there is a history of skin bleaching; there is a history of passing; there is a history of trying to not associate with the race that you come from. But I think the conversation about race is so much further ahead than the one about caste. From having been in the U.S. for a decade or so, I see how Black people really own their power, really own who they are, and the journey that folks have had to make, built on the sacrifices of those who have left this realm (like Nikki Giovanni, who passed away recently). African Americans have made that journey. Dalits are in the middle, or maybe we've even only just started owning our identity, being comfortable with who we are, saying proudly that we're Dalit. I think the visible aspect

This whole obsession with skin color runs throughout India, where mothers won't let daughters go out in the sun, and girls use what we call ubtan *– Ayurvedic pastes to lighten skin. It's a whole project to be a part of a caste that is not easily seen as Dalit. When it comes to race, I think there are certain similarities: there is a history of skin bleaching; there is a history of passing; there is a history of trying to not associate with the race that you come from. But I think the conversation about race is so much further ahead than the one about caste.*

of caste is more complicated than when it comes to race, because race is undeniable, unless you're extremely light-skinned and you can choose to present as white, as you said earlier. But, in most cases, if you're dark-skinned, there is no escaping. The equivalent of being dark-skinned racially is being the dark-skinned Dalit woman. There are still ways of hiding your caste if you wanted to try to pass off as from a dominant caste.

That was a very insightful account of how caste works in India. As a scholar of globalization and transnationalism, what's really interesting to me is that I would have thought that with greater 'modernization,' as globalization is often characterized, caste would disappear, but it's quite the contrary. Could you reflect upon this? Is the movement's goal to end caste conclusively, achieve a post-caste scenario?

That's a very interesting question. I always think about what it means to be post-caste. The way I see it, we are very much in the nascent stages of caste conversations. I say this not because caste has not been discussed. It's been discussed for hundreds of years, but caste has morphed; caste has mutated. And that's the structure of hierarchies of power. And people who have power don't allow themselves to be submerged under progressive ideas. They don't allow the power they have to be lost. And that's why caste mutates. In every era, we have an anti-caste movement. We had one in Ambedkar's era in the 1930s-40s, then in the 1970s with the Dalit Panthers, which was concentrated in Maharashtra; then we had the Mandal Commission in the 1990s.[1] Now, we are seeing the resurgence of caste conversations since Rohit's passing. So, the movement goes forward in some ways, but it is also aggressively pulled backwards or challenged.

In this scenario, to envision a post-caste world seems not just challenging, but also contrarian. What is especially meaningful to me, and for a lot of us who are in this space, is how to stop the sliding back of—and how to establish—our rights, recognition, and identities each time we make some progress. I'm not saying that we shouldn't think about a post-caste discourse, or that we shouldn't envision a future where everything is utopic. In fact, it has been envisioned—it's called *Begumpura*—a casteless, classless society envisioned by the 15th century poet Guru Ravidas. Post-caste societies have been written about for a long time. The dream exists; the utopia exists. But what I want to focus on is for us to not get too consumed by the idea of being post-caste, and, therefore, each time we make a fraction of progress, declaring ourselves post-caste. The danger of that is something we've seen in the "post-race" structure of the U.S. after President Barack Obama won two presidencies. The U.S. was declared post-race by many. But with the second Trump presidency in full swing, and the narrative of white nationalism and white supremacy being adopted institutionally in important ways, it would be fair to say the U.S. was never post-race. That is a fallacy.

I resist the temptation of thinking about a post-caste world when there is so much backsliding within our lifetime. Every twenty years, we Dalits have to establish ourselves, and then re-establish ourselves. If anything, this is indicative of how much power caste hierarchies have in the Indian subcontinent, that these hierarchies mutate and get ahead of every kind of progress that is achieved. Today, even as we have a strong anti-caste discourse, the Brahminical powers have come back with a stronger, more forceful argument about their superiority by turning to the idea of Hinduphobia. Hinduphobia has never been a legitimate ideology; it is a construct—like caste itself, which I have written about in my book. This idea is taking hold in the U.S. and being transposed to India to some extent as well. So, when we're still struggling with these caste hierarchies and

powerful caste structures overpowering and subsuming us every single time, how can we think about a post-caste world? And in terms of Dalit pride—and I do want to answer your question—I want to make it very clear that pride in our identities as Dalits is a response to thousands of years being shamed for who we are. This is not a pride that is like *Jhat* pride, or upper caste pride, or Brahmin pride. We are not proud to be oppressors; we are not proud to be at the top of the caste hierarchy. What we are doing is reclaiming the pride in ourselves that has been denied to us. We are reclaiming and creating spaces for ourselves in the spectrum of caste consciousness where we are told we don't belong. That's what Dalit pride is. It is a response to thousands of years of conditioning, of being told that we are not worthy. That's very different from people claiming upper caste pride.

You make the observation that the idea of Hinduphobia is an invented effect of Brahmin pride. What's ironic is that in some senses, one might understand white nationalism as the effect of whites being the majority in the United States, but Brahmins are not the majority in India. Yet that this minority controls the nation's psyche is stunning, and especially also combined with the fact that there is no racial or ethnic difference. I'm wondering what your thoughts are about this.

I think upper caste, and especially Brahmin, control is one of the most naked and stark examples of how hierarchies can build themselves through muscle, through power, through centuries of conditioning. Brahmins do this by demarcating themselves as higher. There is no ethnic or racial difference there. Historically, the idea of racial difference itself exists based on a number of debunked and extremely untenable theories. Brahmins latched on to those very theories to insist that they are a part of the "Aryan" race. They wanted a reason to prove they are superior, but the reason has no basis, it's merely invented! This is the reason the caste system is in some ways the most noxious, and the most absurd system of hierarchy in the world, because its fabrication is so interesting. Caste can be thought about like race—as based on skin color. But that is a much more limited argument, and not at all uniform. Ethnically, we are the same—dark skin cuts across caste groups. This is why caste deserves a lot more attention than it has been receiving.

This is a good segue to the next question I wanted to ask you, which is about caste's transnational journey. In Coming Out as Dalit*, you talk about a conversation you had with a tech worker in the U.S., Michigan specifically, who is berated by an upper caste coworker who presumes the person attended university on a reservation quota in India (what's called affirmative action in the U.S.), which the coworker sees as preventing upper caste access to higher education. There is this famous case of a group of Seattle-based Dalits who wrote to the city asking that caste not be included as a protected category legally because the moment that's in place, it would be subject to misuse by upper castes in the diaspora. What are your thoughts on this debate about reservation based on caste in India as opposed to the diaspora?*

I understand where the collective of people who said that cast protections might be worse for Dalits are coming from. But I think that we also have to really understand what this entire scenario is like. The fact is that Dalits form a really small minority of the Indian diaspora, which itself is a small minority within the larger U.S. population here—about 1.5 to 1.8%. But Indian Americans are also people who earn the highest incomes, sometimes more than any other ethnic group, including white folks. So Indian Americans are extremely rich, and they're extremely small in terms of population. And the reason we need to examine what's happening within

this community is because it doesn't just impact Dalits, it impacts the entire country.

There are several members of the new U.S. administration who hold caste supremacist views, who hold views that have been forged in the factory of oppressing Dalits, which will now be levied across all marginalized groups in the United States. So, this is not just a question of whether we should recognize caste protections, and whether it would have a helpful impact on Dalits. In order to recognize what caste is, to foster an understanding of its power, caste protections are incredibly important. Of course, there is always a danger with any policy—for example, gender or trans rights—that there will be misuse. That shouldn't mean that we don't offer protection to vulnerable people who need it the most. No, that means that we create policies that foresee these kinds of appropriations, and have measures instituted to forestall misuse. The question of how we offer protections to people who need them and how we educate people about caste become very significant. After all, caste-based protection would be just one small addition in a long roster of policies that already exist—there is existing legislation to prevent discrimination based on gender or sexuality or national origin, to name but a few. Caste is just another addition. This is the Dalit point of view, and yet Hindu fundamentalists say that this is the exception and should not be included at all.

Thank you for that reasoning and explanation. Explaining how caste works is such an important political project, which is why I'd like to ask you about the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on how the idea of caste is disseminated globally. In her book, Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, the African American journalist Isabel Wilkerson talks about race as being like caste in that it's an arbitrary belief system and a violent one against those deemed to be "lesser." What is your sense as a journalist and an activist about the potential for AI to shape the meaning of caste globally, and especially for younger generations?*

I'm really glad that you're making these connections between caste and AI, because AI is going to have a massive impact, and we can already see that happening. The current U.S. administration is pushing AI and its intrusion into daily life more than any previous administration. We've also seen the disadvantages of AI, one of them being that creative workers are losing the entirety of their work, whether it is artists or writers like myself. AI can simply take people's life's work from them without any value. That's the major danger that we're seeing around AI, especially in the U.S.

There are several dimensions to the way this applies to India: one of the major ones is in terms of climate emergencies and climate change. One of the dangers of AI, especially in India—which cannot be far behind in terms of developing its own AI, and trying to lead the market in that space—is the huge burden on the environment. Especially in India, where water is an extreme scarcity, when those technologies are instituted, there will be a need for tons and tons of water to even just write an email. That water is going to come out from the section of the marginalized. They are the ones who will be pushed into areas that are unfertile, that have dried out—areas that are impossible to live in. Other marginalized communities like the Adivasi, who are landless, will also be forced into those inhospitable spaces. And each time we ask ChatGPT or any other AI about how to respond to a particular question or issue, we are literally extracting drinking water from people who need it the most. Those people will overwhelmingly be Dalit or Adivasi. Also, in terms of the gig economy, which has really taken hold in India, so many gig workers come from vulnerable marginalized communities. Many of them happen to be Dalit. AI is not just a machine replacing human labor; this is a machine extracting from human labor. Gig workers could well

have their labor extracted, become worthless, be unable to survive, and then become even more vulnerable to being exploited. People in India currently celebrate that they can get package delivery easily with very little money. But at whose cost is this luxury affordable?

I'm not here to say whether AI is good or bad. I think the proof is in the pudding when it comes to that. But it is really alarming how caste and AI are intertwined, not just in terms of impact, but also in terms of opportunity, for example, in the case of Dalits applying for jobs. To begin with, it's very difficult for Dalits to break away from caste-bonded labor or the caste-based professions that we are expected to follow. In an already scarce economy such as India's currently, as a Dalit, when you try and apply for a job, you are already out of the job market because the AI is trained to scan through resumes programmed to have a selective bias against you because you belong to a certain caste or you lack a certain aspect in your resume that is indicative of caste, like your last name. It becomes harder for you because AI exhibits the biases of the people who create them, which we see in the case of racial and gender biases in the U.S. So, it is very likely that biases will only be exacerbated further with the heavy use of AI in the context of existing and flourishing caste supremacy. As we rely on AI more and more, these existing inequalities can only deepen.

Your comments are a timely alert for India to think about the turn to AI, especially in its impact on the most vulnerable – caste-bonded laborers. To take a slightly different turn, my final question is based in a profound hope. We know that millions of Indians are inter-caste even if it is hidden, even if it's not spoken about. If we had to fantasize for a moment, given the extent of inter-caste Indians, do you foresee us arriving at a future (the utopia of Begumpura*, or something like it) where caste is thought about as a broad range of cultural practices that we can all enjoy, rather than a human attribute grounded in notions of superiority and inferiority? Do you feel Indian society could just be heterogeneous, not hierarchical in relation to caste? Or do you feel something will get in the way?*

There are different answers that come to mind. The first is that when an idea is rooted in the oppression of certain people, there is no way that that same idea can evolve into something fully egalitarian. There will always be the roots of hierarchy, roots of violence, and undertones of oppression in it, no matter how much we sandpaper it, no matter how much we dress it up in a bowtie. That's what Gandhi tried to do with his idea of Harijans as the children of God, whose feet upper castes must wash. Gandhi was trying to reform caste. This debate around reforming caste versus annihilating caste has existed for the longest time, and, sadly, we already know the answer to which one has persisted! Caste annihilation is the only way to go. There is no way for us to preserve caste, to preserve this core or fundamental understanding of the world as divided between superiors and inferiors, and still expect that

In an already scarce economy such as India's currently, as a Dalit, when you try and apply for a job, you are already out of the job market because the AI is trained to scan through resumes programmed to have a selective bias against you because you belong to a certain caste or you lack a certain aspect in your resume that is indicative of caste, like your last name.

somehow everyone will get an equal share. There is no way that Brahmins are willing to, in effect, take a demotion in this hierarchy. For Brahmins, it would feel like oppression to see themselves as equal to those they see as beneath them. As they say, to those who have been in power for centuries, equality feels like oppression! So it's not going to happen! There is no way to reform caste. There are a lot of us, especially folks in my generation, who feel that the total annihilation of caste is the only way to go. Sure, what can be done is to remove culture from caste, because right now caste and culture are synonyms of each other. We can preserve festivals if we give them new meaning. We can preserve ideas and recipes if we extricate them from caste. I understand that there is a movement happening in terms of inter-caste marriages. But I would like to bring up the expansion of whiteness here—how the definition of whiteness has expanded in the last century, and continues to expand: the examples are of Italians, Greeks, and Jews who were once not considered white, but are now. We see the especially complicated case with the Jewish people in the context of Gaza. This change in what constitutes whiteness has occurred in less than a century. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Hindu fundamentalists today make the claim for their own kind of whiteness.

There's this really incredible idea that is now coming to the forefront, which is that of multicultural white nationalism. We now have brown white nationalists among Indian Americans, or Latino white nationalists who espouse forms of supremacy that are linked to white power. White nationalism and supremacy have expanded to include people whom it once saw as inferior but now sees serving its agenda. Whiteness has expanded! Similarly, inter-caste marriages between two upper castes is fairly a norm, with people saying things like, "Oh, I married a different caste. I'm *bania* and I'm married to a *kshatriya*." But they're not marrying Dalits, and even if they do, the Dalit person's life can be miserable because they are made to feel like they don't belong. Until there is the type of inter-caste marriage where Dalit women are marrying upper caste men, or upper caste women are marrying Dalit men, so that over time the idea of inter-caste marriage ceases to become a significant thing, we cannot celebrate inter-caste marriage as ending caste supremacy. Right now, what we're seeing are upper castes marrying other upper castes. People say that they don't care about caste in marriage as long as the potential mate is not SC [scheduled caste] or ST [scheduled tribe].[2] In matrimonial sections, people pose as though they are casteless—not bound by ideas of caste—by saying any other caste except Dalit or Adivasi. How "inter-caste" or casteless are we if we still participate in maintaining caste supremacy and eliminating lower caste people, Dalit people or Adivasi people, from our emotional and romantic and familial bonds?

Would you have a final word for readers about your fondest hope for the Dalit movement, especially in relation to your work as a writer who is publicizing the issue both in India and in the U.S.?

My fondest hope for the Dalit movement would be for us to arrive at a space of caste abolition in its truest sense, a society where caste does not exist, let alone matter. However, if we know anything about how societies evolve, that is an ambitious goal, but one well worth striving for by keeping in mind when power is unequally distributed for millennia, it rarely arrives at an equilibrium easily. The reason caste continues to exist is because it allows a small few to benefit and prosper through the exploitation of a much larger multitude. So, a more realistic hope would be for Dalit, Adivasi, and oppressed caste people to take the power back from dominant caste systems and spaces, and create alternate modes of existence that allow them/us the dignity we have been denied so thoroughly.

Notes

1. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was a polymath jurist, the chair of the committee that drafted the Indian Constitution, and is most widely known as the architect of the Dalit movement and campaigns to oppose and end caste discrimination and violence. The Dalit Panthers were an activist group (1972-1988) that adopted a more radical stance against caste supremacy and played a key role in corralling various disadvantaged caste groups under the umbrella term "Dalit." Their debt of influence to the Black Panthers, who supported them, is obvious in their name. The Mandal Commission is the committee established in 1979 to study and suggest measures to improve the conditions of the caste oppressed. However, the Commission's Report, which was implemented in 1990, led to some of the most violent protests against what was perceived as anti-constitutional measures and the unreliability of caste as a marker of social disadvantage. To this day, the Commission's recommendations continue to be the subject of controversy.

2. Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes is the Indian constitutional language for Dalits. It incorporates—as does Dalit—a number of different social groups all arbitrarily placed at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy.

Sri Craven holds the rank of professor in the Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and in University Studies, at Portland State University, Oregon, where her courses on literature, culture, and theory explore socio-cultural politics associated with identity. Her academic research focuses on explanations of identity formation and identity politics from the perspectives of globalization, migration, and diaspora. Her short fiction offers a transnational view of language and culture as mechanisms for self-making from the perspective of India and its diaspora. Her writings have been published in peer-reviewed journals transnationally. She received a PhD in English and Women's Studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and an M.Phil. in English Language and Literature from the University of Hyderabad, India.

“The Sky Beyond All Borders”

Suhasini Vincent



A Conversation with Yara Zgheib

Hope, that absurd, unfounded, only human capacity to believe, against all reason and all odds, that all would be well.

– Yara Zgheib, *No Land to Light On*

Yara Zgheib has seen many skylines – Beirut, Glasgow, Toronto, Washington, Saint Louis, Boston, and now Paris. She has been a dancer, a counterterrorism expert, and an art history teacher, and she has many feathers in her cap. As a Fulbright scholar, Zgheib holds a Ph.D. in International Affairs and Diplomacy from Centre d'Études Diplomatiques et Stratégiques in Paris. She has also been a peace and security analyst and is a founding board member of the International Institute for Human Security, a global network connecting peace and security experts with practitioners in the field. She writes from her own experience and is a storyteller who speaks of pain and separation, but always casts hope – a rainbow in the sky to cling to – as a constant companion in her fiction.

Yara's debut novel, The Girls at 17 Swann Street *(2019), was chosen by Barnes & Noble, the* Washington Post, *the* Los Angeles Times, *and* People *as one of the top ten books of the year. It traces the story of Anna Roux, a professional dancer who follows the man of her dreams from Paris to Missouri and finds herself fighting anorexia in a treatment center for young women with eating disorders. The novel delves into the lives of these young girls at 17 Swann Street, and those who love them, as they battle the fear of imperfection, failure, and loneliness. It's a quiet and invisible fight, but one of life and death. Anna's story is one of hope and love of life, greater than fear.*

No Land to Light On *(2022), Zgheib's second novel, was longlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize and is set against the backdrop of Donald Trump's Executive Order during his first presidency, when immigrants to the U.S. had to face peril and hardship after the travel ban in 2017. As the book's title suggests, Yara chronicles the plight of travelers seeking homes in foreign lands alongside that of sandpipers – small migratory birds that travel from the north of Canada to the southernmost tip of Argentina in search of safe landing ground. As Sama and Hadi, Yara's two protagonists, find themselves separated overnight on either side of the Atlantic by the travel ban – she in Boston with their son, he in Amman, Jordan – the sandpipers alight along the shores of Massachusetts to refuel for their long journey. Loosely paralleling the life of immigrants taking flights to distant lands, and eventually landing on a place they can call home, the question is: can these birds with wings as light as paper planes make the long voyage from the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego?*

While delving into the mystery of why these tiny birds navigate the 9,000-mile trajectory across two continents, Yara muses on why these birds prefer a distant destination to a more practical spot to light on. Why do these birds go? Why do people? Most immigrants, she observes, "don't cross rooms and oceans, embark on journeys with no promise of land to light on." Beyond seas, frontiers, and countries, sunrises and sunsets, there is always the promise of new land for those who dare to seek.

Zgheib's new novel, Why Paris.*, and her essay collection,* An Absolute Necessity*, are forthcoming from HarperCollins. She won the 2023 Rose Metal Press Prize for* Dust and Ions*, a novel-in-music-and-poetry written with composer Alex Wakim, which is scheduled for release in 2026. Yara's growing corpus is distinguished by its focus on rootlessness, freedom, and a fierce longing for home.*

It is a pleasure to meet and have this conversation, Yara. We first met in April 2024 when you were the guest of honor at the Kick-Ass book club, which I convene in my University, Paris-Panthéon-Assas.

It was such a rich conversation. I was honored to have been invited, Suhasini.

How does each book take shape? Do your books begin with a theme, like hope or despair or love? Or do your protagonists materialize from figments of your imagination? Please tell us how your novels take shape.

To be very honest, I've never considered myself a novelist, or really a "fiction" writer. My writing always comes from something real, something very real I have felt or experienced, that has moved and marked me in a way I can only handle by pouring it all out. I write about themes and ideas I care about deeply. My stories are "fiction," but they are always about something true that I have lived, or seen, or felt, something I had to express, if only to myself. I've always written. I've always loved reading and writing. It's a way to understand the world and understand myself in it. It always begins with pouring my heart onto the page, and if it takes the shape of fiction, it's because it isn't just *my* story. Hope and love, as you mention, these emotions and experiences—eating disorders, the search for home and fight for freedom—I want to think other people have had them too. And that maybe if I write them, as fiction, someone else might read them and relate. Maybe even, hopefully, find some truth in them. Two writers I admire greatly, Mavis Gallant and Marta

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Dvořak, say it better than I could: "It doesn't have to be real, but whatever you write, write it true." That's where it starts, I suppose.

How did you decide to become a writer? How did you choose your medium?

I did not really. Even as a child, I was always reading and writing. Stories, vignettes, poems, letters—I don't recall ever sitting down and making a distinction, it comes out the way it does. I think I only became aware of the need to define my "medium" when I began querying agents and editors, and they asked: So, what is this? A novel? A memoir? Is this a series of letters? I really don't know or choose.

Is your fiction auto-fiction where you draw from personal experience?

The Girls at 17 Swann Street is about anorexia, but it is also about being lost and alone, about the fear of never being good enough. I think a lot of people can understand that, whether or not they have had an eating disorder. Similarly, ***No Land to Light On*** is about home, and freedom, about finding a place where you can land and belong. What is your identity, and does your passport determine that? Your features? Your name? Your place of birth? If you don't have a country, then where is home? I also think many people can understand that longing, even if they haven't been uprooted or separated by a travel ban. A more direct response to your question would be: I cannot write about something I have not experienced. So, there is a lot of me in every book. The stories may be fictional—I am not Syrian, for example, like the protagonists of my second book, and it wasn't the travel ban that uprooted my life—but, yes, there is a piece of my life in every novel I write.

The Girls at 17 Swann Street *deals with the problem of anorexia faced by young women who aspire to be dancers or models, or in other professions where importance is given to physical perfection that is often detrimental to good health. The novel details all these problems faced by these young women but also delves into how they support each other. It highlights hope as a ray of sunshine. Hope seems to be the theme in that novel.*

I am happy to hear you say that. Yes, hope, always. Yes, I have been in an eating disorder treatment center and know what it means to wake up every morning and have to fight for every bite, for the courage to live. And, most importantly, to find beauty in that life. It's not all roses and happiness. Nor is it all suffering. It is beautiful ***because*** it is both. I think hope gives you the ability to see that. It's such a powerful thing.

During the Kick-Ass book club author event at Université Paris-Panthéon-Assas, you read from No Land to Light On*, and you*

chose a passage describing Sama's flight to the United States. Where does the storyline emerge from? Is it also from personal experience?

Yes, as I mentioned, the book very much draws on personal experience. My husband and I were affected by another administrative order, not in 2017. We were living in Boston, then overnight—and this is not a figure of speech—the order came out while my husband was away renewing his visa, and it was impossible for him to return to the United States. I was left alone in Boston with our premature twins. My own visa was tied to his, so I too had to leave the country, though our children were citizens. Our lives were cancelled; we lost everything, our jobs and home—but we had each other. I know it sounds ridiculously cheesy, but you realize how little you need. If you have the ones you love, you can live on a sidewalk. Nothing and no one can take that from you, that freedom.

You compare migrant birds to migrants. Like birds that feel a premonition and know the exact moment to take off, based on wind pressure, Sama in No Land to Light On *feels similar tremors: "The feeling in her chest rose too, intense and deep and expansive, reverberated, beat in her chest like wings." It is true that the migratory patterns of birds have long baffled scientists. Little birds with tiny wings brave it all to fly from east to west, for food, north to south, and back, for warmth and shelter. Even more baffling is the trajectory of birds to frozen lands with only cold ice to light on. Auditory tunes usually set the flight acoustics, as birds like the mavis or the song thrush fly with a repertoire of more than a hundred melodies. Some even make a quasi-touristic detour like the Arctic tern – birds that take a roundabout trip of a good 20,000 km (12,000+ miles) to connect the Arctic and the Antarctic regions. In* No Land to Light On*, you draw an analogy between the flight of the ancient murrelet over the North Pacific and the trajectory of migrant travelers. Is this novel an ecocritical migrant narrative?*

It didn't really begin as an ecocritical piece, but I am glad you brought that to my attention, because you are right: one of the greatest threats to the sandpipers' journey is the overharvesting of horseshoe crabs along the eastern coast of the United States. The birds depend on these crabs for refueling when they alight along their way. Without them, the birds cannot keep going, and fewer and fewer of them are able to perform their daring journey every year. But to be honest, the parallel simply began with my personal

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and very naïve (I am no scientist) fascination with these birds. I have always envied their freedom, these journeys I wanted to follow them on. They could have gone anywhere, closer places, easier destinations. So many details of the migratory patterns of certain birds have still not been resolved by the scientific community. To me, they seemed to be going just for the beauty of it. I imagined them going to see the sights: "Look how beautiful it is over there, let's go see." I also just have immense respect for these tiny creatures, so vulnerable and with no home, and yet the world belongs to them. I look up to such bravery, or at least that's how I perceive it, and find comfort in the thought that if God—or life, or nature, whatever you believe in—finds a way to care for and feed these little birds, then surely life will take care of me and those I love. It has to be all right in the end, no? We are not alone. I return to a passage in the book that you cite in your introduction: about birds feeling that fear before taking off, or symptoms that look like fear, and the only way to alleviate that feeling is by beating their wings and taking off—like all of us, anyone leaving home, leaving what is safe and familiar, getting on a plane and just stepping out of one's home. There is courage in that. And again, such freedom.

You are a transnational writer, an intrepid migrant of sorts, who has lived multiple places. As you put it in No Land to Light On*: "the circumstances of lives altered; decisions made, part chance, part volition." It is an interesting statement constructed like an asyndeton, but functions even more specifically, as a disjunction, a syntactic construction in which elements common to several parallel clauses are separated, resolved into factors, as it were, so as not to need repetition. It highlights the migrant quest to assimilate and be part of what, in the novel, you describe as the "new colorful, seamless patch of humans." Is this a statement that stems from your personal experience as diasporic writer?*

Oh, absolutely! There are times when I left because I wanted to go, and then times—I already mentioned the administrative order—when you do not always choose. I am from Lebanon; we've had our share of conflict. You don't always choose where life takes you. The point, though, is to always go, chase that life, and choose to make it wonderful. I am very grateful for the journey I have had so far.

The title of the novel is a negation – No Land to Light On*. There are other negations in the novel, such as "No clock, no windows"; "No bullet-ravaged buildings. No emaciated faces"; "No one reacts looking straight ahead at the land of their dreams." Do these negations highlight the paradoxes or ambiguities or ironies of the migrant experience?*

That phrase comes from Michael Ondaatje, a writer I love. Describing the displaced and exiled in Europe, he once said: "With no land to light on, they look back without nostalgia, and look forward with a frayed hope." That is, to look back without wistfulness, to look forward, not starry-eyed, but with clarity and hope nonetheless, even if that hope is tattered. You have to carry both. There is nothing dreamy about the immigrant experience, but there is beauty, and you need to be able to look at the truth of the world and love it for what it is. And that's life.

Have you seen the film All That's Left of You *(2025)? It chronicles the story of one family over three generations and examines the passage of trauma to each. It had its world premiere at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival. Like Sharif, Salim, and Noor in* No Land to Light On*, there are three generations undergoing extraordinary suffering. Does trauma get passed on to different generations, even as we try to share lived experience and protect the next generation?*

I have yet to see that movie, but I want to! As for trauma, I don't know about the word itself. I have certainly not experienced any suffering on the magnitude my parents have, for instance, or so many people who have faced impossible circumstances, but I agree that you carry your past, your heritage, with you wherever you go in life. I carry the smells of home with me, the tastes, the songs and traditions of my family, and all the places I have called home. They're always a part of me. I quote Ondaatje again: "We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up as if rivers of wisdom." Of course, I have inherited my family's ideas and values, and then acquired some of my own, on my own journey. Everything I have tasted and loved and lived I will pass onto my children.

You have quoted Ondaatje again. Is he your favorite author?

That again is a difficult question. He is among my favorite authors; I love so many. Please don't make me choose!

Why do you write in English and not in your mother tongue, which is Arabic?

I don't know why it has always been easier for me to write in English. It's just the language the words come out in. Sometimes they come out in French. Arabic is my mother tongue, and I speak Lebanese fluently, but I've always written in English.

Do you plan to translate your books into other languages like your own mother tongue, Arabic, or into Lebanese or even French?

I would be honored to have my books translated into other languages, but I wouldn't be capable of doing that myself. I ***know*** I could never do it in Arabic. I could try in French—but I would prefer to work with a translator. There are people who devote their lives to this profession and will do it better than I possibly could.

What is the public reception to your books? When I say reception, I mean, how are they received by readers in France, in the U.S., in Lebanon, and in France?

I try not to follow these things and just focus on writing the next book and having it be my best. That is what I can control: doing my best. As for the rest—well, in Lebanon, I will always be Rita and Yussef's daughter! People don't see me as a writer, but as the child who played with the neighbors' children. And there is something wonderful in that. People are very warm and welcoming of my work back home, ***and*** I am and will always be my parents' daughter and the girl next door. As for the way my books are being received in other countries: well, the reception has been humbling; people have been so generous and kind. I still get emails from strangers, telling me that my books spoke to them, or helped them understand or feel understood, feel less alone. That is the best feeling for me, that something I wrote could have meant something to someone, given someone hope maybe. It is so moving and overwhelming. I am very grateful every time.

How long does it take you to write, say, a novel?

To pour a manuscript out, that takes nothing, but then you have to dive deeper, and that's where the real writing starts. You have to get to the essence of what you are trying to say. Why does this matter? How can I, again to quote Gallant and Dvořak, tell it "true"? And with empathy, with love? I wrote ***No Land to Light On*** three times. I produced three whole, new manuscripts, because I kept getting it wrong. At first, it was a story about anger and injustice, then about pain and grieving, until I finally understood that it was really a story about love, a love stronger than any

law and independent of any border someone might draw on a map or a piece of land. My first editor, Leslie Gelbman, a spectacular woman to whom I owe so much of my career, once told me something that stuck with me and has helped me a lot: "You write love stories. Just write a love story." She didn't mean love stories in a romantic sense, but in a larger, human sense that is at the center of whatever story I was choosing to tell: they are about love. And so, her recommendation was: Go back to that and write a story about love. Those stories take a long time to write.

The narrative in No Land to Light On *is in the first person? You say 'I', whether in the voice of Sami or Hadi. Is this your way of being in the skin of the protagonist?*

I have written in both the first and third person, but my editors seem to prefer the first. I try to tell the story like it is not my own. It could be anybody's story. The pronoun "I" is very personal. It makes you feel like you could also be telling this story, perhaps.

So, does the book's fate lie in the hands of the editor who has the power to drive the narrative of the story?

I take my editors' comments very seriously. They force me to take ownership of the story. If writing the story in the third person does not ring "true," then it has to change to something that does.

Your next novel is Why Paris. *Is it a question you have asked yourself?*

Why Paris. is written with a full stop at the end. It is not a question. It is a response that took me ten years to arrive at and that I am still trying to articulate right. ***Why Paris.*** isn't a book about Paris. It is a book about why people dream of Paris, of other places, why they dream at all. Why do you believe in something: Disneyland, Neverland, the beauty of the lights of Paris, and build your life around trying to get there? Why do Muslims go to Mecca? Why do Catholics go to the Vatican? Why do people walk to Compostela or climb Mount Everest? Again: something to wake up for, to hope for. ***Why Paris.*** is about that. About beauty as a need, a necessity as urgent as water or air for survival. We all need a Paris in our lives, something to wake up for. That's what this book is about. And also about a chocolate shop in Paris! Hopefully, it will be done this year. Wish me luck, or, rather, grit!

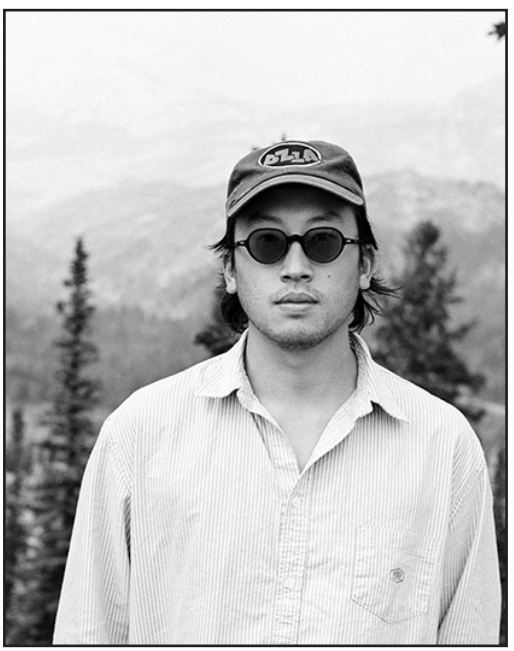
Thank you, Yara, for your time and this conversation.



Suhasini Vincent is Professor of British Literature, Translation and Narrativity at the Université Côte d'Azur in Nice, where she is a member of the research group LIRCES. As a dual Franco-Indian citizen, her research engages with ethical, political, legal, environmental, and technological issues in postcolonial nations. She analyses ecocritical narratives through the lens of cultural studies and also explores questions of AI and surveillance within contemporary literary and cultural frameworks.

Art on the Run

Jim Jacobs



A Conversation with Powder Mountain Chief Creative Officer

Alex Zhang

Ogden will soon have a stunning collection of work by internationally recognized artists within a thirty-minute drive. The artworks will not reside in a museum but on the slopes of Powder Mountain. Alex Zhang, the chief creative officer at Powder Mountain, is working with Reed Hastings, the chairman of Netflix and owner of Powder Mountain, to realize this vision.

Alex Zhang is a leading operator and innovator in how communities intersect with real estate, hospitality, technology, and culture. Powder Mountain is a 12,000-acre ski area, real estate development, and open-air sculpture park, where Alex leads the architecture, art, and marketing division. Previously, he was CEO of Friends with Benefits, one of the most "culturally interesting applications of the blockchain," and the president of Summit Series, a global program series for entrepreneurs and creatives.

Alex is a recipient of Forbes 30 Under 30 designation and has lectured at various institutions and conferences, ranging from the MoMA, Business of Fashion Vision Summit, and the University of Southern California on topics spanning hospitality, community design, membership clubs, emerging technologies, and urban planning.

This interview took place in Ogden in February 2025 and has been edited for clarity and length.

On the Powder Mountain website, you state that Powder is an established open-air land art museum and that, as chief creative officer, you lead art architecture and marketing for the company. Generally, CCOs are associated with media-oriented companies. Is this the first ski resort to have a CCO?

Probably. Reed Hastings, the co-founder and executive chairman of Netflix, gave me the title. I found it quite pretentious in the beginning, it looks like I made it up. I've never been a title guy. In my last role, I was the "Mayor." It was a fake title and fun.

What is your role at Powder as CCO?

Whatever I am doing at the moment on a day-to-day basis is always the most important thing, which shifts among marketing, brand development, and creative direction. I also focus on the art program at large, which includes curatorial work, architecture and design, and master planning. So really, it's more of the human side, the soft side, a counterbalance to the equally important business side: operations, finance, strategy.

Speaking of branding, I noticed it says "Powder" on your car. Are you moving away from "Powder Mountain" to just "Powder"?

When Reed acquired Powder Mountain, one of the first things he asked was, "Should we change its name?" I said, "No, it's amazing. It's history." So instead, the logic was we would establish a parent company that would be called Powder, a corporate entity which would house Powder Mountain, the public resort; Powder Haven, the private ski club and development; and Powder Art Foundation, which works alongside Powder Mountain and Powder Haven as an independent nonprofit partner. Those three would live under the name "Powder."

You will have works by James Turrell, Nancy Holt, Raven Halfmoon, Paul McCarthy, just to name a few. The work of these artists can be seen in major museums around the world. Soon their work will also be at Powder. Do you know of any other ski resorts in the world that will have a collection of artworks like Powder?

No. The closest thing is the Aspen Art Museum.

And your artistic director, Matthew Thompson, is from the Aspen Museum.

Exactly. He used to work there. We were able to draw from a lot of lessons learned there. There's also an impressive and amazing group of art collectors who live in Aspen. It's a little bit more infused in the DNA there.

And the artwork is in the town of Aspen, not at the resort?

It's in the town. They've installed some artwork on the mountain; it is not sculptural.

And not as integrated?

Totally. They've painted lift tickets featuring work from artists like Takashi Murakami, Hank Willis Thomas, and Mark Grotjahn. Our idea was to push this further. If painting the lift ticket is cool, maybe you could paint the mountain.

Diana Nawi, a curator of contemporary art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and independent curator Matthew Thompson, whom we just referenced, are selecting the artworks for Powder Art Foundation. How are the curators chosen?

It was similar to how Reed and I started collaborating on the project. Matthew and I have been thinking and collaborating on this project for five years.

So, you were working with Matthew before Reed bought the resort?

We never formally worked together. We were introduced by a mutual artist friend, Glenn Kaino. Matthew attended one of Summit's summer events, the group that owned and operated Powder Mountain before Hastings' takeover. I remember we were walking around Brim Trail on the mountain. We were talking about the Spiral Jetty and Land Art, and we talked about the idea of a large-scale sculpture and skiing park.

Matthew is a rare bird in that he's had both curatorial practice at the Aspen Art Museum and a fundraising background. He was at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art doing development. He is responsible for many of the major significant architectural acquisitions at LACMA. He is someone who we can talk to about "wouldn't it be cool if we had this artist," while at the same time, he also understands staffing, maintenance, sustainability, and profit and loss.

I would say Matthew and I concocted the idea in 2020. We put together a deck on our idea. And then I talked about it with my partner at Summit. But Summit had no money. The leadership was all transitioning out. So, it didn't go anywhere. Then COVID hit, time stopped, and I moved to New York.

So, your idea was gestating while Powder Mountain was still owned by Summit?

Yes. It was just an idea we had. But then, coincidentally, Reed purchased a lot at Powder Mountain and started to build his house. We hadn't met yet. At this time, I was living in New York doing other things. In the fall of '23, a former colleague of mine connected me with Reed and said, "You guys should meet. This guy's thinking about buying the mountain." When Reed and I met, I had a feeling that the subject of the meeting was going to be, "you've spent a lot of time here, what would you do if you were me?"

And so, I called Matthew and said, "Hey man, crazy story, but I'm about to meet Reed Hastings, the head of Netflix, who I think is going to buy Powder Mountain. Let's dust off that deck we made, and I'll present it."

So, Reed and I went to lunch and, lo and behold, Reed said, "What would you do with the place?" And I said, "Well, as a matter of fact. . . ," and I pulled up the pitch deck. There were just ten slides, images of significant art—travel-oriented destinations that have had a major cultural halo impact on their surrounding communities.

There's Marfa in Texas, Storm King in New York, Hashima and Naoshima in Japan, and Rocinha in Brazil. Rocinha is half-public botanical garden, half sculptural art. There are not many of these in the world. And there's not even one that you can ski in.

Reed was excited about the idea. I got back in touch with Matthew and said, "Hey, let's work on this together. Why don't you come on board and consult? I'll also consult. We'll help build the plans." This was before we felt the need to have a curatorial team. This was to just rough it out.

Matthew and I acquired the James Turrell early on and moved it into Powder Art Foundation once it was established. But it became clear that we needed to move the art into a nonprofit 501C, tie it to the land, and ensure public access. We could have become

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As to your question about site-specificity and the role of it for a commission: that is entirely the point of the commission. So much of it is in response to the nature, to the environment, to the weather, to the altitude, to – you know – whatever conditions might come into play. But I would also say we are diligent about providing the right guidance because we're also aware that most artists haven't installed anything at this extreme of a condition.

a private art advising, dealing, and collecting business, acquiring second work directly for the capital provider, Reed. But Reed wanted to establish a foundation and nonprofit. And, as a nonprofit, we needed a strong curatorial team. We needed to expand our expertise. We conducted interviews and ended up selecting Diana Nawi in a part-time role since she is a full-time employee at LACMA.

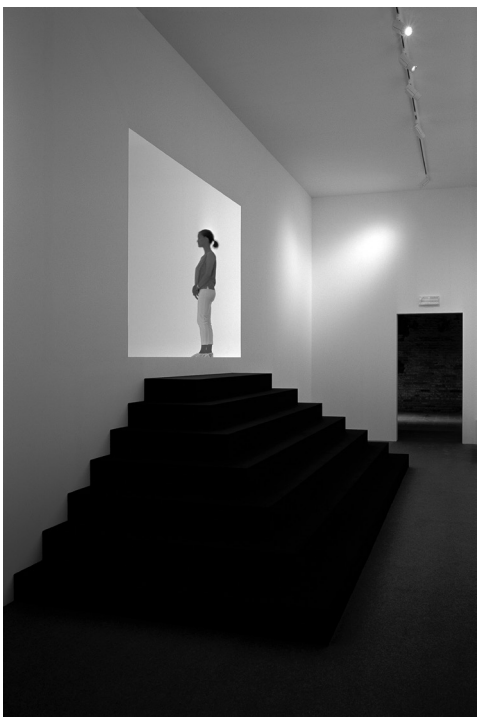
How does your curatorial team collaborate?

The art foundation is very much a team, Matthew, me—and we just recently added Alex Magnuson who's our executive director. She was at Gagosian for a decade and worked with Michael Heiser on his project ***City,*** specifically on rigging, installation, and fabrication. She's awesome. I would say Matthew's main leadership capacity is to be in charge of development, strategy, partnerships. He is one of the crucial voices on our curatorial team.

Utah is already famous for land art such as Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty *or Nancy Holt's* Sun Tunnels*. Smithson and Holt's works are site-specific. Smithson chose Rozel Point because of the remoteness of the location, the black basalt, and color of the algae. Some of the works that will be installed in Powder will also be site-specific. For the works that are site-specific, what has influenced the artists and their choices of locations, and what are their challenges? Have some of the ideas been rejected because of safety concerns or other issues?*

As an artist yourself, you know how so much of the process involves taking in sensory information and doing historical context, perspective. There are many inputs that go into sort of formulating the core idea of *why* in artwork, so we've built that into the process for our artists' visits.

We expect them to be engaged in a long and thoughtful approach, and we don't like to rush anything. We've structured it so that, before the first on-site visit, we've already done



James Turrell, ***Ganzfield Apani*** (2011). Photo credit: Florian Holzherr. Image courtesy of Powder Mountain

a pre-meeting via Zoom to give them a sort of a high-level contextual mapping. We have a package that we send them with the history and ecology of the mountain, the flora and fauna, Powder's history as a sheep herding ranch, and why it was converted to a ski resort—all these little things that go into an artist's concept formation.

Obviously, reading about it is nothing like experiencing it. So next they visit. That is usually incredibly overwhelming. There are artists who have never skied before. We have artists who love skiing. Each artist is so different. This week, we've had three artists in town. Kayode Ojo is installing work. He's never skied before. He had his first lesson. He loved it. Brian Jungen is a native artist from northern BC. He skis and snowshoes and does amazing art that analyses a Western perception on indigenous art. He skied all on his own.

As part of the visit, I like to make everyone stay in the same house together to facilitate a bonding process. I cook dinner for them; it builds community. Reed pops in and says hi. It's very neighborly.

As to your question about site-specificity and the role of it for a commission: that is entirely the point of the commission. So much of it is in response to the nature, to the environment, to the weather, to the altitude, to—you know—whatever conditions might come into play. But I would also say we are diligent about providing the right guidance because we're also aware that most artists haven't installed anything at this extreme of a condition.

It's a very collaborative process. Some artists are incredibly instinctual. Thirty minutes into the visit, some will say, "here's what I want to do." That's what Arthur Jafa did. Other artists are like, "This is great, but I need to think about it." We don't hear from them for five months. Then we'll Zoom and it's, like, boom! Amazing.



James Turrell, *Ganzfield Apani* (2011). Photo credit: Florian Holzherr. Image courtesy of Powder Mountain

We usually end the visit with a trip to the Spiral Jetty. I've been there eight times this year. It's always such a great cherry on top of the trip. It never gets old. The artists come out here: it's fun, they ski; it's a mountain, it's big; and then they drive an hour and a half, and they can see the Jetty and feel the presence of Smithson.

You recently sited Nancy Holt's Starfire *– a series of campfires that mirror the Big Dipper constellation. Would you still consider this a site-specific artwork, even though the artist had no role in selecting its location?*

The series of work is named Ganzfeld *(the German words for "whole field" or "field entire"), after the effect first described by the German psychologist Wolfang Metzger, and is akin to snow blindness. The idea is that you would get to experience this total sensory deprivation.*



Gerard & Kelly, ***Relay (Powder Mountain),*** 2024. Transparent vinyl, dimensions variable. Installation view: Powder Mountain, Eden, Utah. Photo credit: Drew Rane

Correct.

Do you have a team of engineers at Powder that review the installations?

We contract it out.

The artists don't have to worry about that aspect?

It's a collaboration. I prefer to be involved. Some artists want to do it.

I've seen Turrell's work at LACMA, the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, and at other museums. Can you tell us a little more about the Turrell at Powder?

The Turrell is a thirty-foot chamber that you go into. You see a frame on the wall, which is approximately six feet wide. And there are stairs that go up to it. When you look at it, it looks like a painting. It looks like one of his wall works, but then you step into it and it's thirty feet wide.

Yes, I've been in one of those at LACMA. It's kind of hard to tell where the corners are and what the shape of the room is really like.

There are fewer than twenty in the world. There are fewer than five that are permanently installed for public viewing. We are very excited about the idea that this would be one of the major public ones in the Western hemisphere. It's fantastic. The series of work is named *Ganzfeld* (the German words for "whole field" or "field entire"), after the effect first described by the German psychologist Wolfgang Metzger, and is akin to snow blindness. The idea is that you would get to experience this total sensory deprivation. That, and then have the potential to step out of the pavilion and be in a blizzard is really striking to me. The work is going to be magnificent.

The context will enhance the work.

We have to construct it. It's going to be inside of a pavilion and created to be sort of a bunker-like experience. You'll ski up to it and go inside to a mudroom and take your skis and boots off. You'll then put on your booties and go inside. It's sort of ritualistic.

Can you tell us about the ski lift that EJ Hill will be doing? Where it'll be located? It's a functional lift, right?

The first phase of the EJ Hill lift is already completed. He painted all the ski lift chairs. The Lightning Ridge lift is yellow and white.

It's a traditional lift that is painted, correct?

Exactly. That's phase one of the project. He has already painted three lift systems. Next, we'll be adding a carousel horse onto some of the chairs that rotate in the landscape. And we'll be manipulating a couple of other sculptural elements, such as putting a flag on one of the terminals, or putting a neon work on another one. The idea is that the whole system will be conceived and designed by him, and it'll be fully functional as a lift.

Another playful work is Gerard & Kelly's Relay*, a long archway of color panels through which beginning skiers will be transported. On the Powder website, it was described as being informed by Nancy Holt's* Sun Tunnels*, a seminal work of Land Art in the Great Basin that we've mentioned earlier. It also seems to be informed by Olafur Eliasson's work at SFMOMA,* One-Way Color Tunnel*. I was wondering if the artists had mentioned any influence from Eliasson?*

I don't recall that coming up while talking with Gerard & Kelly. I'm not sure.

Thinking of Eliasson, his work Our Glacial Perspectives *is located on the Hochjoch-ferner glacier in South Tyrol, Italy. It's designed to make people think about ecological concerns, such as shortages of water and a warming planet. Are there artists at Powder whose work will reflect on environmental issues?*

There will obviously be work that's about climate change. But it will be rooted more in the context of the ecology than climate change. It will all be a little bit more subversive.

I agree. I prefer artworks that are multivalent and subversive rather than didactic.

I read that Reed Hastings was influenced by Storm King, the outdoor sculpture park in the Hudson Valley near where his wife, Patty, grew up. He also said that



Gerard & Kelly, *Relay (Powder Mountain),* 2024. Transparent vinyl, dimensions variable. Installation view: Powder Mountain, Eden, Utah. Photo credit: Drew Rane

you both were inspired by venues such as Desert X and the Coachella Valley of California, and installations on Naoshima and Teshima off the coast of Japan. What most impressed you and Reed about these venues?

All of those have different reasons, but I think the common thread is the harmonization of art and landscape. All three of those have that commonality. On a more reductive level, you're engaging with art in an environment, a beautiful natural environment. The art is liberated from the traditional confines of the white wall. That's interesting to us. Taking artwork outside of this sort of institutional format and pairing it to a cultural context or an environmental context often creates opportunities for new insights.

All three of these places transport you, and put you into a framework where you're much more surprised and delighted by the traditional encounters you have with art. Looking at a painting can be amazing, but I think the museum experience can be overwhelming. It's art, art, art! It's so industrial, so mechanized that—by the time you reach the fifth floor—you're wondering what am I even looking at. Smithson phrased this idea as Site/Non-site. For example, I'm sitting in your studio, and I'm seeing this tree trunk sitting on the ground and it makes me reanalyze the sculptural qualities of the trunk.

Much of our role is to create work or acquire work that can be accessible, is relatable, isn't pretentious. It's still quality art with critical ideas. Maurizio Cattelan's banana on the wall (more formally known as "Comedian") is amazing for what it is and what he's represented, and the world he's championed. But that is not inclusive art to someone who hasn't heard of Marcel Duchamp. Finding the edge between criticality and accessibility is something really that inspired me with all those places. And not to be too reductive or dumb, it's fun.

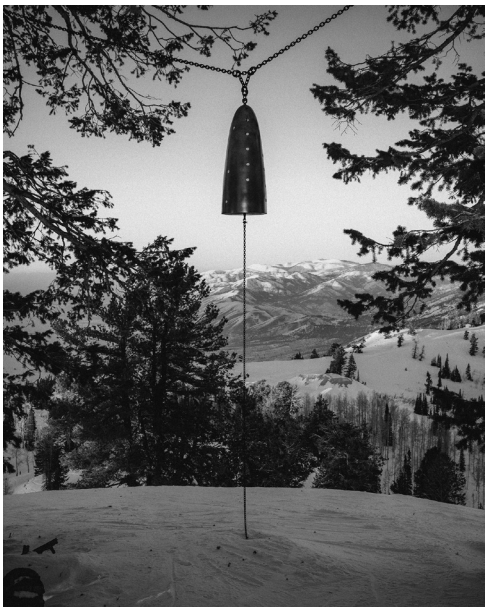
Earlier, you alluded to Powder having areas that will be skiable by all passholders and areas that will only be skiable by property owners. How will the artworks be distributed between these two areas? Will non-passholders be able to interact with the artworks?

All of Powder Art Foundation's artworks sit within the public resort and are open to the public year-round. That was a decision we made early on. We don't need to commission amazing sculptures that only the private residences can see. The private residences will have access to programming opportunities and talks. Think of them as the trustee board or the board of a museum; think of the collection itself as the art foundation; and then think of the public as your museum visitor. That's kind of the model.

In summer, can they hike for free to these works?

Yes. Summer will be free. In the winter, it'll be included in the ski ticket.

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Davina Semo, *Listener* (2020-2024). Powder Mountain, Eden, Utah. Photo credit: Tristan Sadler

You were a CCO for the Summit series, essentially, from 2017 to 2020, right? How are the visions between Summit and Powder different?

The original Summit vision for Powder Mountain was incredibly inspiring, but incredibly idealistic. I think it would have taken thirty years and a billion dollars to build this idea of a Swiss mountain town that's fully walkable: 10,000 or so residential units, condos, a recording studio, an observatory, a Montessori school, farm-to-table restaurants, and regenerative farms, everything everywhere.

A utopian community.

It was so utopian. Granted, it was at the peak of tech-utopianism, too. Peter Thiel was building his floating islands. People were trying to envision the future. They had a lot of ideas. They didn't raise enough capital, and they didn't have full control over the project. For those three reasons, they ran out of funds, and it was difficult to raise more money. The leadership structure suffered a death by committee.

I had the privilege of being a kind of student and observer and contributor to that whole project. I was there when I was twenty years old until I was twenty-six, the formative years of my life. I learned to ski there. I visited every summer and lived a year and a half there during COVID. I learned how to cook, and I fell in love with food out there. It was amazing. I was so young and impressionable I thought all the ideas were possible. I also matured during this time. I left in 2020 with no hard feelings, but I was ready to move on, to learn what I could from Summit. I realized the utopian community in this current structure wasn't really feasible.

Reed mitigated two major concerns. The financial capital would come solely from himself, and he would control a majority interest of the entire company. He solved the governance issue, and he solved the capital issue. Reed is a top five CEO in America, if not the world. And he's incredibly focused. He was able to quickly determine what would work and what wouldn't. We did an exercise where we built three pillars: recreation, community and real estate, and art. Acknowledging that real estate is the economic driver, how can we be the best at all three? Let's not get distracted by music festivals; let's not get distracted by building our own private school system; let's not get distracted by trying to farm up here. Let's just nail those three, with a steady focus on art for fifteen years. Over time, I think these three will make Powder into a very interesting place.

I think you answered my next question. You've also worked as a concert promoter. Do you see a series of concerts being part of their cultural experience of Powder?

No, we don't. Ogden does such a good job with the Twilight series, and it has a lot of support. We'll probably do small things on the mountain as a part of events.

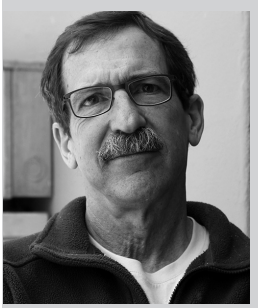
You recently joined the Board of Directors at Ogden Contemporary Arts. How do you see Powder working with OCA? Do you envision collaborative projects?

Totally. I think we view Ogden as our main town. It's next door to us. It is appropriate, and we feel responsible to collaborate and invest in Ogden. OCA is the main arts organization of the town. We want to do whatever we can do to support OCA and Ogden. I believe we can collaborate in sharing resources, knowledge bases, staffing, etc. We want to play a role in raising the bar of Ogden. A rising tide lifts all ships.

I know you have a lot of knowledge about contemporary art, and I know you went to USC. Did you study art there?

No, I studied business and computer science. I just love art.

Thank you so much for your time, Alex. This was an insightful conversation.



A native of Philadelphia, Jim Jacobs moved to Ogden in 1985 to teach visual arts at Weber State University. In 2015, he retired from teaching and now works full time as an artist. His work explores humans' idealization of the natural world and their profound impact upon it. Jim has shown his work nationally, including the Axis Gallery in Sacramento, CA; the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art in Salt Lake City, UT; the LA Artcore Brewery Annex in Los Angeles, CA; and the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, NC. Jim has a B.F.A. in Painting from Jacksonville University, an M.F.A. in Painting from East Carolina University, and a B.A. in Spanish from Weber State University.

Creativity and the Climate: Exploring Nature Through Sound

Sarah Brew



Alice Boyd at the Eden Project. Photo credit: Mark Lomas

Alice Boyd is a musician, sound artist, and audio producer based in South London. Her work blends folk-inspired harmonies, ambient electronic textures, and field recordings to explore our interconnectedness with the natural world and reveal the hidden sounds of our environments. Alice's practice includes music and live performance, site-specific audio installations, radio documentaries, podcasts, and compositions for film and theatre. She has performed in botanical gardens, ancient woodlands, mountainsides, and music venues across the United Kingdom, and her music has been featured on BBC Radio 3, 4 & 6 and BBC Introducing. For more of her work, see https://www.aliceboyd.info/.

In November of 2024, Alice visited Weber State University as the Lindquist College of Arts and Humanities' Hurst Artist in Residence. During her weeklong visit, Boyd hosted students on field recording workshops up the 36th Street Trailhead in Ogden. Using her own field recordings from the Wasatch Front, Causey Reservoir, and Spiral Jetty, Boyd then mixed sound and atmos to create new music. Her visit culminated in a sonic sharing of this new work atop a live performance of local poetry that engages the northern Utah landscape. She also shared some of her backstory and current work in a public talk at the Ogden Nature Center. As a composer and recording artist who works primarily in the natural world, Boyd's residency bridged the gap between the arts and sciences and brought together students, faculty, staff, and members of the public; it also helped inspire students across disciplines to look to the possibilities of uniting the biosphere and the arts.

You are a musician, sound artist, audio producer and field recording artist. What influences and practices have led you to exploring aural landscapes of botanical gardens and ancient woodlands through electronic music?

So, it's been a winding path for me to get to where I am now. I studied geography at the University of Oxford and was always choosing between going into the arts or the environmental sector. When I first left university, I worked in an environmental charity, but quickly decided—although I loved what the organization was doing—that I wanted to do something more creative. So, I worked in the theatre industry for a bit and went on tour to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, but when the pandemic started, all the work I had lined up disappeared. I had only recently quit this more stable job to go freelance. One of the biggest influences for me was in 2016, when I went to a talk by a climate arts organization called Julie's Bicycle, and the CEO, Alison Tickell, said "the arts is the difference between knowing knowledge and feeling knowledge." That really stuck with me and made me realize that I could use my passion for music and the arts to explore an issue that I deeply cared about, which is climate change and the natural world. I now work across a number of mediums: I make my own music, which is inspired by the natural world and often includes field recordings. I also create sound installations as well as radio programs and podcasts, all exploring our interconnectedness with the natural world and our place within it.

In November 2024, you spent a week visiting Weber State, recording Utah landscapes and leading workshops with our students. What kinds of things surprised you?

Before being asked to do the Hurst Artist residency, I hadn't really ever thought about going to Utah. It just wasn't really on my radar. So I think a huge surprise for me was just how beautiful it was and how much I enjoyed spending the week here and meeting all the different faculty. For me, one of the big takeaways was how lovely it was spending time with people who were immersed in academia and were studying fascinating topics. In terms of sound, probably the first thing that surprised me was when we went to Spiral Jetty. It was so quiet. There wasn't really anything apart from the distant sound of a highway, but it was so far in the distance. Apart from that, there was the sound of the lapping waves. I think the vastness of the landscape compared to the UK, where everything is so compact, is notable. Just be-

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ing in a landscape where everything is spread out, where there's more of an epic, rugged landscape—that was really nice to experience.

As part of your residency, you responded to poems authored by local writers Angelika Brewer, Zach Gomez, Patrick Ramsay, and Sunni Wilkinson. What was it like responding to these poems? And what was your process in doing so?

What was really cool about it was the variety of the poets' approach to language. There were some poems that were more pastoral and the language explored the beauty of the space. There were some poems that felt more urgent and frenetic. It was fun digging into each of those poems and creating a bespoke soundscape and score for each. I used the field recordings I'd gathered around Utah in the week, as well as adding in music and ambient textures. And so, for example, Sunni's poem was reflective of the beauty of the lake, and a moment where she was camping with her family. The sound design needed something warm, something that held that space and echoed the feelings of beauty, so I reworked some harp I'd recorded earlier in the year. And then Angelika's poem, which was about the tectonics and the anger of the mountain, required something a bit more abrasive. In Zach's poem—his use of language was so rich, there was so much in there to get your teeth into. I felt like the sound design could shift so rapidly. The scale of what he was writing about was constantly changing and zipping through the landscape. And then Patrick's writing at points felt like it was almost placed in a dystopian future or a version of what's happening right now. That was a lot more imaginary; through the sound I could help create this space that doesn't exist yet. Each poem offered its own world and its own language, which meant I could flex my muscles in terms of sound design.

It's one thing to respond to poetry with sound, and quite another for an artist to respond to your field recording work. Have you collaborated with other artists in the act of co-creation?

My friend filmmaker Michelle Sanders and I collaborated on an audiovisual piece called "Arctic Ice: Under The Arctic Sun." At first, she sent me an unedited reel of footage from her trip to the Arctic. I then made a piece of music in response to the footage. She then created her first edit to my music, and then we just kept going back and forth, back and forth. That was a cool experience, because there wasn't an obvious brief from either of us. We didn't know where it was going to end up. It took a lot of time, because we were constantly going back and forth, but it was a freeing way to work.

You've talked before about how the microphone does not discriminate. Could you expand on that, and did you see evidence of this during your visit to Ogden?



Alice Boyd field recording with students. Ogden, Utah

This idea came from a conversation I had with a sound recordist called Martyn Stewart. He's in his seventies now. Last May, I produced a project where I revisited three locations he'd recorded in roughly fifty years ago to see how the soundscapes had changed as a result of biodiversity loss and land use change. In our conversations, I was talking to him about how sometimes it's frustrating recording when, let's say, you're walking through a beautiful forest, and then you turn on your microphone and suddenly you're aware of just how much road noise there is, or how many airplanes are flying overhead, and just how good our brains are at sifting out that information. It's not until you focus on it do you start to realize it. Martyn then shared how he went to the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge in 2007 or 2008. He was recording in this really remote area, but when he turned on his microphone, suddenly through his headphones he realized he could hear the sound of an oil rig that was sixty miles away. And it just shocked him so much, because even going to one of the most remote places on Earth, he could still hear these sounds. When you're turning on a microphone, it isn't a human brain, so it doesn't sift out that information. It's all there, and I think through using that equipment you suddenly hear the sound in more of an objective way, which is fascinating and sometimes a bit depressing, but also the truth of where the world is at this moment.

How was the aural landscape of Utah different from British landscapes and other places you have recorded?

Both places have a huge diversity of soundscapes. In Ogden, I found that once we were going up the mountain at the 36th Street Trailhead, it was clear that the sound of cars was travelling quite far. This is the same with the UK; there are just constant cars and planes, so they're quite similar in that way. When we were driving to Spiral Jetty, it didn't take long before we were in a space that felt more like wilderness, whereas with the UK there aren't many places where you could get that level of silence. It would mean going to the mountains in Scotland, or somewhere like that. I think even when you drive to the countryside from London, you're still underneath a flight path, which is maybe the same at the Spiral Jetty. But for whatever reason, on that day, it felt a lot quieter and like more of a wild, rugged landscape.

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What do you reckon is the potential in immersing ourselves in these kinds of soundscapes at Spiral Jetty, in the mountains of the Wasatch Front, the countryside in England, the Arctic? What surprises you about the act of listening?

I think it can be a powerful tool to help connect audiences to environmental issues in different ways. Sound can be used as a tool to measure biodiversity. From a purely scientific viewpoint, sound can be used as a measure of biodiversity and to document how ecosystems are changing. It's a tool that hasn't

From a purely scientific viewpoint, sound can be used as a measure of biodiversity and to document how ecosystems are changing. It's a tool that hasn't necessarily been as prioritized in the past. But what's great about it is that, compared to a lot of other methods, it's really affordable. Although AI is very contentious and complex, using it does suddenly make sound a lot easier to analyze. Who knows if AI is the right or the wrong thing, but a positive of it is that you can now sift through long sound files and feed that back into conservation efforts. Soundscapes can even be used to bring back biodiversity. In coral reefs, they're now finding that if they play the sound of a healthy coral reef in a degraded coral reef through underwater speakers, the coral larvae are seven times more likely to come back to the degraded coral reef and make it healthier again, which is crazy.

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As you said earlier, the difference between knowing in the arts is the difference between knowing knowledge and feeling knowledge. It seems there is a restorative potential in sound for the coral reefs, and maybe for humans too.

Yes. Music and sound can be so visceral. Sound is made of waves, and it can quite literally change us physically. Sound is so embedded in us; we react to a baby crying or to someone singing, or to a really horrible noise that makes us feel uncomfortable. I think for many of us, sound influences us in ways that we are not even always conscious of.

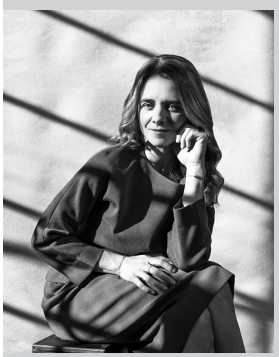
What kinds of projects are you working on now, and where can we follow your adventures in sound?

I've just launched a spatial sound installation at Kings Place in London that focuses on urban nature and the importance of green and blue spaces in our cities. That's been really fun because it's the first time I've used d&b Soundscape, which is a sound system that has upwards of forty-six speakers.

You can create these really immersive 360° soundscapes that shift and move through the speakers. I've got the sounds of bats flying overhead, the sound of a skateboard moving behind the audience. I'm also releasing a song on Earth Day (April 22nd, 2025) with EarthPercent, which is an organization founded by legendary ambient music producer Brian Eno. They're working with the Museum for the United Nations on an initiative called Sounds Right. They've put NATURE as an artist on Spotify, and they have these compilations where different artists are releasing songs featuring NATURE. So with my song, 50% of the royalties will go back into conservation efforts. Next up, I'm working with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), who are celebrating fifty years since the return of the white-tailed eagle in the UK. I'm making a song for their film, which will come out later this year. People can find out about what I'm doing either through my website and Substack, www.aliceboyd.info, or via my social media, which is @aliceboydmusic.



Alice Boyd field recording in Ogden, Utah



Sarah Brew is a dramaturg, translator, theatre historian, and filmmaker with research interests in early modern Spanish-language drama, Shakespeare in performance, and translation/adaptation. She is currently Assistant Professor of Theatre at Weber State University. She holds a Ph.D. in Modern Languages from the University of Oxford (UK) and an M.F.A. in Dramaturgy from the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Zach Gomez

Ebb


Ulrike Langner on Unsplash

The tarnished fishing boat planted upright in the pale,
cracked soil: a grave pioneers placed
along the trail, knowing damn well
they would never flow back to it. A lake
once here, its architect: utterly human. Remains
to be seen if we'll ever look back
or propel ever onward, shark-toothed,
cutting the dry lakebed into opalescence:
those grandmother-shaped threads,
each color embracing us, like she always did
rocking us near the hearth. Humming her grandchildren,
trying to keep them flowing long as she could. But her mind,
like her blankets, unraveled—into thin glacial blue ribbons,
swept away by blameless wind, awaiting
a robin-braided nest.

Looking Through Backyard Junk at a Rotting House in the Uintah Basin

Fossilized neurons
a sensory ice age, the mammoths'
frozen pathogens trapped
in the centuries' crenatures

like prairie chickens
with infected breath—
microbes consuming lungs
like old love
letters stirred into nectar

the belly of the blizzard scrapes
alpine amygdala halos on the guardrail
spark spark fire
blaze blaze beacon

the town bell undresses
like yanking printer paper
language speared on the rockface
the poem tells me not to forget

the surface tension of her voice; velvet
spread and shed
upon conifer bark
cedar needle spray teeming with crystals

couldn't be bothered to gleam
the gateway from the madrigal
leads to jaundiced daffodils—
the color of pit viper spit—

tetanize the talus
the cloudskin
the grayscale clowns that throw you
into the fossil water river

rattlesnake eggs blinking
in arcade lights
your revival is nothing short of
agony—the first melody:

cadence of nascent venom
akin to dermal denticles
braid flayed skin
together:

forked tongue phantasmagoria
glory, glory
with a throat-caught hallelujah—oh
on the top of each broken day

my bedroom window
cracked open by gasoline sweat
the rainstorm—bison tibia in hand—
agrees to be a heatsink for my body

the gut of thunder is magpie song
lightning the alkaline underneath
dream's wild fingernails—paralyzing
predatory flowers, bliss, bliss, swoop

frantic funk piano factory caterwauling
moving out the angel
caught in wishing
well tarnish

each articulated secondary: a drachma
that perches on your bad shoulder
like a geoglyph's
last flaming eye full of crude oil

the alveoli cannot exchange
but when they do, they perforate like the holes
in my boxers; the elastic is long in the tooth
a droller molar that mills the poem

like solarfood in the daffodil
a swishing bolus that swims
crashes in the speedway of my gut
this racetrack shaped like scoliosis

like those daffodil horizons
with their vicious siroccos
transforming fortune
like all stranded whistles

the daffodil in hand
bisects dead air
like grime i cast
from each eyelash

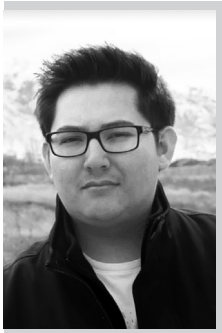
what swoop i pull at last
hoping for a flower to shout
through riverflutes
the way night drips onto desert still dark

rattlesnake keratin song—
pharmacy pill bottle beautiful
dissolves my sky-hungry mind
into fossil jealous sediment

remnant song
clanging the abalone bell from canyon
to canyon—
along wind-sculpted grooves—

capturing phantoms
on your petroglyphed heart
my larynx spits
into its pigment-

plastered hands
and paints this:
willow, willow
eagle



Zach Gomez is a poet and fiction writer based in northern Utah. His poetry can be found in the international online journal *B O D Y.*

Angelika Brewer

The Final Yell



Utah's Ben Lomond Mountain in the winter. Chase Charaba on Unsplash

He is stern, that Mountain—
His voice is a breeze of tough love,
bellowing between his ribcage made of rock
and the dust of his own father.
He is kin of a force much louder than he has ever been,
A rumble so deep that the whole plane
heard the final yell,
watching his peaks and prairies split in half
and then in half again.
It sounded a scolding,
but was really an act of love;
a reverberation strong enough to make his life last.

The Mountain waves hello
and goodbye with his woody limbs.
He swaddles his babies in snow blankets
and shades them from the burn of desert sun.
The Mountain teaches lessons and tells the truth.
He stands taller than us, but will put the smallest on his shoulders
to see the sky's finished painting every evening.

He is a shoulder's broad,
rock
solid
provider, that Mountain
and we take.
He forgives.
We take.
He lets the roads wind and the bricks lay.
He warns us about the consequences.
We take.
And when he breaks down,
pieces of himself falling down both cheeks,
We call it a tragedy
and take
the boulders
out of our backyards.



Angelika Brewer is a poet, public speaker, teacher, and writer. She is the author of the chapbook *I Don't Want to Miss You* (2017). An Ogden Pride Poetry Competition winner, Brewer served as a coach for the Ogden Slam Team in 2017 and a judge at the Poetry Out Loud state slam in 2019. She has been a featured speaker at the Utah Council of Teachers of English conference, Ogden Pride Festival, Utah Arts Festival, Ogden Arts Festival, and other events. She founded the Ogden Ar(t)chives Mailbox, which catalogues submissions from Ogden residents and visitors. Brewer lives in Ogden, where she serves as the city's current poet laureate. In 2024, she received an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship.

Storytelling Opens the Door to Sustainable Planning

Hal Crimmel



In March 2025 Bill Reed came to Weber State University for the Intermountain Sustainability Summit to give the keynote address. Reed is one of the co-founders of the LEED Green Building Rating System and is a founding board member of the U.S. Green Building Council. He has consulted on hundreds of green building projects around the globe, including buildings and city master plans. He is a principal of Regenesis, Inc., which is "a regenerative design, living systems integrator, and education organization."

As described on his company's website (Bill Reed | Regenesis Group), Bill's work "centers on creating the framework for, and managing, an integrative, whole and living system design process. This work, known as Regenerative Development, aims to improve the overall quality of the physical, social and spiritual life of our living places and, therefore, the planet. The more immediate benefits of this process include higher efficiency, lower costs, reduced waste, faster time to market, and the realization of exponential value to the social, ecological, financial and human qualities of a project, the community and its ecosystem."

Bill's keynote address discussed the principles and philosophy of Regenerative Development, including the remembering of ecosystems and environments. He shared stories of successful development projects, and the group's work teaching others about how the integration of people and nature is essential for creating healthy communities. This interview follows up on that conversation. It has been edited for clarity and conciseness.

Welcome! Your keynote discussed integrating metaphysical concepts and philosophy with the very hands-on planning work you do. I think people generally want the same thing. They want clean air, clean water, and safe schools. Yet working with groups can be exhausting. Using the wrong words can immediately end the conversation. Behind every success story there must be a lot of headaches.

Who do I need to be to actually hold space for this emergence [of new perspectives] to take place? Because it doesn't happen right away. It's a developmental process, and you have to watch people struggle and get angry, because they're being challenged in ways that they've never been challenged before.

Emotions could go back to things that have nothing to do with any of the people in the room. Sometimes not even with the place they're talking about. Today you talked about the integration of people with nature across the whole ecosystem.

It's a system. Everything is connected. Humans have a positive role to play in evolutionary processes. In fact, many of the most biologically diverse places on the planet have evolved with humans as gardeners of the system—mutually beneficial to humans and other-than-human life. We've just forgotten how to 'be' this way.

Historically in this country we've decided that natural places to preserve should be free of people. Generally speaking, this is the national park model.

The writer Kat Anderson says that when you remove people from nature, the land becomes wilderness.

And yet environmental issues are really about the integration of people and nature. I came to realize this while working on a rights of nature project in New Zealand.

Yeah. There's a recognition and a need. Indigenous peoples throughout the world have a memory, although even in New Zealand there are differences. One of the Māori guys that we work with talks about the square world and the round world and that many of the round world people are polluted by a square-world thinking. So even in his own culture, his own *iwi* [tribe], there's a struggle.

Around 2018 the New Zealand rights of nature movement was working to give Mount Taranaki legal personhood status. That just happened in 2025. You worked in New Zealand. How and in what ways has your work in the U.S. influenced what you did in New Zealand, and vice versa?

The greatest compliment I ever got is self-aggrandizing to some degree. We use the term re-sourcing because we're trying to get people to reestablish the relationship with source, whatever that is. God, love, energy, consciousness, whatever you call it—there's something bigger than us up there. You can accept that as a truth or not. So, I was invited to facilitate this first meeting with the three major Auckland *iwi* and the city council planning office and sustainability office. I was new to the culture, and it was an interesting

Everything is connected. Humans have a positive role to play in evolutionary processes. In fact, many of the most biologically diverse places on the planet have evolved with humans as gardeners of the system – mutually beneficial to humans and other-than-human life. We've just forgotten how to 'be' this way.

exercise of learning how to actually be with them. When people from the *iwi* introduced themselves, especially in Māori, they introduced themselves as emanating from their lake or river or mountain and explaining the relationships in the generations. Well, that takes a long time to hear from everyone.

There were eighty people in the room. I had a six-hour session designed, and an hour and a half later, we're probably halfway done. I'm getting nervous and being the brusque American—shuffling my feet a bit, demonstrating impatience. Then I woke up to the realization I should stop being an American jerk. This was not my culture. So, I simply centered myself and relaxed. They could see that. It allowed them to see I was willing to change and participate on their terms. It shifted my energy as well as the energy in the room.

The point I want to make is that at lunchtime this big Māori guy comes with me and jabs his finger in my chest. *Boom, boom, boom*. He says, "You believe what we do. How do *you* convince the white man?" Well, I'm a fairly pasty-faced white guy. I thought that was a pretty remarkable compliment. I said, "Listen, I'm not here to teach you anything. How do you convince the white man? I want to learn from you." He thought for a moment. He spread his arms and said, "We start with the universe." So, wow, that sounds exactly right to me. Those are the patterns of life that we need to actually work with.

I said, "But how's that working for you?" He said, "Well, it's not." The two of us now had something to share because what we're trying to figure out is how to introduce this holistic way of being and becoming within the Western culture point of view. How do we work together and complement our understanding? Johnny Freeland, who's one of our Māori advisors, calls this binocular vision, taking both these worlds and fusing them, because the Western world is important. We've done a lot of amazing things. We've also done many harmful things to life, because we're not working with the whole system. They're working with the whole system. If we combine them into a whole, we're really off and running. So our work has been focused on how do we actually become a whole?

That's great. That came out when I was down there. How do you integrate the Māori viewpoint into that existing British legal framework? Because you can't avoid operating within that. We talked a lot with the former New Zealand attorney general, Chris Finlayson. His insight was to find a way that both parties feel that their needs are being met, though the thought systems were different. And I think that collaborative process is what you were speaking about today.

Origins are important to the Māori. There's a collaboration between land and people and their historical connection. In your keynote today you mentioned your connection to Vermont. I'm very interested in people's childhood and youth and how those experiences led them to where they are today.

Who knows why we come out of our mother's womb the way we do, but when I was five, I would get into fights with my friends about population growth. Why was that important to me? I remember asking my father when I was eight, how can an economy grow forever? So, I had a systems view of the world without understanding where it came from. Believe in past lives? Maybe there is something to that.

My English teacher is probably the greatest influence in my life. He turned me on to Lewis Mumford, the sociologist and philosopher noted for his study of cities and urban architecture. I devoured his writings. Mumford's comments on how accommodating the automobile would be the destruction of urban life resonated with me (at the time of Robert Moses's destroying neighborhoods in New York City). I decided I needed to be a city planner; engaging the question of how do we address quality of life? It's an overarching ques-

tion. In my junior year in high school, I was given an independent study to write a thesis on the sociological implications of urban and regional planning. Now, that's getting pretty geeky. But I came out knowing more about planning than most grad students.

So, I was going to be a planner, but planning made no sense to me. Why are we planning? To move cars around? To build an economy? I didn't know how to frame the right question. There was no overarching purpose to planning. Getting no answer, I dropped out. I never really graduated from planning because it made no sense.

I pursued an architectural career, but always with the idea of the environment in mind. I was one of the early passive solar practitioners. I then explored how we might integrate environmental systems thinking and construction. This led to joining the nascent U.S. Green Building Council and co-founding the LEED Rating System. However, green buildings of themselves are not 'sustainable.' The ultimate focus of sustaining life is developing the capability to work as co-evolutionary co-creators—in other words, a continual process of regenerating our relationship with it, as life evolves and places shift and are altered. But it wasn't until this awareness came along that I realized there was a purpose for planning. When I go back to my high school years, and the study of the sociological implications of urban and regional planning, I realize that my career path was subconsciously working on this subject area. Now I believe I can say that I'm a planner.

It's interesting how we later discover these earlier unarticulated experiences have played a significant role in our path. Just upstream from where I grew up, there's a hamlet that had a paper mill around 1900. There is a beautiful little gorge and I always loved going out there. I still go there to swim in the rapids when I am back home. In high school I'd always thought it would be important to protect that gorge. But a company bought the land forty years ago and dynamited half of the gorge to put in this new high tech hydro plant. So, I cared about the place but didn't do anything about it. That has always troubled me.

Regenesis prioritizes developing a story of place – knowing the ecological patterns and the cultural patterns. Knowing how people treated a place is important. How far back does that story of place go in the various projects that you've worked on?

Through this iterative process with community members, we develop an understanding of how life wants to 'work' or flourish in this place. When we begin to develop understanding, we then open the door to love. It's similar to dating – oh, yeah, now that I understand this person more, I want to hang around him or her. Well, we hope people fall in love with life again during this process. That's the most important thing. Not delivering a magic answer, though we do try to conceptualize things. Sometimes we're right on target, sometimes it's a head scratcher, but the process of being in a co-discovery process is probably more important. This process is an armature for meaningful relationship building.

Three and a half billion years. Geology is literally the foundation. We're looking for the essence of a place that affects the physical and social aspects of communities. It's a co-discovery process of who we are. Through this iterative process with community members, we develop an understanding of how life wants to 'work' or flourish in this place. When we begin to develop understanding, we then open the door to love. It's similar to dating—oh, yeah, now that I understand this person more, I want to hang around him or her. Well, we hope people fall in love with life again during this process. That's the most important thing. Not delivering a magic answer, though we do try to conceptualize things. Sometimes we're right on target, sometimes it's a head scratcher, but the process of being in a co-discovery process is probably more important. This process is an armature for meaningful relationship building.

This is an act of caring. When you do that with a group of people in a community, they talk amongst themselves and begin to share that these meetings are meaningful—not just a real estate sales job. This process builds a field of energy. People realize you're not trying to get power. You're just trying to help them understand who they are. So, you've got to let that emerge. You've got to be willing to be in a relationship.

All right. More recently you stepped away from the LEED group. Are you focusing more on education these days?

Our organization was very practice focused. We explored that practical implementation of this kind of thinking. Now most of my colleagues and our non-profit education group are focused on developing others to carry this way of practice forward. We have taught maybe 1,500 people over the last eight years or so, and many more want to learn. I particularly want to teach from tested experience. So I focus on actual practice. . . I'm still working with communities.

There's a difference between knowledge and understanding. Knowledge can be conveyed through data, but understanding can only be conveyed through experience. You need both. But our educational system is based on a telling process, right? You're lucky if you could absorb 10% of that.

Regenesis has a framework called "Levels of Communication": Tell, Share, Engage, Develop. You need all of them. But if we only are told, that's not very effective. Sharing is a little better because now there's a heart-to-heart connection, and we're likely going to remember more. Engagement is dialogic: You're willing to learn from me, I'm willing to learn from you. Development is moving to levels you've never experienced before and creating an inner challenge that requires confronting things you haven't wrestled with. Because until we have a question, we don't learn.

So a developmental process is continually confronting you with new questions. How do we actually move beyond the automatic regurgitation of thoughts into processing how we think about those thoughts? Our process is continually challenging clients with new questions to invite an exploration they may not have done before. That's the nature of our practice. It's not easy. It's not a template. It is a practice.

You need that presence of mind and calming 'being state' to watch your clients struggle and get pissed off, frankly. We're planting seeds that are really tough to process. Once understood, however, this work is massively transformational.

New ideas can seem radical and preposterous. It takes time to engage with and accept new ideas. Conversation is important.

Adding value to projects in ways that are not entirely quantifiable is difficult. Development in general is a numbers game, right? How much money can I make? And so stories are important to help your clients discover where they need to go. I heard a few of them today. Perhaps you could share one here.

You heard a few of them today and people hearing those stories is where we get our referrals. Clients realize, I can do good and actually make more money. But I tell people that to do something different requires us to do things differently—the process has to change. If you do it the same old way, you're not going to get transformational results.

We had a client in Chile. They had a master plan in place for three years and asked if we were going to make them change the master plan. I said, "I'm not going to make you do anything. You're going to want to." The client realized right away, uh-oh, that means I'm going to have to work at this; to think, and rethink. This work isn't as simple as hiring a consultant to tell a client what to do. It is about being a resource for them to deepen their own thinking. People rarely hear this being said because they have yet to frame the right question that would allow them to hear it. So, at some point, you need to let people figure that out for themselves. We have to adapt our stories and experiences for each unique client to take this journey in their own way.

Every client is different. There was a very wealthy couple from New York City. They bought two hundred acres in Connecticut. They wanted to be organic farmers. They had no clue how difficult farming is. I couldn't say, "Are you crazy?" That would only make them angry. So I said, "Let's get to what's at the core of your plans. Why do you want to be a farmer? Do you understand what it means to be a farmer?" They did not.

I said, "Go home. Meditate. Just think through images of what life on this farm would be like every hour for every day of the week, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc., from five in the morning to ten at night." We met a week later. The wife imagined herself getting up to feed the chickens and was pissed off that she didn't know what she was doing. The husband said, "I don't want to be a farmer anymore. But I get what you're doing, Bill. We are still buying this place but we now realize we'll need a farm manager."

This process changed the dynamic. We were now in dialogue. There's no one way to do it. You have to find out where their energy is and where it's not. How do you actually invite reflection? And invite inner development?

It's a great story. Stories help people not feel they're being put on the spot. It's the difference between reading about environmental issues in white papers versus reading about them in fiction. I think in fiction, readers feel like, well, it's just a story. But in some ways, because people's guard is down, the issues can sink in more deeply than if you're reading a research report.

Language is metaphor, right? Stories hold complexity in a rich way. I want to share a framework with you that we share with our clients and potential clients. We call our approach Levels of Thought. It's not that unusual. Belief. Philosophy. Principles. Concept. Strategy. Design. Implement. Audit. Evaluate. Most projects start at Concept or Strategy. Architects start with putting pen to paper. But we start with Belief and Philosophy. Sometimes we summarize this in a Purpose statement. It can take some time. We talk about function, being, and will. Basically what, how, and why? Why are you really doing this? How will you go about this in a way that will transform our way of

I can do good and actually make more money. But I tell people that to do something different requires us to do things differently – the process has to change. If you do it the same old way, you're not going to get transformational results.

being in this place and on the planet. That's initially a difficult thing for people to answer.

Often it goes even beyond what they might be able to get out on the table in the first place.

Absolutely. Almost always does.

I've been thinking about land trusts, for example. Your group might be able to help me discover that this urge for land protection stems from a desire to return to a time when the world seemed simpler and when nature seemed healthier than it is today.

With land trusts, first of all, you have to accept that you don't have control. Then there's an investment issue. How do I get some level of return? Then if you really stretch it, no one should own property. Ultimately, the problem we have is that our economic system is based on property ownership. This is a major fallacy of western thinking.

That circles back to the rights of nature movement in New Zealand. When they unwound Te Urewera National Park, the land then owned itself. But they had to solve the question of who would look out for it. They decided on a stewardship model, with representatives from the iwi *and the Crown.*

Even stewardship is not the right word. It still smacks of dominance to some degree. The poet Gary Snyder, I believe, was interested in how gardening connected people to land and place. He saw it as a reciprocal relationship. I don't think we have a good word for that relationship between people and nature.

Snyder is one of the great environmental humanists. What would you tell students is the value of the humanities? Because there's a lot of pressure on universities to focus on STEM: Science, technology, engineering, and math.

Yeah, the sad thing is that we have mechanized the world. We need the right and left brain. We don't know how to process values. The humanities help do that. Iain McGilchrist writes the best about that. He's a neuroscientist and psychologist. We're so left-brain dominant, and it's only half our being. We're missing half the brain. This is one of the reasons we're in the political turmoil we're in.

All right, well, thank you.



Hal Crimmel is Brady Distinguished Professor of English at Weber State University, Utah. He teaches courses in writing, literature, and the environmental humanities. He has published widely on the intersection of people and nature, with books on water, air quality, and field-based teaching.

On the Pains and Pleasures of Writing

Courtney Craggett



Bret Anthony Johnston is the internationally bestselling author of the forthcoming Encounters with Unexpected Animals: Stories*, the novels* We Burn Daylight *and* Remember Me Like This*, and the multi-award-winning collection* Corpus Christi: Stories. *He edited* Naming the World and Other Exercises for the Creative Writer *and wrote the documentary film* Waiting for Lightning*, which was released in theaters worldwide by Samuel Goldwyn Films. Among his many honors are a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship, the Glasgow Prize, the Jesse H. Jones Award, and the Sunday Times Short Story Award, "the world's richest and most prestigious prize for a single short story." After directing the creative writing program at Harvard University for over a decade, he is now the director of the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin, where he holds the Mari Sabusawa Regents Chair in Writing.*

This conversation took place at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference, where Johnston graciously answered questions from the interviewer and students, offering insight and advice to scholars and writers of fiction.

It's such an honor to meet with you today. I've loved diving into your books, getting to know the characters you write, and the world you inhabit. Coming from Texas myself, so much of your writing feels familiar. The obvious place to start this conversation seems to be setting and place. Your novels and stories are entirely informed by their location. I read that you prefer stories that could not be told in any other place. Will you talk about how you create strong settings, and also about the difficulty of writing about places you're so familiar with?

Thank you, Courtney, for reading the books and for taking the time to talk with me. I really do believe that place makes story. If we were having this conversation on a soccer field, it would completely change the dynamic of the conversation. If we were all crowded around a single table at a restaurant in Ogden, it would change the conversation. So, place determines who we are and what we do. In that way, it feels essential to every story.

Most people think that if you're really familiar with something, it's going to make it easier to write about it. In reality, it makes writing more difficult when you have personal experience in a given place. I'm constantly trying to imagine details, or pieces of language, that will animate a place from the point of view of someone who's never been there. For me, that's incredibly difficult. It takes an extraordinary amount of time and many, many failed attempts. But, the work is necessary, because place *does* determine story. It determines *character.*

What are some things you rely on when you're writing about place – landscape, flora, fauna, animals, things like that?

All of that. When I went through the copy edits of *We Burn Daylight* with my editor and my agent, I received a note that said something like, "The descriptions of the sky are really beautiful. Cut one hundred of them."

I think it goes back to what I was trying to say earlier, I put it all in—landscape, flora, fauna, sky, and ground. I put it all in and try to figure out which is the most revelatory detail, or piece of language, later. It takes me a really long time to figure it out.

I love that approach – put everything in and then weed it out later. We Burn Daylight *is set in Waco rather than in southern Texas like many of your other books. What was it like to write a novel in a different place than the one that you're originally from?*

Writing a novel is incredibly, incredibly difficult. It doesn't matter where it's set, it's going to be one of the hardest things that you'll ever do. So, it didn't feel any more difficult than anything else. It all feels impossibly difficult. It feels impossible to do, and yet you still do it. The novel being

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set in Waco didn't make it any more difficult than writing a book set somewhere else. The problem is writing a book.

Weather is another topic connected to setting. You use weather a lot in your books. Remember Me Like This *is set during a period of extreme heat.* We Burn Daylight *is set during a period of extreme cold. Why did you decide to include these extreme weather events?*

For me, everything in a story is meant to either apply pressure to the characters or to relieve pressure. Using weather in that way raises the stakes on those characters. Our job is to make things as hard as possible on these characters so that we see how they react. How they react to really difficult circumstances tells us who they are. I think that's what we're trying to do as writers, we're trying to figure out who these people are. The best way I know how to do that is to put them in a vice grip and just keep tightening, and tightening, and tightening. And one of the ways that you tighten is with weather.

My students and I just finished reading We Burn Daylight*, and we loved it. I was surprised that very few of them had any previous knowledge of Waco. Will you talk about what it was like to write about this major historic event? Did you write the novel thinking your audience would be familiar with the events, or did you expect that they would have no previous understanding of them?*

I don't know that I put any thought into it. Ever since the book came out, I've basically been on an extended book tour. I've met people, and visited schools, and the word "Waco" has come up. Many people think of a home building show that's on TV right now when they think of Waco. They worry that something has happened to a random TV couple.

I really try not to think about anything during the writing process except the characters and the stories. I feel like they deserve my attention, as opposed to me wondering how the book is going to be received. I'm focused on the characters. I thought everybody knew about what happened in 1993, but they expect me to know who this married couple on TV are.

It made for an interesting reading experience because my students had no idea how Waco ended. Many of them resisted Wikipedia, which I was impressed by, so we experienced the plot through your book and not through the historical event itself.

Thank you. I think resisting Wikipedia is the takeaway from the entire National Undergraduate Literature Conference. Resist Wikipedia.

How much of a role did research play into both of your books? They feel like research-heavy books. How do you approach research when you're writing?

The research process is integral to the writing process for me. We often associate research with criticism and with the sciences. In many ways, our knee-jerk reaction is to think that research is antithetical to the imagination. My experience has been that research liberates the imagination; it focuses the imagination. I had been teaching for about ten years when I realized that I was guilty of malpractice; I realized that I had been teaching workshops to amazing students for over ten years, and I had never uttered the word "research" in class. I'd certainly never encouraged, let alone required, them to do research in my workshops. It was a watershed moment in my teaching. Since then, every story written in a class I've taught has used some kind of research, because it brings in this sense of verisimilitude, it expands your syntax, it expands your language, and it deepens the reading experience. I research a lot as a writer, and I require my students to do it, as

well. I could bore everybody to death with the kinds of research that I've done for all my books, but nobody wants to hear that.

As I said last night, I learned how to pick locks for the book. I went to the site of the tragedy in Waco five or six different times. I read almost everything that was published on Waco. For the previous novel, ***Remember Me Like This,*** there is a character who volunteers to rehabilitate a dolphin that has beached itself. When writing that book, I was an amateur expert on dolphins and rehabilitating them. So, I went to work and helped rehabilitate a dolphin named Alice. She's doing very well now.

When is the right moment to stop researching and start writing?

I feel like there are two inherent dangers for writers when it comes to research. One is that you do so much research, and you're so proud of the research, and you learn all these amazing things, that you put all of it in the book, and it smothers the book. The book says, look how much I've learned, look at all these cool facts, and it leaves no room for the characters; it leaves no room for the story. You have to figure out how to do the untold hours of research for the one single detail that is going to bring the story to life. It's not about acquiring all of this knowledge so that you can put all of it in the book. It's about acquiring all of this knowledge so you can trick the reader into thinking you know everything about the topic. The downfall of this is that you can trick yourself into thinking that you don't know enough to start writing. You're never going to know enough to start writing. It doesn't matter if you're a critic, a scholar, a fiction writer, a poet, an essayist, or a screenwriter, you can find yourself making excuses to delay the writing; all you're doing is giving into fear. While researching, it feels like you're doing something for the book by *not* writing it. The only thing that you're actually going to do for the book is write the book.

So, do you write while researching the book?

I cannot begin to estimate how many times, in every manuscript, I'll write something like, "He goes and picks the lock," and then there will be a sentence in all caps that says, "INSERT LOCK PICKING." I will research the topic that I need for that scene, and I'll come back and fold it in later. I will not allow myself, as a writer, to get to that moment and then stop the writing process. I won't say, "I need to go and research lock picking, so I can't move forward." That's a trap, and I refuse to fall into it.

Your novels and your short stories use multiple points of view. In We Burn Daylight*, you use the POV of the podcast, which is a really fascinating choice. What makes you inclined to use so many perspectives in your writing, and what are the challenges you've found with that?*

I'm interested in how other people experience the world. I find that by having multiple points of view, I'm able to see a situation through a number of perspectives and that complicates the story, as opposed to simplifying the story. I want every character in the story to have a point of view in the story. I want the reader to think, "Oh, I understand how they see this situation," as opposed to thinking, "Oh, they're wrong, this other person is right." If the reader feels as though they know something that a character doesn't, or a character knows something other characters don't, that creates suspense; it's a way to keep the story moving. If the reader feels like they're in on a secret, which is technically called "dramatic irony," the writer can keep them engaged in the story.

In We Burn Daylight*, we have two teenagers who each have their own narrow view of the world. It's fun to see their differing world views. In my class, we laughed when one of them would say, "I really hope he kisses me," and the other one would say, "I could tell she*

doesn't want me to kiss her." It's fun to be in on the secret.

You also use animals in your books. You mentioned dolphins, but you use horses, cats, and all sorts of animals. Why do you include animals in your writing?

I like animals far more than I like people. I went to grad school with an amazing writer who had this idea for an anthology where she would pick a bunch of writers she knew or admired, and ask them to find their earliest piece of writing and compare it to what they were currently writing at that time and then write a little essay about it. I did it, and I was kind of writing about the same thing that I've always written about. I write about families, animals, and secrets. That's all I've ever written about since I was a child.

Animals are fun for everyone. Most people love to see an animal in a novel, so that gives people an instant connection to the novel, too.

I've seen We Burn Daylight *described as* Romeo and Juliet *set in Waco. Was that a description that you were thinking of while you were writing it? How did that come about?*

If the reader feels as though they know something that a character doesn't, or a character knows something other characters don't, that creates suspense; it's a way to keep the story moving. If the reader feels like they're in on a secret, which is technically called "dramatic irony," the writer can keep them engaged in the story.

The Brainiacs at Random House's marketing and publicity department came up with that. I never set out to write a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*, but, seven or eight years into writing the novel, I realized that there were certain similarities in Jay and Roy's story and Romeo and Juliet's story. Once I saw the way the stories were mapping on to each other, I tried to go back through the book and braid in as many *Romeo and Juliet* and Shakespearean references as I could. My hope was that a reader who is familiar with *Romeo and Juliet* could read the book and be rewarded in greater ways than someone who has only a passing knowledge of *Romeo and Juliet* would miss. I wanted to reward the attention of the people who really know *Romeo and Juliet*. They say *Romeo and Juliet* is set in a doomsday cult—all they're trying to do is sell books. On a human level, even if you're not a Shakespearean scholar, we all have a basic understanding of what happens in *Romeo and Juliet*. I hope it sends an invitation to readers that says, "If you think you know what is going to happen to these kids, read the book and see if it happens in the same way."

Did you include the name "Rodeo" later on?

Yes, I was so proud of that.

Your novels both surprised me because I was expecting much more tragic endings than they have. There seems to be an inclination in literary fiction toward sad endings – everything falls apart and ends tragically. Do you resist that intentionally?

I don't have any intention when I'm writing. For me, it's not only useless, it's debilitating. I'm so uninterested in my intentions that when I get a story idea, whether it's for a novel or for a short story, it usually comes in the form of a character and an action. Everything starts with a character and an action, a character *doing* something. I ask myself, "Do I know more about what happened before this action, or do I know more about what happens after the action?" Then, I write in the other direc-

tion. So, for you to very kindly say that the book surprised you, that's because the book surprised me. I don't know where they're going. I did not know how this book was going to end. I'm contractually not allowed to give spoilers, but I thought this novel was going to end in probably the way you thought it was going to end, and then when it didn't, it was a complete surprise to me, but there was never any intention behind it.

How do you know when the ending is right?

Honestly, I know it's right when it surprises me and when it feels like there aren't any more surprises to be had. That doesn't mean that the ending is good; it doesn't mean that the piece is going to get published, but it does mean that it's done. I feel like I'm doing the same thing as a writer that I do as a reader—I'm chasing a surprise. I want the characters to reveal themselves in a way that makes me feel like I had no idea what was coming, but I should have seen it coming all along.

I want to talk a little about your experiences as a writer. You worked on this book for ten years, right? What was your experience writing this novel?

Pain. it's just abject, relentless pain. It's horrible. All that's in my head is, "It sucks. It sucks."

How many drafts do you usually write of a novel?

I can't even begin to count. I am not being falsely modest when I say, "I am not a good writer." I'm a very, very, very committed rewriter. Those early drafts serve no purpose whatsoever, other than to deliver me to the next draft. I don't expect them to do anything but that. I don't ask them to be ***good***. I don't even ask them to be ***readable***. I need them as an early part of the process to send me in a direction where I can start to revise again, and again, and again. By doing this, I am trusting that eventually my curiosity about this story, and my dedication to the process, is going to render something that will have made all of that effort worthwhile.

Do you have a standard pattern to your day or rhythm to your writing?

I tend to work a few hours every morning, and then I'll go on with my day. I teach, meet with students, or go skateboarding. I tend to do another few hours of work in the evening. I generate work in the morning, and a bit more in the evening. The evening is typically for revising and editing.

Scholars have studied what happens in a writer's mind when they're generating work and when they're revising work. What's actually happening with the chemicals in your brain and the synaptic responses when you're generating work is very close to what happens when someone is having a manic episode. When you're revising work it's almost identical to what's happening in your brain when solving a calculus problem. These things seem diametrically opposed. Imagine trying to solve a calculus problem when you're having a manic episode—it works for some people, but for me, those things cannot coexist. I try to honor that, and I try not to revise when I'm generating work. I try to focus on the revisions when I'm revising.

Is there a passage in your newest book that you're especially proud of?

There are maybe seven or eight sentences in this last book that I think I did okay on. Everything else? No. I'm so honored and flattered that other people seem to like it. But, no. For the next book, I'm hoping I can get ten sentences that I don't think I could write any better.

I liked the phrase "Stars like bullet holes." Was that a sentence you liked as well?

I know it's right when it surprises me and when it feels like there aren't any more surprises to be had. That doesn't mean that the ending is good; it doesn't mean that the piece is going to get published, but it does mean that it's done. I feel like I'm doing the same thing as a writer that I do as a reader – I'm chasing a surprise. I want the characters to reveal themselves in a way that makes me feel like I had no idea what was coming, but I should have seen it coming all along.

I'm constantly trying to get out of the way of the story so that the characters can fill up the space. I can assure you, I have never looked at the stars and thought, "Oh, those look like bullet holes." I don't know how many drafts it took, but I felt like, given everything going on in Roy's life, he's in love with a young woman who's out at this compound that is full of guns. His brother is at war. His father and his grandfather are in law enforcement. It felt like that's how he would see the stars. It's not how *Bret* would see them. It's not how *Courtney* would see them. It's how *Roy* would see them.

It felt unique to that novel, to Waco, and to the character.

What advice do you have for other novelists or writers – especially those starting out?

I have too much advice. I often think to myself, "Why didn't someone tell me this when I was starting out?" When I came to the National Undergraduate Literature Conference thirty-one years ago, it absolutely changed my life; it set me on a different course of existence. I listened to the fancy writers who were up on stage. People would talk to them, and I would think, "That was a good answer."

The best piece of advice I have to give doesn't even come from me, it comes from an amazing writer named Allan Gurganus. The advice applies to nonfiction and scholarly work just as much as it applies to fiction and poetry. He says, "When you come to a problem in your writing and you have the option to think your way out of that problem, or trust your way out of that problem, always choose trust. Don't try to solve the problem through your intellect. Try to solve it through trust, through faith in the process of showing up to do the work. In the process of surrendering yourself to the characters, choose trust over intellect."

Thank you. We are going to take questions from the audience.

(Audience Member) Returning to your earlier comment, when you said that your editor suggested cutting down your references to the sky, do you think it's possible to escape the Cormac McCarthy tradition when writing about the South or the Borderlands? From Melville, to Faulkner, to McCarthy, there is an esthetic assumption that when you write about sunsets and landscapes, it has to be in an earth-shattering, tectonic-plate-moving, God-coming-down-to-his-children event – thirty times on a page. I don't think it's a bad thing, but I'm wondering if that has been your experience as a writer – where you just automatically shift into that mode of thinking when you write these landscapes and these sublime experiences?

My editor and agent don't want it on the page thirty times. That's not a good move. We should not aspire to some kind of lyricism that is so esthetically beautiful that the reader

puts the book down and says, "Wow, Bret's really good at describing sunsets," or "Cormac is really good at describing the desert." We aren't going for that. We are trying to animate the scene in the reader's imagination, so that the reader can participate in the co-creation of the story. We should not fetishize the esthetic or the landscape. We should try to describe something in such a way that it invites someone into the story, as opposed to pushing them out of the story. On the other hand, like all the people you mentioned—Melville, Faulkner, McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Carson McCullers, Zora Neale Hurston—I would rather not escape them. I'd like them to have way more influence on my writing than they already do. Sometimes, you'll get questions like, "How do you escape your influences?" I'm too good at escaping my influences. I want them to have *more* influence on me.

(Audience Member) I'd like to ask a clarifing question about your comment on trust versus intellect. I hear a lot of writers say, "Trust the process," or "Get it all out on the page." How do you step away from the framework you've already created in your mind while you're doing a project?

I think the reason that you've heard those phrases so many times is that I don't think there's a one-size-fits-all answer. What happens for you on the page is different than what happens for me. I think what we're really talking about when we talk about trust, when we talk about patience, is, maybe this description, or this passage, or this argument, or whatever it is that you're writing, this whole book might not be where you want it to be yet, but don't rush the sentence, or the book, just because it's suddenly gotten hard or has started to feel like a puzzle that you need to solve. Instead of trying to think your way through it, and accelerating the process, slow down and let the story, or the paper, or the essay, guide you. I can give you countless examples from my work when this has happened. I'll give you an example for fiction writing. A story is like a car. The writer is supposed to be in the passenger seat, the character is supposed to be driving. But wait, we haven't gone far enough. I want the character to be driving the car. I want the secondary characters to be in the passenger seat. I want the supporting characters to be in the back seat, and I want the author to be locked in the trunk. I want the author to have no idea where the story is going. I want the author to just be along for the ride. When the story gets to the end, the characters come around and unlock the trunk, and all of this light pours in. You, as the author, get out and look around, and you find out that you are where you were meant to be going all along. You get there because you surrendered to the characters as opposed to trying to control the characters. I know that's very fiction based, but I do think it's true, even when you're constructing an argument.

(Audience Member) What's your opinion of the audio book of We Burn Daylight*?*

I have not listened to the audio book for the novel, but I did offer input for the audio book. The publisher sends audition tapes from all of the actors who want to be in the book, and I get to pick. But I've already spent ten years with these characters. I don't want to listen to them anymore.

(Audience Member) My question is related to research. You said, "When you run into a problem with research, or when you're researching too much, or you feel like you don't know enough, it's really just that you are giving into your fears." This reminded me of something a professor told me about writer's block. They said, "writer's block is just plain fear. Writer's block doesn't exist." What are your thoughts about that?

It sounds like your professor is a genius. I can really get on a pedestal about writer's block.

Nobody wants me to get on a pedestal, so I'll just tell you how to solve it: lower your

standards. The poet Marvin Bell had the best description of this that I've ever heard. You're in school, and the professor says you've got a big final essay due in six weeks. You get that assignment, and you think, six weeks, that's so much time. I can for sure get an A on that, so I don't need to start writing right away. Weeks go by, but you still think you can get an A, no problem whatsoever. You don't start writing for another couple of weeks. By now, you're down to three weeks. You're thinking, things are getting busy in the semester. But if I work really, really, really hard between now and the due date, I can get an A. Now, you're down to two weeks, and you're thinking, Okay, I don't know if I can get an A in two weeks. But I can probably do enough to get a B. It's not going to sink my GPA. So, you don't start writing. Suddenly, it's the night before the assignment is due, and you're thinking, all I have to do is turn in anything, and I won't get a zero. I can do really well on the final exam, and I'll still pass the course. All I have to do is turn in anything at all. It's the night before, and that's when you start writing. Most people will see that process as procrastination. You waited too long. It goes back to what your professor was saying: It's fear. If the goal is to get an A—those standards are way, way too high. You're never going to start if the goal is to write a novel, or a story, or a poem, that's going to win a bunch of awards, if it's going to become a national bestseller or going to be made into a movie. The standards are too high. What you have to do is lower your standards. Once you lower them far enough, you'll start writing. Once you start writing, it's a lot easier to keep writing.

I want the author to just be along for the ride. When the story gets to the end, the characters come around and unlock the trunk, and all of this light pours in. You, as the author, get out and look around, and you find out that you are where you were meant to be going all along.

(Audience Member) You've talked a lot about how painful a process writing is. I'm not much of a writer. My husband is the writer, that's why I'm here tonight. Hearing that statement makes me anxious, because I don't want to watch my husband go through that much pain. How do you push through that pain, and is it worth it to you?

This is going to sound like a sound bite. However, it's the God's honest truth. I hate writing. I hate it, but I love having written. I feel so much better, so much more myself, so much more at peace, and so much more connected to humanity after I've written. So, is it worth it? Absolutely. The trick is to make this thing that is incredibly, incredibly difficult to be as manageable as possible. You have to go in with your eyes open. Writing is probably the hardest thing anybody is ever going to choose to do. You're going to go through harder things in life, but you're not going to ***choose*** to go through those things. You're going to lose the people you love. You're going to have money trouble. You're going to get sick. All of these things are, unfortunately, going to happen. You're not choosing to do that. Your husband is ***choosing*** to write. Everybody in this room is ***choosing*** to write. It's the hardest thing you'll ever ***choose*** to do. And to make it worse, it's maybe the only thing that gets harder the longer that you do it. Think about everything else you've learned to do in your life—walking, talking, riding a bicycle, swimming—those are really hard at first. Now, you probably don't fall very often. You fell all the time when you were learning to walk. Writing is really easy at first, and then it gets much, much more difficult. At the end, you're connected to your

community and to the human experience in ways that are unparalleled and profound.

(Audience Member) I have a clarifying question about having goals and not having expectations. You can't write for other people. You can't write for awards. You can't write for grants and accolades. But you need to have goals in life. Otherwise, you're just writing endless pages. Don't you need to have goals?

I had a goal to go to college, and if I didn't have that goal, I wasn't going to be able to learn how to write. I have a goal to graduate and write my thesis, and a goal to one day write a book. How do I manage having those goals, but not buy into the idea that I need my writing to be a bestseller?

It sounds like you're answering your own question. The goal is to write a book. The goal is not to write a bestseller. If you focus on it being a bestseller, that does not position you to write the book that you want to write. If you are thinking about an external validation, you're not writing the book that you want to write. If you focus on writing a book *you* want to write, a book *you* want to *read*, chances are, other people are going to love it as well.

I'm not against goals. I'm against seeking external validation that would put the goal itself in a secondary position to what people feel about what they are writing. I don't want you to write a book that only works if people love it.

(Audience Member) You've said, "Don't write what you know." My professors have given me the opposite advice. I read that you grew up around horses. You've written a lot about horses. What do you mean when you say, "Don't write what you know"? When are you okay with breaking your own rules in your own writing?

I don't think you should listen to anybody's advice—certainly not mine. I will often start with a familiar experience. Maybe it's something from my own lived experience. I will often start there, but I will never finish there. If the story doesn't become smarter than me, if it doesn't become bigger than me, you will never read it. You will never read it because it's uninteresting. I would never share that with the world because it's just about Bret. Who cares about Bret? I will often start with my lived experience, and then take it through draft after draft, year after year, until it has evolved past that origin and become something altogether different. I tend to start there, but I have never finished there.



Courtney Craggett is the author of the story collection *Tornado Season* (Black Lawrence Press, 2019). Her work appears in *Image, The Pinch, Mid-American Review, Baltimore Review, Washington Square Review, CutBank,* and *Monkeybicycle,* among other journals. Originally from Texas, she now lives in Utah and teaches creative writing at Weber State University.

Flipping the Wig

Ben Kruger-Robbins



A Conversation with Julio Torres

As part of Weber State University's Browning Presents! *series sponsored by the Lindquist College of Arts and Humanities, I enjoyed the privilege of engaging with multimedia artist, director, and showrunner Julio Torres in April of 2025 for a wide-reaching, candid, and side-splitting conversation about his creative approaches to media production. Torres remains a vibrantly unorthodox presence in American entertainment, a talent who moves seamlessly among genres and forms without ever sacrificing his biting humor, soulful aesthetic charms, and keen political sensibilities. His accomplished television and film output includes memorable, deeply idiosyncratic sketches for* Saturday Night Live *such as "Papyrus" and "Wells for Boys," two acclaimed surrealism-tinged comedy series for HBO –* Los Espookys *and* Fantasmas *– and a critically lauded stand-up special,* My Favorite Shapes, *for the same network.*

I introduced Torres's deeply personal feature film Problemista *for our university community as a work that activates coalitions of the marginalized in order to conjure a more just, and deliciously weird, shared future. Torres proves as uninhibited and imaginative in casual conversation as in his body of work, expounding with an effervescent ease and self-effacing wit upon the social observations, creative collaborations, and cultural concerns that influence his art. Our talk veered wildly from topics of community building and philosophies of creative expression to personal anxieties and inhibitions, only to end on a simultaneously moving and silly anecdote about literal wig flipping. The joyful ephemerality of what Torres terms his media "confections" resonates in the clever, incisive, and ultimately indispensable insights reproduced below.*

Julio, thank you so much for being with us tonight. It's no secret that I am enamored with your film, TV, and stand- up work. Your media work is so imaginative. Your approach to satire is consistent throughout your body of work – stand-up, variety programming, television series, and film. But it is also inherently humanistic. Your work contains elements of the surreal and seems to be inspired by fantasy, social commentary, and autobiography. Will you talk about how you began to develop your comedic style in your early writing and performances? Where did some of these sensibilities come from?

I moved to New York because I wanted to be a screenwriter and television writer. I couldn't really find a way in, so I started doing stand-up comedy and open mics that were available to anyone.

I wanted to be a screenwriter and a television writer, but it was just an abstract idea based on the fact that I enjoyed movies and TV. I didn't go to school for it. I went to the New School in New York because I really wanted to be in New York and because they offered me a scholarship. When I got there, they asked me, "What are you going to major in?" I said, "Screenwriting." They said, "We don't have that." So, I said, "Okay, that's fine." (Laughter) In the end, I chose a vague creative writing degree. At WSU, it seems like you gain technical skills and tangible knowledge with a creative writing degree. The New School is a school about *ideas*. When I graduated, I had written a little bit here and there. I had kernels of what I thought my *style* was. But, to be honest, I still haven't grown out of that imitation period that I feel every artist goes through where you're so informed by your influences that you're just mimicking them.

When I decided that I wanted to start doing stand-up comedy, the first open mic sets I did were mostly me doing impressions of what I thought a stand-up comedian did. It was then that I realized that stand-up isn't really anything other being given a set amount of time in front of a microphone, and you can do anything you want with that time. I started adding a bit of my creative short story writing abilities into my stand-up, and it became literary. I started reading these micro short stories to my audiences and that's when the shows became more conceptual. I was reading from a notebook, when someone remarked on how that uncomfortable character I was portraying was really funny. (Laughter) I wasn't really performing a character, but then, I decided to lean into it. Something clicked when that person said what they said. They meant it as a compliment, but I have always felt like Alien in some form, so it felt like an interesting thing to lean on. I kept going down that path.

Through stand-up, I auditioned for "showcases." NBC had something that wasn't a TV show, but more of a tax write-off for them called "Stand-up for Diversity." (Laughter) You'd wait on a sidewalk, all night, to do thirty seconds of stand-up for these judges, who were NBC executives that were flown in on the company credit card to judge this event. I went, and I got through to the second round in L.A. From there, I met the person who became my manager. I think that's a big part of show business gatekeeping. You're probably not going to be able to apply for a TV writing job unless you have a manager. This all sounds like it happened fast. It didn't. This all happened over years. I started working with my manager, and I found work writing for *Saturday Night Live*. In the same way I approached stand-up, I was mimicking the standard of what I thought writing for *SNL* was supposed to be. My first couple of trials of writing sketches there were too informed by what I thought a *Saturday Night Live* sketch was supposed to be. Then, I realized that if my stand-up was kind of like my fiction writing, maybe my sketch-writing can be like my stand-up. My first sketches there were very voice-over heavy. I was just sort of *reading* my sketches. The film and TV work are kind of like the sketches. With every new medium, you discover something new about your style.

You don't *decide* what your style is going to be, unless you're a pop star. They *tell* you what your style is going to be. (Laughter)

You've talked a lot about the sensibilities of developing a comedic voice, and yet so much of your work is physical, tactile, and overtly visual. There's a fascination with props, with puppetry, with models, with ways that you can move from one side of the stage to the other via unique obstacles. How did you start to build visual and physical sensibility into your work? Shape and color seem to factor into all of your comedic work – especially in your SNL *sketches and in what you've done recently.*

I was raised in a very visual household. My mom is an architect by trade. My dad is very artistic. He's not an artist per se, but he's very visually driven, and very visually stimulated. We always had art books around the house. My mother gets tired of the weight of the furniture, so she moves it around and paints the walls different colors. It's nothing fancy, but she is constantly imbuing life into a space and won't let things get old. She would always remark that she hated it when you'd go into someone's house, and you could tell that things hadn't moved in years. (Laughter) She thought it was unnerving. I began to appreciate the visual side of myself through my parents.

In the process of creating your film, television, and stand-up work, you take on a lot of roles simultaneously. You're directing and you're writing. Oftentimes, you're adopting an alter ego or a unique character. I'm curious how you negotiate between these different roles, and whether you prefer one aspect of media-making over others?

It happened incrementally. Because of the way television writing is structured—particularly on *SNL*— it's not like you write something, submit it, and then forget about it. You see it through production, you're on set, you're working with the director, you're giving notes to the actors, you're pretty hands-on during the process. The full burden of director doesn't fall on you, though, really. So, I started exclusively writing, and then I started acting and show-running. I did that job, but I'm still unclear about what exactly "show-running" is. (Laughter) By the time we made *Problemista*, the directing felt like a natural role increment and responsibility. I don't know that I could have done it without everything that came before; it felt easier to be able to have control over all those things.

In bringing these various roles together and trying to figure out what a certain role is, *what the job of a show-runner constitutes, the process of becoming a multi-media artist is one that's formative, one that's based on collaborations, one that's based on cultivat-*

My first couple of trials of writing sketches there were too informed by what I thought a Saturday Night Live *sketch was supposed to be. Then, I realized that if my stand-up was kind of like my fiction writing, maybe my sketch-writing can be like my stand-up. My first sketches there were very voice-over heavy. I was just sort of* reading *my sketches. The film and TV are kind of like the sketches. With every new medium, you discover something new about your style. You don't* decide *what your style is going to be, unless you're a pop star. They* tell *you what your style is going to be.*

ing relationships with people that you have a trusting relationship with. I'm curious about the professional relationships you built in the early stages of your career—whether on Saturday Night Live*, or the comedy circuit in New York City. How do you determine which folks you want to collaborate with repeatedly, and who you want to build an artistic community with during the process of developing your work?*

I have met an abundance of friends and performers through the Brooklyn comedy scene who I now consider the core of my creative family. I'm friends with a couple cinematographers, my editor, my composer. It's a process, to grow your creative family. I like the idea of working within a community. I don't want my creative life to feel like something that I clock in and out of. I don't want to see the people I'm working with as colleagues; I want to see them like a little family.

Are there certain artistic affinities that you look for when collaborating, consistently, with a composer, a director of photography, or various co-stars? What are the qualities you seek when realizing a particular artistic vision?

A compatible sense of humor is obviously very important to me. It's also about finding out who makes you feel good to be around. There are a lot of extremely talented people who are unnerving, right? (Laughter) So, who are you excited to see? For example, my friend Ana [Fabrega], who created *Los Espookys* with me—I love her. I love being around her. Also, my friend Martine [Gutierrez], who is in *Fantasmas* with me. There's my friend, Spike [Einbinder], who I've known forever. Funnily enough, Tilda Swinton is actually a very calming presence for me. (Laughter) You meet up with these people to write, but 50% of that time is just spent gossiping. (Laughter)

You mentioned Los Espookys *and your collaboration with Ana. How did the premise for this show come about? There are these four friends who have a shared love of horror, and it leads them on a trick-scare enterprise. Also, what conversations, reflections, and alone-time conversations inspired the formation of your character, Andrés Valdez, in that show? Do you see him in yourself?*

If you haven't seen the show, it's very difficult to explain. (Laughter) During the few interviews we did for the show, interviewers would ask, "Why should people watch this show?" And I'd say, "I don't know, we made it and we think it's funny?" (Laughter)

Fred Armisen sold a show to HBO, where the only promise that was made was that it was a show about horror-makeup people in Mexico City. He wanted to do a show in Mexico City. And he thought that prosthetics artists were really interesting, so he wanted to do a show about them. He'd already done *Documentary Now!* and *Portlandia*, so he was capable of selling a show with just a loose idea. I can't do that. (Laughter)

Fred met me when I was writing for *SNL*. He met my friend, Ana, when she auditioned to be in *Portlandia*—she didn't get the part, but he thought she was funny. He didn't know that Ana and I were really close. He reached out to both of us separately and said, "I don't know you well, but do you want to write this, and maybe be in it?" It was a dream come true. We met up and started talking about stuff. His producer made notes on what we were talking about. We brought our various interests to the project, and that's how it all happened.

As for the character I play, I wanted to play someone who was both vampy and robotic at the same time. So, like a vampire-cyborg, or something. (Laughter) It was very, *look* first, *character* second. (Laughter) I've learned that a lot of great actors work that way. I'm not saying that *I'm* a *really* great actor! (Laughter) It sounds dumber than it is, it's a legitimate form of acting. The acting was by far the most difficult thing. I did not have an easy time.

What was particularly difficult about acting?

Memorizing lines and not looking into the lens. (Laughter) They were very basic things, but I was so stressed during that job. I was like, why would I have the hubris of casting myself in this? (Laughter)

Does that sensation of anxiety, and the circumstances of how you came into the project, in any way tie into the character? Does Andrés's ambivalence about his wealth as the inheritor of a chocolate company, his desire to both be with and to break away from the confines of his family, and instead to go out and procure another lifestyle, say anything about that?

It would have been great to have you on set and connect those dots for me. (Laughter) What I was doing was going back to Ana, and asking, "Was that horrible? Do I suck?" And she'd say, "No, I don't think so." I spent a lot of time being pissed at myself. I'd mess up one line and just be devastated.

There's nothing more humiliating than failing at a job that you are unqualified to do in front of a whole crew. (Laughter)

How did some of your investments in anxiety and narratives that are a little adrift and irresolute play into your work? What do you find compelling about journeys based in anxiety or unease?

I'm a very anxious person. I had a very anxious upbringing. I gravitate toward people who are fixated on one specific thing. Tilda's character in *Problemista* is a good example of that. She just wants those databases to work—that's *all* she wants. I am obsessed with obsessed people. It's a through line in all of my work.

I'm a very anxious person. I had a very anxious upbringing. I gravitate toward people who are fixated on one specific thing. Tilda's character in Problemista *is a good example of that. She just wants those databases to work – that's* all *she wants. I am obsessed with obsessed people. It's a through line in all of my work.*

You can sense an affinity for people who are defined by their differences, by their outsider status. That is what brings a sense of uniqueness to a show like Los Espookys *and* Fantasmas.

You mentioned that part of the reason that Los Espookys *made it on air was through the support it received from Fred Armisen and the industrial clout other collaborators on* SNL *carried. What was HBO's response to this show? Was there any apprehension from them on this project? How did they feel about putting a bilingual show on air, when the vast majority of the dialog was in Spanish, with a number of overtly cultural and consumerist critiques embedded within the show?*

HBO was very permissive. They were busy with *Big Little Lies* and *Game of Thrones*. (Laughter) They were just like, "Yeah, it's fine." (Laughter) In my experience, both as a creator and also as a viewer, HBO was totally okay with letting a show be the best possible version of itself—sometimes they are hits, sometimes they are misses—but those shows always feel true to themselves in a way that I really appreciate. There is no such thing as indie TV, but there is TV that is unburdened by the machine, and I feel like they do a good job of making that happen.

That is a fascinating consideration about finding a penetrable corporate entity, but

also being able to fly under the radar of corporate dictates. You bring a unique voice to these works. You have a compelling vision that is antithetical to what media entities within the horizontally integrated environment that we're in right now – the conglomerate media environment – lean toward. It can be very difficult to pursue or not get pushback. How much of that is defiance? How much of it is about finding appropriate working relationships? What were some of your strategies to not sacrifice the integrity of the vision you want to present?

I think the entertainment industry works on *types* and what has proven success. They constantly want to recreate that. They want lightning to strike twice. Very early on, I felt like I wasn't any one of those *types*. It was a waste of time for me to try to emulate one of those types, because I was going to do it unsuccessfully. I decided I would do what I was capable of doing. I decided that I was like the artistic little treat they get to have on the side. (Laughter) You can remove all of the work I did on *SNL*, and those episodes will still air, no one *needs* what I do. But I have been fortunate that people *want* what I do. No market research is going to tell them to hire me. (Laughter) There is no one saying, "We're looking for a Julio-esque kind of a project." (Laughter) I am just happy that there are some people who have said, "Okay." (Laughter)

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I think that product will be much, much more in demand. I think "confections" is such an appropriate term, because these works are so delectable. They don't patronize or condescend to the audience. They're fun, they have a camp quality to them, and yet they're so thematically rich. I want to ask about the politics that inform your work. When watching your shows and your standup specials, and when watching Problemista *with the WSU community last night, it's clear that these are works that upend the politics of U.S. centrism in this country – thinking that it's the center of the moral universe – while simultaneously mocking crass corporate entities and officials who communicate through PR speak. It seems like a special point of contention in a lot of this work. The bodily manifestation of corporations like Bank of America is especially funny. I'm curious as what you see as some of the more absurd elements of American life, of corporate ethos, and how you write these situations, or these absurdities?*

It's not like I put on my "I want to have a message hat" or my "political hat." It just so happens to be that our lives are inherently political. What makes us happy? What makes us sad? What angers us? What delights us? It's all housed in a political context. So, when I'm expressing frustration with a bank, or with a government, or a corporation, it's all through *lived* experience. It's not philosophy in a vacuum. It's about how these topics are informing my day-to-day life and the day-to-day life of the people that I love. *Problemista* isn't a documentary. It's not an intellectual exercise on unpacking the immigration system. It's about sharing the *feelings* that I had at the time, and the feelings that I had

at the time happen to be tied up with the political context of the time. I lead with emotion, and emotion is so often informed by politics, by the context that we're living in.

How do you work to highlight certain forms of cultural privilege that might otherwise be unrecognized? Or, how do you work to complicate those forms of privilege? I think the character Bingham is a representative example of this in Problemista*. He might not recognize the ease of his livelihood in particular ways. How do you think about these issues and realize them in a way that isn't patronizing, isn't didactic, and yet might present to a broader audience that these are things they might overlook in their day-to-day lives?*

In that case, the character Bingham exists to unnerve my character, Alejandro. Bingham is a great source of jealousy for my character. But, on paper, he's perfectly fine. What's his crime? That he got an internship? What was he supposed to do? ***Not*** work? That is the push and pull that I have with a lot of people who unnerve me. I never want to write something that says, "I'll never give an immigrant ***this*** job," because the people who I've encountered are ***not*** malicious. Because it asks, "What is the baggage that we are bringing to every interaction?" "What lens am I seeing through, and is that something that I am really exploring?"

When two people have an argument, they aren't having an argument in a vacuum. They're bringing whatever else happened earlier that day, earlier in their life, with them. ***Problemista*** is keen on unpacking the point of view of ***my*** character, Alejandro. So, it feels like an ***indictment*** of Bingham. But if the camera followed Bingham around, then, maybe, Alejandro would come off as annoying.

These characters, and the worlds they inhabit, exist along a continuum. They are worlds that are made to break down binaries and reductive forms of definition. Colleagues of mine talk about "plasticity" in terms of representation and identity in ways that we're concerned about.

The hollow dropping of "representation" is something that me and my peers think about a lot. Now, some people say it was just a marketing plan that failed. It's just about money, right? We knew that, but they were gaslighting us into thinking that we were special, or that you thought we're special. I'm not a cynical person, but I am one who asks "Why?" and I am a little incredulous.

I want to ask you about a valuable contradiction of irresolution. I noticed a tendency in your work to move towards the arena of optimism. You tend to provide what certain characters might determine as "happy endings," procuring a dream that they had sought, despite all of the turmoil that they experience along the way. As you indicated earlier, these are journeys that aren't devoid of hardship; they aren't optimistic in a vacant or apolitical sense. To what extent do you consider your work to be optimistic in the face of dire circumstances? What importance does that optimism, that sense of hope, have for you?

I am, by nature, a glass half full person. I was raised to be an optimist. That is a default of my work, not a diagnosis on the world; it is more of a demeanor. The circumstances of my life have allowed me to be an optimist. Because I do work that is true to me, that's how it comes out.

Thank you. Let's take some questions from the audience. (Applause)

(Audience Member) I'd like to go back to your remarks about the film-family that you've forged. What was your role as a director like within that found family? Did

your role develop naturally, or was there a rotation, or sharing of responsibilities?

I think people who consider themselves to be writers, performers, or directors respect the integrity of what we are *each* doing. I ask them to be in *my* work. And then, when my friends are directing projects, and they think I align with their work, I'll be there for them. It almost feels like we take turns. We do *your* thing, then we do *my* thing. You'll also see people fall into the disciplines that they are the most attracted to. I have friends who make *really* good directors. And then I have friends who have no interest in directing, but they are *really* good career actors. I have friends who are only interested in writing. I have friends who say, "Screw this, I'm going to go paint." It feels communal, and not hierarchical, because none of those decisions are fixed beyond the one project that we're currently working on.

(Audience Member) I'd like to ask about fear and apprehension when entering the world of TV writing. Do you have any inspiration or advice?

What's the worst that could happen? You don't have a job that you never really had in the first place? What are they going to do? *Fire you?* (Laughter) You really have nothing to lose. I mean, I don't know *your* situation. (Laughter) I don't know if you're leaving a whole family. (Laughter) If you think that you *are* funny, and if you want to do it, then there's no reason why you shouldn't go through with it.

I always caution against a goal or a dream being only one specific *job*, as opposed to one emotional *interest* or *need* that you have. If you like being funny, and you like writing funny things, then that will always be able to offer you a source of joy. You don't want to be the person who is obsessed with Harvard, just so you can say, "I went to Harvard." What about it is so interesting?

I always caution against a goal or a dream being only one specific job*, as opposed to one emotional* interest *or* need *that you have. If you like being funny, and you like writing funny things, then that will always be able to offer you a source of joy. You don't want to be the person who is obsessed with Harvard, just so you can say, "I went to Harvard."*

The *SNL* element is actually something that comes up a lot. Every year, *SNL* auditions happen. And every year, every aspiring comedian does a little pony show. Some of them do it *so* begrudgingly. I'll say, "Do you think you could *enjoy* working on *SNL*?" They say, "No." And I say, "Why do it? There are other places."

(Audience Member) What are some coping mechanisms you can use when you are, inevitably, faced with a time when you find yourself in over your head?

Let's figure out the answer as I talk. (Laughter) When I was co-running *Los Espookys*, we had a lot of wig problems. (Laughter) My friend, Greta [Titelman], plays the American Ambassador, Melanie Gibbons. This is going to get very "nuts and bolts," so, forgive me. Here in the U.S., it's very common for actors to wear wigs, *normal* wigs. Hair people in the U.S. are well trained in installing wigs when an actor needs a wig.

We shot *Los Espookys* in Chile, where actors, God forbid, use their normal hair. (Laughter) The director for this episode decided that the actress needed a wig. They got her a wig and were about to roll in her first scene, and her wig looked *insane*. (Laughter) She

looked like she was a spy; it was a *hard* bang, the wig was *clearly* fake. (Laughter) As show runner, not checking what this wig was going to look like, and just blindly assuming that everything was going to be fine, was on *me*. We got her a different wig, but we had already shot scenes of her in this terrible wig. So, we just gave her a line, a line that says, "Nobody tells me no, I can do anything, I can even undo bangs." (Laughter) So, luckily, we had already created a world where things didn't really matter. (Laughter) But, there were no freak-outs. There was no, "What are we going to do? She looks like shit!" It was like, "You look great. You look really hot!" (Laughter) "If it looks bad, we'll fix it later. Let's keep going." You have to bluff a little bit. Because, if you storm off, it's a problem. Sets are very porous in that way. The mood of a set can easily be contaminated with bad producing or leadership. Sometimes, you walk into a set, and you can tell people really don't like each other. People are working a minimum of twelve-hour days here in the U.S. A lot of crew members are severely underpaid. You've got to make sure the ecosystem is functioning well, so that even if you're freaking out about a wig, and you know it's your fault, you say, "Everything is great! We'll deal with it later." (Laughter)

Your calm approach to wig-tastrophies is an appropriate note to end our conversation on. Thank you so much.

Thank you.



Ben Kruger-Robbins is an assistant professor in the Film Studies program at Weber State University. His research focuses on queer involvement within both American media industries and audience cultures, and he is currently writing a book about gay legitimization through television awards organizations. His work has been published in *New Review of Film and Television Studies, The Velvet Light Trap, Refractory, Sexualities, Flow,* and the edited anthologies *Camp TV of the 1960s* (Oxford UP, 2023) and *The Politics of Twin Peaks* (Lexington, 2019).



Suzanne Sbarge

2025 Artist-in-Residence
Ogden Contemporary Arts

Dancing Bird, mixed media on panel, 60” × 48,” 2025



Anomalies, installation view. Photo by Tristan Sadler





Shapeshift, stop-motion animation detail, 3-channel video installation, 2025

The openness with which Sbarge approaches her art is well-suited for the freeing, yet challenging, environment of Ogden Contemporary Arts's (OCA) Artist Residency program. During her residency, Suzanne was invited to create a full body of work in just under two months, culminating in a solo exhibition. This creative space allowed her to expand beyond her two-dimensional collage and painting process, as she delved into stop-motion animation, cyanotypes, and three-dimensional printing, with full organizational support from OCA and the local community. Sbarge engaged with the Utah landscape and culture, opening up new perspectives and subject matter for her layered compositions. Through community collaborations and workshops, she extended her Jungian dream world outward, asking students to let their imagination take the lead while considering their own migration and relationship to the natural world. Sbarge designed a culminating mobile exhibition titled "Real/Surreal: Stories of Antelope Island," which features elements from students' collages on an Ogden City bus wrap and digital billboards throughout Ogden and Salt Lake City.

As her OCA exhibition title references, anomalies are deviations from what is considered "normal," such as errors, rare events, or new phenomena. The title is fitting for Sbarge's recent studio experience on many levels and was originally inspired by one of the hybrid creatures that populates her dreamlike universe—a deer figure whose digital distortion through the 3D printing process sparked conversation on how this technology can reshape image and meaning.



Deer, 3D print, 9.125" x 10" x 4," 2025. Photo by Zane Smart

Sbarge's characters, which migrate across mediums, are anomalies in themselves: fluid when it comes to species and gender, they exist in realms that layer time and space, inspiring reflection on the interconnectivity of all life.

The process-oriented and tangible nature of collage lends itself to happenstance and deviations. Sbarge is guided by the pull of her materials and the subconscious exploration that happens through touch and experimentation. Her work, while playful and whimsical in its creation, stems from deep awareness and curiosity about the world around her. At the heart of this exhibition is the delicate ecosystem of Antelope Island and the Great Salt Lake within the context of the last 150 years of the area's evolution.

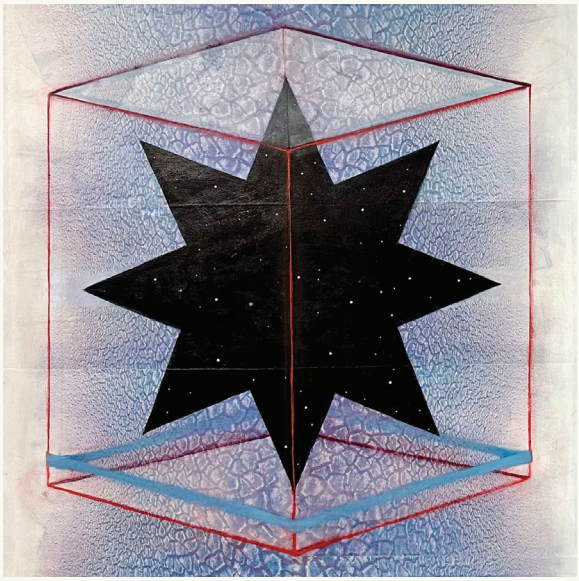
The vastness of Great Salt Lake and its mineral shimmer is also reflected in Sbarge's cyanotypes, a new process for the artist that relies on salt, sunlight, and water to create rich cyan blue photographic images. Enamored by this deep Prussian blue, Suzanne enriched nearly every surface of her work with this intense color, from large-scale paintings to three-dimensional printed objects and animations. She observes, "This process felt connected to the elements at Great Salt Lake and drew on my background in photography and alternative processes. The deep Prussian blue became part of the vocabulary of this new work, providing the tone of a dream-like space and a way to engage with historic photography. Like collage, cyanotypes became a way for me to tweak reality and reflect on the impact of time on people, animals, and the environment."



Suzanne Sbarge at work in her OCA studio, photo by Austin Luckett



Woman in the Mirror: Antelope, cyanotype, 17" x 13," 2025. Photo by Zane Smart



Star Cube, mixed media on panel, 30" x 30," 2025

The development of her characters and their mysterious worlds stems from the artist's initial visit to Antelope Island, where she found that each species of wildlife, from bison to bobcats, has its own story to tell. She was particularly interested in the return of the white pelican – once driven away when the shrinking lake exposed species to predators – as a symbol of hope and adaptation. The bird's story also inspired reflections on migrations of both humans and animals across time and geography, a continuing narrative that weaves throughout the exhibition. The large herd of free-roaming bison on the island is another key inspiration for the artist. She says, "In Indigenous ecological philosophy, animals are seen as kin, and the relationship with bison sustained thousands of years of human life before European colonization and holds deep spiritual significance.



Herd, mixed media on panel, 36" x 48," 2025

"As climate change redraws boundaries between species through extinction and adaptation, and technology forges new pathways into an uncertain future, Sbarge's hybrid bodies are emblems of empathy, survival, and transformation."

Real/Surreal: Stories of Antelope Island

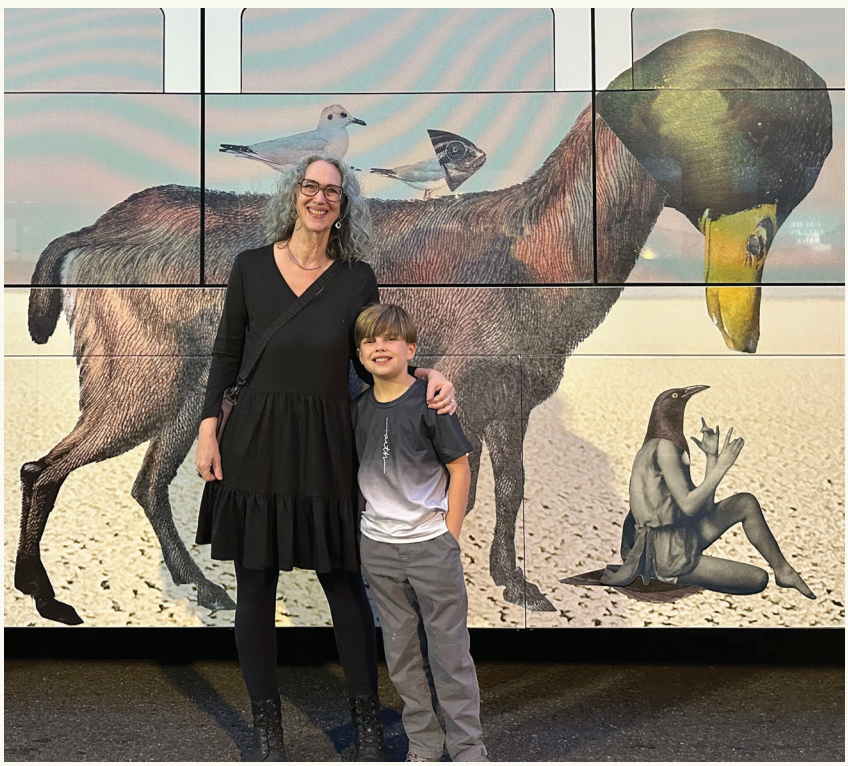
Community public art project led by OCA Artist-in-Residence Suzanne Sbarge



Real / Surreal, Ogden city bus wrap, street side



Liam, workshop participant, and Suzanne Sbarge at the opening of *Anomalies*



“The colonial campaign of eradication nearly destroyed bison and Indigenous ways of life together. The modern conservation narrative that began without Indigenous voices now intersects with contemporary movements for tribal-led restoration of wild herds. While the conservation of bison on Antelope Island prevented further extinction, it also represents a legacy where colonization transformed an Indigenous relative into a managed species under state and commercial control.” As climate change redraws boundaries among species through extinction and adaptation, and technology forges new pathways into an uncertain future, Sbarge’s hybrid bodies are emblems of empathy, survival, and transformation.

One of Sbarge’s community workshops was held for the Venture course in the Humanities at Weber State University, which included students from Kuwait, Mexico, Italy, Guatemala, Colombia, and Guam. When asked what they want to imagine for themselves in the future, answers included freedom, being in Mexico, human unity, world peace, and healed souls.



Real / Surreal, Ogden city bus wrap, entrance side



Tawni, workshop participant, Venture program, WSU



YESCO digital billboard, 2025



Flying Pelican, mixed media on panel, 30” x 30,” 2025



Avocet, mixed media on panel, 30” x 30,” 2025



Shapeshift (detail), stop-motion animation, 2025



Specimens (detail), cyanotype installation, 2025



(Above) *Descent*, 2025, mixed media on panel. Image source: Ogden Municipal Park looking east, 1930s, courtesy of Weber State University Special Collections and University Archives. (Right) Suzanne Sbarge. Photo by Austin Luckett



Suzanne Sbarge's collaborators and assistants on this project include Simone Baron, Chloe Kinnavongsa, Natalie Skowbo, Zane Smart, Dylan Totaro, and Zayne Wilcox. This residency, exhibition, workshops, and public art project are made possible by support to Ogden Contemporary Arts from The National Endowment for the Arts, Ogden City Arts, Utah Division of Arts & Museums, Utah Office of Tourism, George S. & Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation, Rocky Mountain Power, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Weber County RAMP, and Giv Communities, with additional support from Lamar Advertising and YESCO.

The Highest Mountain from the Center of Earth

Kent Nelson



Mount Chimborazo, Ecuador, from the North. Photo credit: Dick Culbert, Wikimedia Commons

The room is dark except for the slide on the screen—a photograph of Mt. St. Elias, 18,008 feet, on the southeast coast of Alaska, the seventh highest mountain in North America. This is what Harold Morton tells us. Twenty-five people, maybe thirty, are seated on folding chairs and benches in the basement of the Episcopal Church, mostly locals from our mountain town, but also friends of locals, who, like the speaker, are here to run the Hard Rock 100.

My husband and Taro's wife, Jan, are sitting ten feet or so in front of Taro and me and to our right. They arrived several minutes before we did and took good seats but didn't save two for us. Taro's to my left, behind a post at the edge of the room, and he has to lean out to see the screen.

Harold hovers above the slide projector, his face lit from below—a garish mish-mash of beard, nose, and shadow. In quick succession, he shows two slides of Icy Bay, the first taken twenty years ago when he'd climbed Mount Logan, the highest peak in Canada, and the second two months ago from the summit of St. Elias. "You can see how much the ice has receded," he says. "In our lifetime, the beach will be accessible for volleyball."

A titter runs through the crowd. My husband in front nods, as he does whenever someone else voices his own fanatical opinions about the environment. In our house we don't flush yellow, can't use aerosols, or toss the weekly newspaper. We recycle

junk mail, green glass, and cardboard. In winter, he keeps the house at fifty-five degrees.

The Episcopal Church hasn't heard of energy conservation, though. Hell couldn't be hotter than this place. I peel off my jacket and lay it on my lap—the two cocktails I've drunk before may play a role.

The next slide goes up. "Mount McKinley, *Denali*," Harold says, as if he's in with the natives. "Twenty-three thousand, three hundred feet, the highest mountain in North America."

Harold has climbed the highest peaks on all the continents, which, on this evening, is what we're paying homage to. To make the Denali conquest more challenging, he and his fellow climbers flew to a glacier and climbed a little-used route. Harry points out for the uninitiated that Colorado's fourteeners are mere foothills compared to *Denali*. Our mountains are nobodies. *We're* nobodies, to Harold, except when we "ooh" and "aah."

Coming to this program was my husband Nick's idea. It's Sunday, so we were having gin and tonics on Taro and Jan's patio. Nick is Napoleon reincarnated, and he pushed Taro aside and took over grilling the kabobs, all the while paying surreptitious homage to Jan's legs. Janelle's tall and thin, no breasts to speak of, but a slender waist. She had on shorts and a T-shirt that said GET HIGH ON COLORADO from my husband's souvenir shop. Meanwhile, Taro brought up the recent arrest of the county deputy for distributing meth.

"Cops are people, too," Nick said. "Colorado allows us marijuana. I mean, man, you don't want to know what goes on in this town."

"Like what?" Taro asked.

"Keep keeping your head down, Taro," Nick said. "You're the only honest person around."

"He undervalues his labor by half," Jan said. "Is that honest?"

"I have to compete with the excellent Mexican stone men," Taro said. "I have to charge what they do."

"Get rid of the foreigners," Nick said. "You could make more working for me selling T-shirts and machine-made arrowheads to the turkeys."

"Taro's a foreigner," Jan said, "but he likes to suffer."

Nick laughed, as if that were a joke.

During this banter, I sipped my gin and tonic. I admired Taro for his principles and his patience. He was Japanese, and, true, though he'd lived in the States twenty years, he was as much a foreigner as a Mexican or a Somali.

"A slide show's on tonight at the church," Nick said. "A hotshot mountain climber is going to entertain the masses. Anyone want to go?"

"Not Taro," Jan said. "Am I right, hon? You'd rather watch 'Dancing with the Stars.'"

"This guy might teach you something," Nick said, "like how to take a risk."

"When are the kabobs going to be ready?" I asked. "I'm hungry."

Old Harold's now showing pictures of Popocatépetl, Huascaran, and Aconcagua—these are the names he recites. All are distant shots of the peaks in clear weather, followed by a view from the supposed top of each peak and a picture of the successful climbers. I want to hear a dramatic story—a rope's breaking, half the party's being swept away by an avalanche, finding a mastodon frozen in ice. But, no, here's the mountain. Here's the proof we climbed it, as if a photograph were proof of anything.

Nick and Jan are hanging on Harold's every word. Nick has his arm around the back of her chair. Fine and good. I glance at Taro, who's peering around the post. The light from the screen shines on his face—the flat nose, the dark hair pulled back from his forehead in a ponytail, eyes shadowy but respectful. He gives me a sideways half-smile.

"Chimborazo," Harold says. On the screen is a snowy peak against green highlands and a cobalt sky—graceful, if a mountain can be graceful. "It's twenty thousand, five hundred, and sixty-one feet, which, because it's on the equator, is the highest mountain from the center of earth."

We wait a few seconds, and another slide comes up, this one of a sleepy street where kids in ragged clothes are playing soccer. "Those of you who don't believe in climate change should go to Puntarenas, Chile," Harold says. "Children have skin cancer, and no one goes outside during the middle of the day. The ozone hole above town is three times bigger than the area of the United States." He pauses. "From Puntarenas, we flew to Antarctica, twelve hundred miles across the Strait of Magellan."

New slides appear—first an aerial shot of the ocean with ice floating in it, then another of snow and ice and rocks. "The Vinson Massif has seven summits," Harold says. "Someone else before me climbed the wrong summit, but, to get the record, I did my homework." A third slide shows the view from the top of the supposedly correct summit. "As far as you can see in every direction, not one bird or mammal, not one insect, not a plant or a lichen or a microbe."

I admit it looks bleak, but— who knows?— behind the camera could have been a hot tub. "How does he know there are no microbes?" I whisper to Taro.

Taro leans closer, rests his hand on the edge of my chair, and knocks his shoulder into mine. "Shhh," he says.

"Are you watching Nick and Jan?" I whisper.

"No. Yes. No."

I slide my hand over Taro's for a moment, as emotional encouragement, because I'm pretty sure he has the same trouble with Jan as I have with Nick, which is off-kilter arguments, aloneness, and uncertainty. When Nick said Taro was the only honest person in town, he admitted he was among the dishonest. I mean, come on, he sells fake stuff in his shop, fudges on our taxes that he never lets me see, and lies about how much he drinks. But I work in the county assessor's office as an adjunct. What do I know?

Harry shows ten rapid-fire slides of snow and ice—enough to give the impression of deep winter. What a contrast to the room temperature! I'd take off my shirt if I could. The next picture is a beach with palm trees and a photo of Harry in a Speedo with his arm around a tan woman, also in next-to-nothing.

The crowd cheers. It's the first picture of Harry without a parka. He looks about my age, thirty-something, but more fit. "R and R and S," Harold says. "At last."

After all that snow and ice, a beach seems reasonable, though, myself, I've never been a beach person. My parents were Calvinists from Minnesota, and I was trained to modesty. I won't pee with the door open; I don't parade around naked as Nick does; I get into bed with a nightgown on, preferably in the dark. I relax when I drink but regret in the morning.

Harry must be rich is all I can say. Airfare, climbing equipment, porters to get the gear to a base camp—you'd have to have dollars and sense and leisure time. Nick and I work fifty weeks a year to get by, and I know Taro and Jan are worse off than we are. Jan works sporadically—she's got focus issues—and Taro is a stone artist, who gets no recognition. Around his own place are rock walls, sculptures created from different-sized and -shaped stones he's collected, even stone patterns in his terrace and in the walls he makes. In Los Angeles, he'd be rich.

The beach pictures segue to Africa, and Kilimanjaro appears. "The peaceful king of the Serengeti," Harry says. "Hemingway wrote about a leopard high up in the snow on this mountain. What was it doing up there? No one has ever answered that question. But now, look—no snow." That's the visual from the picture. "Believe in the worst," Harry says. "We are doomed."

Up in front, Jan has her head almost on Nick's shoulder. Maybe she's dozing in the heat. Taro sits back straight in his chair and stretches—legs out, arms behind him in the air. We're in the last row, so he doesn't interfere with anyone behind. He relaxes, slides his chair back a few inches, and his puts his hand on my shoulder. He might have meant to hold on to the back of the chair, but his hand's *there* on my skin.

After a few seconds, he takes his hand away and pulls his chair forward.

"Harold's an egomaniac," I say. "Aren't you tired of this?"

Taro gives a shrug. "He's an entertainer." He reaches into the pocket of his shirt and takes out a candy, which he proffers to me. "This might help," he says.

He breaks the gummy candy in half, puts a piece in his mouth, and hands me the other half.

Harold and friends climb Kilimanjaro and move on to Europe. He details ascents of the Matterhorn and the Eiger North Wall—throwing bones to the locals who might have heard of these mountains. After summiting the Eiger, the next slide is of men in red and blue windbreakers laboring along a sunlit crevasse. "Mont Blanc," Harold says. "We had good weather, so it was a walk in the park."

I imagine a walk in the park as being on a leaf-swept path along a river somewhere, not on snow and ice. And not with Nick. In this reverie, a breeze ruffles my hair. What I'd be after is freedom from censure, a world in which my life starts over again.

That can never happen.

We see the climbers hoisting bottles of champagne, and Harold elaborates about how the bottles got up the mountain. While he rambles, I take the extraordinary step of grasping Taro's hand for no reason I can understand—my own need, maybe. He gives me another half-smile, as if he understands, and presses my hand in his.

"After this, I didn't climb for two years," Harold says. "My wife had a baby, and I had to recoup some capital, but I was always planning the next expedition."

Harold doesn't explain how he recouped capital—importing shade-grown coffee, selling electric cars, or working for world peace. That he has a wife is a surprise, because I thought the "S" in "R and R and S" was sex.

Whatever. The slide of Mont Blanc and the champagne is replaced by whiteness on the screen, and the room lights come up.

"We're going to take a break," Harold says. "I have one more mountain to climb."

Everyone's stunned by the light, and I withdraw my hand from Taro's. A few people stand up and murmur, and a dozen or so people head toward the bathrooms down the hall. Someone asks why the heat is on.

We're at the back of the room, where Reverend Alford props open the door to the outside so a breeze comes in. "God hadn't invented air-conditioning when the church was built," he says.

Taro does a few knee-bends and touches his toes several times. I look for Nick and Jan, half-expecting they'd find us to talk, but they've disappeared in the crowd up front. A couple approaches Taro and asks him about a patio they want to build, whether a retaining wall would be required, etc., so I drape my coat over the back of my chair and find the drinking fountain. I need to wash down the candy.

Why do architects and builders think men and women occupy a restroom at the same rate? Jeez! It's the church, of course, the most backward institution on the planet. Anyway, in the long pee-line, Gail Weston wants to know whether I can keep her dog for a weekend. "Nick doesn't like dogs," I tell her. "Have you asked Taro?"

"Jan's a bitch," Gail says. "I wouldn't ask them."

"You have another reason not to have a dog," I say.

At last I get my turn, and when I come out, the crowd is settling back into their seats. Nick and Jan cozy up again. I skirt along the edge of the room.

The couple next to Taro and me has moved up closer, so I take one of their seats so that, when Taro gets back, he doesn't have to hide behind the post.

The room goes dark, and Harold puts up a slide of a crowded street with signs in an Asian language no one can read. We're supposed to pick

out Harry—he's the white guy carrying an immense backpack and studying a map. "In Nepal, even finding a mountain was a challenge," he says.

The crowd laughs, but what's funny? All right, he's an entertainer, as Taro said, but now I'm less patient with his condescension and not so fascinated with what he's accomplished with his money. Taro slips into his seat and stretches his legs. Already I'm feeling a floating sensation from the candy.

Harry snaps up another slide—a distant mountain with immense cornices of snow and ice. The audience oohs and aahs. "Everest," Harry says, "Twenty-nine thousand, twenty-eight feet—the mountain of all mountains."

Another slide shows loaded-down Sherpas crossing a rickety bridge over a rushing stream. "It wasn't easy to get there," Harold says. "The equipment—tents, food, climbing gear, including oxygen—we trekked four days to reach the base camp."

Base camp is next, a collection of red, blue, and yellows tents with people in short-sleeved shirts milling around. "We're at nineteen thousand feet," Harry says. "When the sun was out it was hot. When it wasn't, it was twenty below zero."

I sneak a look at Taro, whose eyes are fluttering. "Are you all right?" I whisper.

"Stoned," he says. He lays his hand on my thigh.

Harold shows more pictures of men carrying gear to another camp, of snow coming down and muting the tents, of the interior of a red tent with sleeping bags, of three men playing cards. "We endured three days of hundred-mile-an-hour winds and temps of forty below," he says. "We kept busy as best we could."

Taro's hand feels like a rough glove. For years he's worked stone—carrying, chipping, placing. He's built walls and fireplaces, terraces and shrines. As a gesture of understanding, I cover his hand with mine, which seems innocent enough, except we're in the dark at the back of the room. I run my fingers along the veins of his wrist, the back of his hand, along one finger and another.

On the screen, specks of human beings work their way up an enormous snowfield. "A helicopter followed us," Harry says. "I'm second in line, the one in red. I can't describe the feeling. It was work. It was fear. But you can't allow doubt into your mind."

Taro's hand presses slightly against my thigh, and, though I'm imagining, and *willing*, I know he's too shy to do anything. And he could very well *not* be thinking as I am. Anyway, I reach up under my shirt and, through my bra, touch a nipple. The expected electric impulse runs through my body and between my legs. I move my fingers from one nipple to the other, give a soft murmur, and take my hand away.

Taro's staring at the screen, but he's not paying attention. For a few seconds he circles his palm across my thigh. I drape my coat over my lap, which he takes as permission. He edges his hand farther between my legs. I hold his arm as encouragement.

He caresses with his fingers for a few seconds, and then I lift up so he can pull my leggings down and slip his hand beneath my underwear. Now he knows all. His fingers scooch, slide, and delve. I lift my body up into his hand and get the luxury of sensation. It's not as if I can speak to him or shout or *do* more. I can only whimper and, even that, softly.

On the screen, the trekkers move up a knife-edge, which is where I am, too, about to orgasm in the basement of the Episcopal Church.

Harold's now on top of Everest. The slide shows six unrecognizable men in parkas and goggles on the summit. "We did it," Harold says. "I'm the one on the right."

People cheer and applaud. "Here, here! Way to go. Bravo, Harold!" The slide stays on the screen. People stand up, still clapping.

This prompts Taro to extract his hand from between my legs and out from under my jacket. We don't rise, but we applaud with everyone else.

The lights come up, and Harold walks to the front of the room. He bows to the applause. "I'll be glad to answer any questions," he says.

The silence lasts a few seconds, and then a man up front raises his hand. "What was your most dangerous moment?"

Harold launches into an anecdote about how, on an obscure mountain in Alaska, a boulder the size of a house gave way above him and, as it was rolling toward him—no chance to save himself—the boulder cracked and broke in half, one part passing him on either side.

"I was caught in avalanches, too," he says, "but they were minor."

"What was your biggest thrill?" Jan asks.

"You mean, besides the birth of my daughter?"

People buy this and laugh, while I wriggle my underwear and leggings back to a comfortable position. I glance at Taro, who gives me the sweetest look of confusion. Other people are standing, so we have to, too, to see what's going on.

Harry smiles. "I suppose being on the Vinson Massif at dawn. We were at the highest point at the pole of the earth. We'd climbed all night because snow is most stable when it's cold. We ascended through clouds and got to the summit, the correct summit, about four A.M. The stars were out. When the sun came up, the clouds below us were layers of pink and orange, and the lower peaks—all white—were catching the same colors. Pink and orange was all we could see for miles."

I wave my hand in the air. "While you were seeking adventure and fame, and your wife and family—how many children, siblings, parents?—were at home, were you thinking of them? You didn't have a job? I mean, most of us in this room are not worth your time."

The audience turns toward me. Nick gives me a venomous stare.

Harry nods and smirks. "I've been fortunate," he says. "Magazines have paid me to write up my adventures. I've had grants. Friends have encouraged me—"

"—So, in the grand scheme of the world," I say, "what's it mean to climb a mountain?"

"Sit down, Beth," Nick shouts back at me.

"But I'm curious," I say to Harold. "I mean, you got to the summit of a mountain. What difference did it make?"

"You had to have been there," Harold says.

People laugh, and I wait for the din to subside.

"Have you helped anybody? Have you created art? If you think tonight you've shared the meaning of life, you're mistaken. We are humble folk, and we know the life within us."

Nick steps between the unoccupied chairs and crashes toward me. Taro, in his wisdom, guides me to the empty side of the room, and stands in Nick's way, while I break for the exit.

The night is over, but not over. Nick's yelled at me in the kitchen and in the bedroom, and I pleaded guilty by not responding. He was humiliated, he said, and claimed he'd lose business—What right did I have?—and so on. But he's asleep now; I'm not. What's odd is I feel Taro's hand between my legs guiding me to different life.

I glance at the window where the moon's rising over our insignificant mountains. The cirque above town is in a wavery light. I want to be elsewhere, maybe helping the children with skin cancer in Puntarenas, playing volleyball on the beach at Icy Bay, or looking for an apartment to rent in another town. Tomorrow, Harold and the other crazies are off to run their hundred-mile race, but I'll get up, make breakfast for Nick and me, and go to work. Alas. I close my eyes and see Chimborazo in Ecuador, the graceful, snow-covered peak against a blue blue sky, which is the highest mountain from the center of earth.



Kent Nelson's collection *The Spirit Bird* won the Drue Heinz Literature Prize from the University of Pittsburgh Press, and his stories have twice been included in *The Best American Short Stories* and twice in *The Best American Mystery Stories*. His story "What's in Uruguay?" won the 22nd annual Gival Press Short Story Award. He has identified 771 species of birds in North America and has run the Pikes Peak Marathon twice. He lives in Ouray, Colorado. More of Kent's work can be found at KentNelsonWriter.com and on Substack at kentsnelson.substack.com.

Art Deco

Kevin Holdsworth



U.S. Forest Service Building. Ogden, Utah. Photo credit: US General Services Administration

The Forest Service Office Building, headquarters of the Wasatch-Cache National Forest, located at 507 25th St. in Ogden, Utah, was an architectural gem. It was designed by the same architects as the marvelous Ogden City Municipal Building and built during the same period by the great socialist experiment known as the Works Progress Administration. Both the Municipal and the Forest Service buildings were textbook examples of Art Deco, done in orangey-tan to smooch the western vernacular. Of the two, based on its more manageable size and even-more elaborate decorations, it could be argued that the Forest Service Building was superior, owing to its harmonious spacing and rhythms; its bold, ornate facades topped with terra cotta crenellations; and the "power station" on the roof, a glass and stainless cupola right out of *Metropolis*. Add to these two jewels Union Station, Ogden High School, and the Egyptian Theater, and it was clear the

city had five absolute must-sees for those fond of beautiful buildings of a certain age.

Jeremy remarked upon this as he entered the room for his hearing. In fact, he had memorized some nuggets to use if a deflection were needed. "Did you know that during the construction of this building, the architects were actively involved in the placement of the masonry, including eight different shades of brick? Also, without question, the terra cotta detailing enhances the progressive shading, doesn't it? Not to mention the stainless-steel windows, doors, and trim—my goodness, they are surely grand."

The hearing was held in a conference room on the third floor. In attendance were L. James Mims, Assistant Supervisor, Wasatch-Cache National Forest; Neil Korbelos, Law Enforcement Lead, Wasatch-Cache National Forest; Travis Hunt, Utah Division of Natural Resources (DNR); and Elizabeth Hall, Assistant District Attorney for Weber County, Utah. There were half a dozen other unintroduced staffers.

Now, while Jeremy was all business and certainly grooving on the solemnity of the situation, it was impossible not to notice that Ms. Hall looked like skiing great Lindsey Vonn's sister. Jeremy did not know whether or not Lindsey Vonn had a sister, but if she did, Elizabeth Hall would have looked exactly like her: a somewhat shorter and softer version of the downhiller, just as fit if a little less flashy, and just as competitive, and in some ways, perhaps, even more so. Hall was a Valkyrie goddess—not exactly his dream interlocutor. He was buffeted by a turbulence of emotions.

Assistant Supervisor Mims began, "Mr. Salat, we would like to make clear that we take the recent incidents which allegedly took place on Ben Lomond Peak to be very serious. Public safety is at stake, and ensuring public safety is the duty for all of us who work on public lands in the West. We're hoping to have a productive discussion today, and perhaps gain insight into the events, and most importantly, to keep it out of the public eye and the media. Otherwise, it could surely create problems. You are hereby informed that this meeting is being recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin? No? Very well then, Miss Hall will lead the questioning."

Elizabeth Hall's name was listed in the certified letter Jeremy received notifying him of the hearing. He had done a little background work and found that she had attended Hamilton College and played field hockey (all-conference) and had earned her J.D. from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He had wondered what had brought her to Ogden, but he assumed it would be skiing, and she would certainly be a Snowbasin skier. She probably went to Park City and Deer Valley regularly. He pictured her as Venus de Milo but with arm guards strapped and race mittens on, ready to handle the pitch and flats of any slalom course.

Hall stood and said, "Mr. Salat, we have learned that you are licensed to practice law in the state of California. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Ms. Hall, that is correct," Jeremy said.

"Then you must surely understand that you have not been charged with any offense."

"Yes."

"If you should be charged, you would, of course, be Mirandized and informed of your right to an attorney."

"Yes," he said.

"But we'd like to think of this as a preliminary fact-finding meeting rather than any sort of investigative matter." Jeremy noted the doublespeak. "Are you willing to 'represent' yourself today? If not, we will have. . . this effort will lose its informality."

"I appreciate you making that clear, Ms. Hall. I will speak on my behalf, but I will not represent myself, because this is an informal hearing, and I have not been charged with any offense."

"Yes," she said. "Now, you should be aware that Utah Code 23-20-29.5 states that "a person who intentionally interferes with a person who is licensed and taking wildlife legally, [ellipsis] or disrupts an activity [subject to certain qualifications] may be charged with a violation under Section 76-9-102, with this governing language: 'A person is guilty of a class B misdemeanor who intentionally interferes with the right of a person licensed and legally hunting' and, moreover, 'any directly affected person or the state may bring an action to recover civil damages resulting from a violation of Subsection (1) or a restraining order to prevent a potential violation of Subjection (1).'"

"In addition," Hall continued, "It has been alleged that you were wearing a mountain goat costume in said area (Ben Lomond Peak) with the express purpose of. . . well, we could look into what the purpose of your behavior may have been, but the result was that a number of persons recreating on said mountain were frightened both by the mountain goat suit and your behavior in wearing the mountain goat suit, and that the resulting fright caused significant harm to one or more persons."

"And, in fact," she said. "We may be interested in examining an invocation of common law and/or case law related to disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace, unlawful public display, and, finally," she said, digging out the maraschino cherry, "We may have evidence that you may have been engaged in socializing with the mountain goats who frequent this area, perhaps even cavorting with the nannies, and that your behavior on multiple occasions can be characterized as harassing wildlife, which is also a misdemeanor. We would be interested in hearing from you at this time, Mr. Salat."

Jeremy stood up slowly. "Ms. Hall, I appreciate your legal explanation," he began. "I'm sure you will understand that I cannot make any factual claims relating to these accusations, but if we are truly interested in working this out harmoniously, I would have to say that I have not had time to prepare any formal response, so please just consider my remarks as unstudied and informal. I'm just hoofing it, so to say."

"Let me begin by stating that I am myself a hunter," he continued. "I'll be traveling to British Columbia shortly to engage in mountain goat hunting with my customized compound bow and removable quiver. If I had

been in the area in question, it was only to observe. To watch and learn. Again, I love hunting."

"And, yet, it may be stated clearly that the area in question on Ben Lomond Peak is not part of a currently permitted hunting area with respect to mountain goats. If there is no hunting area, there can be no harassment of hunting. Mr. Hunt, you will attest to this."

"Yes, it is currently off limits to hunting," said Travis Hunt, frowning.

"So, there can't be hunters where there is no hunting, and there can be no interference of hunters where there is no hunting."

"Mr. Salat, that is not the sort of claim that would stand up in a court of law. It's sophistry."

"Perhaps, Ms. Hall," he said. "But consider this: you would need some type of evidence to support a charge of harassment of wildlife, but no such evidence exists, because there was none."

He looked at Mims, and then continued, "Now, one's right to interact with the public on public land is protected by the First Amendment. No placards were carried, nor was any political agenda espoused. No one chanted, 'Free the baby goats, now!' If a person chooses to express him or herself by wearing a goat costume, then significant case law supports this right. I'm thinking right off the top of my head of *Berman et al.* and the landmark case *Frutigen v. Sanders.* Now, if someone is frightened by someone else wearing a goat costume, then that is certainly unfortunate and unintentional." He really slowed down on the last word.

"It seems you might be blaming the victim, in this situation, Mr. Salat."

"No, indeed not, counselor. If we cannot dress up and stimulate folks' imaginations, then we'd better outlaw Halloween."

"But you were not up there on Halloween, and the persons in question were not expecting to be confronted by someone in a goat suit, who, and I quote, 'Made threatening and aggressive guttural sounds like growls.'"

Quiet, knowing conversation could be heard.

"If your team had approached wild goats and had been threatened by them," Jeremy said. "Would you be citing the goats in question for their ba-a-ad behavior?"

"More sophistry," Hall said. "A ridiculous analogy."

There was a lengthy pause and some tittering.

"Perhaps," said Jeremy. "But I would suggest, respectfully, that you might need to do more investigation as to the facts of this case. It is possible that you do not have the full story."

"Would you like to clarify and expand on that point, Mr. Salat?"

"Yes. Perhaps, and this is purely hypothetical, of course. Perhaps someone wearing a goat suit or other animal suit might be taunted, threatened, or harassed by hikers, particularly aggressive young male hikers often referred to as Hey-Dudes."

"Are you saying this happened?"

"This is purely hypothetical. But consider in such a case that a person in a goat or other animal suit was outnumbered, that there may have been two or three or four or more on the opposing team, so to speak. Imagine,

further, that there may have been taunting. Suppose one of the Hey-Dudes said, 'Man, that is one ugly-ass goat, there. It's no wonder it's all alone. What goat in his right mind would want to spend time with such an ugly-ass goat? Tell you this, if it charges, I'm going to huck some rocks at it or maybe my bike.'"

"Are you saying this happened, Mr. Salat?"

"Certainly, it is possible. Another consideration: it is possible, indeed likely, that a person wearing a goat or other animal costume could be suddenly frightened by a group of aggressive hikers or hunters and that one possible response to an overt act of aggression would be to be aggressive in return."

Elizabeth Hall shuffled her papers.

Jeremy continued, "A taunting can quickly escalate. A taunt becomes a threat becomes an action. This is known as self-defense. It is possible or even likely that taunting may have been a clear provocation of that 'ugly-ass goat,' sort of like, your nanny wears Army boots. Surely you have all observed this in the animal kingdom, and, truth be told, occasionally in what I'll refer to as office life. Sometimes people act strongly or even irrationally if they are afraid, outnumbered, or if belittling comments have been passed. Antisocial behavior assumes many guises."

He saw her smile just a little bit.

"Right," said Mims. "Like Jock Glidden is going to get aggressive up there—seventy-three-year-old mountain climber and Sierra Club president Jock Glidden."

"You might be surprised," Jeremy said. "And, as is common with bullies, when a victim, in a goat or other animal suit, is taunted, mocked, and/or threatened, one reaction would be to respond in what may not have been the most civil way, but get a jury to go along with that one—that when one is threatened, mocked and/or threatened, it is best to turn the other cheek. . . pardon me if I say, my eye, on that one. When one is threatened one may act in self-defense."

"What is clear here," said Hall. "Is that Mr. Salat has an active imagination. This is probably why his area of legal specialization is. . . or was. . . the entertainment industry."

"That was a remarkably hurtful comment, Ms. Hall. But I will overlook it and make my final point. It is not inconceivable that a person who was a hunter, who enjoyed viewing mountain goats for their majesty, might become bonded to them in odd ways. When this person, wearing a goat or other animal suit or not, heard his band being threatened by Hey-Dudes or wannabe hunters, or even elderly environmentalists, or hormone-crazed clumps of Boy Scouts, maybe something inside that person just snapped, temporarily, at the thought of harm coming to his hirsute friends, and said, 'Oh please, don't you smite my goats, don't smite my goats, 'cause I don't want my goats to be smitten.'"

Suppressed giggles and ceiling-ward looks.

"I'm not sure that's something we've heard before," said Korbelos.

"It could devolve into a case of he-said, she-said," said James Mims.

"There would need to be expert testimony."

"First Amendment protections are very broad," said Jeremy.

"Perhaps if Mr. Salat wishes to dress up in a goat costume," Korbelos said, "he might do so in another jurisdiction. But, certainly, he doesn't need to do this in Utah on the Wasatch-Cache National Forest. And it might be difficult in any case, as we have confiscated his costume and put it into evidence."

"Admittedly my attempts have not been exhaustive," Jeremy said. "But I don't find any statutory prohibition or case law related to dressing up in a costume to get closer to nature."

"You might need to keep looking," said Korbelos.

"Closer to nature to threaten hikers?" said Hunt.

"No. Rather, dressing up in costume to enjoy our wild America," said Jeremy.

Another pause. Some heads were shaking.

"I think we may have gathered enough information at this point," said Mims. "If this went public, it would not be a good thing; surely we can agree on that."

"Any person is entitled to a criminal defense," said Hall.

"Certainly," Jeremy said. "It would not be good to see such a headline: Utah Wildlife Lover Harassed by Governmental Authority on Wasatch Mountain Peak."

"That is simply absurd," said Hall. "We understand you are new here, Mr. Salat. How would you like it if word got around that your kink is dressing up in a goat costume?"

"That sounds potentially libelous or defamatory, Ms. Hall." He paused. "Probably a lot of people would like to dress up in goat costumes if they only had the means or ability to do so. And if you are taking away that right, it certainly smacks of unfair elitism."

Knowing glances were exchanged.

"Miss Hall, are you willing to let this go?"

"No, I'm not," she said. "My office will continue its investigation until such time as we inform Mr. Salat as to our direction. I am willing to say that Mr. Salat's seminar today was somewhat educational and certainly entertaining, but there are serious considerations of legal and public safety. It is not in the public interest to allow Mr. Salat to be a scofflaw. It's not good for social order."

"Mr. Salat has relinquished his goat costume," said Mims. "And we could ask him to promise not to do it again."

"Those might be mitigating factors, but the investigation will continue," said Hall. "Do you have any final comments, Mr. Salat?"

"Well, I certainly appreciate your time and trouble on this," he said. "It makes me feel personally very good that our public servants take such matters with alacrity and sincerity. As a peace offering, could we all meet at the Angry Goat Pub—you know it's just around the corner—for some

grub and refreshments? I realize I cannot buy, but wouldn't a goat burger deluxe and a round of Diet Cokes do wonders just now?"

"Meeting adjourned," said Mims.

As they shook hands, Elizabeth Hall whispered, "Smart ass."

"See you around," Jeremy said.

Neil Korbelos gave a fist bump. "Just don't, Dude."

"Not ba-a-ad, Bro," said Travis Hunt with his fist bump.

Mims said, "Maybe get in touch with your inner goat some other way?"

"Yes, sir."

He walked out of the building and up 25th St. He stopped on the corner of Porter Ave. and looked north. He could see it clearly, above the rooftops and St. Joseph's steeple, Ben Lomond Peak, once his domain, now just a summit of sadness, like an old lover lost in the terra cotta sands of time.



"Art Deco" is inspired by 2012 media reports of a person wearing a goat suit being spotted on the slopes of Ben Lomond Peak. Kevin Holdsworth let the account ferment for a dozen years, then began a short story about it. The short story quickly got away from him and eventually turned into a novel manuscript, "Don't Smite My Goats." Holdsworth is the author of *Big Wonderful*, *Good Water*, and *Red Stone Heart*.

The Custer Wolf

Inspired by a true story

South Dakota, 1920

Taylor Brown



Federal hunter H.P. Williams (pictured left) and a local rancher stand over slain Custer Wolf. October, 1920. Photo credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

They call him the Gray Devil of the Desert, though it isn't the desert he roams but the Black Hills and Badlands of the Dakotas—hard and rugged lands where life is short, violent, cold. He walks beneath stone spires where the falling sun strobes bloody between cathedral jags and he walks across prairies where the bones of bison lie like the bleached timbers of seven seas' of sunken ships and he walks the ranges of stockmen and ravages them, swilling whole oceans of cows' blood and the hearts that drive them. Some say he's a crossbred monstrosity, part wolf and part cougar. Some a werewolf out of the Old World tales. Or even a beast more sinister, an animal possessed by an avenging spirit of the land itself.

They call him the Custer Wolf.

He roams the rangeland around Custer, South Dakota—the first white settlement in the Black Hills, where General George Armstrong Custer of the 7th Cavalry discovered gold in 1874 and droves of bonanza-seekers began to trespass the sacred lands of the Great Sioux, sparking the war that Custer didn't survive, his long yellow locks red-scalped over the Greasy Grass. A war the United States government won, forcing the Sioux to cede their hallowed lands.

Here walks the Custer Wolf.

A pair of coyotes flank him, sand-colored ghosts who tread in his wake, warning him of pursuers and feeding from his kills. An army chases him. Government hunters who wield guns and traps and poison to rid his kind from the land. White men who sucked dry the inland seas of bison whose sick and wearied and weak filled the bellies of his ancestors for a thousand generations. Men who left behind the lowing cattle he hates. Defenseless brutes, too easy to fell and yet. A wolf must eat.

He is a creature born of the land, raised on wolf's milk and red meat, who eats nothing but what he kills with his own teeth. He watched his father die on his back, mouth-foaming with the poison of a laced cow carcass, choking on his own slaver.

He watched his mother die in a steel trap, her blood spooling out of her in a red-bright puddle that fumed in the night.

They call him a devil, but what do you call the devil who rebels against such gods?

—

H.P. Williams receives a telegram at his remote cabin. The express rider arrives haggard, easing saddle-sore off his horse and asking first for water, his mouth chapped white.

"Don't die on me," says H.P. "I don't feel like diggin' a hole today."

A message from Washington. He's needed in the Dakotas, it says. Another wolver has abandoned his pursuit of the Custer Wolf after a year of near misses. They say it will be a service not just to his nation, but to civilization. They say they need him, Harry Percival "High Power" Williams, the man who's bagged a thousand wolves in his time. Only he can rid the world of the Gray Devil.

High Power is 44 now, a veteran "U.S. Biological Survey Supervisor" — a fancy name for a professional hunter-for-hire of the federal government. Sometimes he wonders: should you call it hunting if you don't eat what you kill?

The bounty is five hundred dollars. A rugged young ranchhand working his back broken is lucky to make twenty-five dollars a month. H.P. sighs and takes his Winchester down from the wall. "The Gun That Won The West." A lever-action repeater famous for killing the native predators of the land, man and animal alike.

H.P. made his name with this rifle. But he knows the gun, if victorious, will be but an afterthought. No more meaningful than the lengths of gallows rope that noosed the necks of Old John Brown and John Wilkes Booth. Nations killed those men, and nations choose their sharpest tools for the job. Manhunters, prosecutors, killers.

High Power tucks his rifle under his arm and heads out to saddle the horses.

—

The Custer Wolf watches the pasture of cowflesh standing naked in the night. No bulls among them, no horns. Not like a bison herd. They are contained in a wire fence he can jump at a thought. It's spring and the calves are dropping slimy from their mothers' wombs, steaming beneath the moon.

Most wolves live and hunt in packs. But no wolves are left in this land. Only ghosts. He has walked years with his nose to the earth, searching for the scent of a single she-wolf. Nothing but signs years old, or the carcasses of the poisoned or trapped or shot.

The purple prairie grass rattles around him and he feels the moon on his back. A coat once the rich deep black of a mink, with a heavy dark ruff around his throat. His fur has grown frosty and thin, paled by countless

winters and full moons. How many he doesn't know. But his teeth are still sharp. Slaver still oozes beneath his tongue.

These calving cows, they cannot drop their newborns helpless in the night. A bison herd would be a fortress now, impenetrable walls of flesh protecting the newly born.

These cattle, they must learn.

A ghost still haunts the prairie.

In the distance, his coyotes yelp in alarm.

Too far.

The Custer Wolf rises from the grass and hops the barbwire.

—

Dawn. High Power stands before the scene. The grass greasy with blood. A small fleet of newborn calves wrecked in a red sea of undoing, tendons and entrails spread across the prairie ground. There's even a dam with her belly torn open, her unborn calf gone.

The rancher trembles beside him, biting his thumb. "Got-damned butcher beast is what he is. You ever seen the like?"

High Power shakes his head. "Can't say as I have."

"They say his mate and pups was killed for their bounties and that's what drives him. Revenge. Eating into ever last one of us. Done twenty-five thou worth of damage since he started on the warpath nine years back. One boy told me he's possessed by the spirit of a Injun brave died at Little Bighorn, pledging everlasting war on old Longlocks and his white-face kin. Others say it's Satan hisself clad in wolfskin."

The old rancher lifts off his hat. He's bald, his scalp sun-spotted. His yellowy eyes blaze like an End Time preacher's. "But it ain't none of that. It's that he's a wolf, plain and simple. A killer. A curse on the land. It's what they are."

H.P. says nothing. He is not here to judge, but to carry out judgment.

—

The Custer Wolf dreams. His muscles bubble beneath his hide and his breath squeaks through black lips. Always he dreams of other wolves, furry bodies swirling around him and a warm tumble of pups.

Ghosts.

He wakes in darkness and catches the dream-thread of a she-wolf on the wind. He rises on aching knees knowing the scent will fast flee his nose, but it doesn't. It hits him full in the face, rounding his nostrils like tunnels into the mind.

His world is fluid, an orb of perception that expands and contracts with hunger, strength, danger. Now it focuses down into a single arrow, aimed toward the she-wolf. He looks west to a rocky flattop of mesa and a wind fills his chest, a desire to plant his forelegs upon a high thrust of stone and howl across the land for an echo of his kind.

He swallows his voice. He drops his head and returns to the scent-trail, silent as a wraith.

—

H.P. has done everything right. Boiled his traps and buried them in cow manure. Smeared his boots in wolfscent and laid down a carpet of cowskin before dismounting his horse. He's set his straps in an irregular ring around a pungent lure concocted of rotten coyote glands and gall.

Three days later he finds every trap sprung. Nothing but tufts of fur in their teeth. As if the Custer Wolf is just playing with him, showing him how much he resents such taps. A weird twitch at the base of H.P.'s skull, as if someone has tapped him on the back of the neck. His hair prickles like the radio antennas rising across the vast shoulders of the West. A message from a world without a voice. The sense he's been spied from afar, touched by the eye of a distant god.

—

The Custer Wolf lies on his belly on the mesa. A small herd of wild horses roves the prairie beneath him, shoulders rumbling over the broad swells of grass. A few foals among them, still suckling, clumsy on their stiltlike legs. When the herd stops to graze, he rises and snakes down the rocky slope, his coyote twins trailing him on long invisible strings.

—

H.P. watches from a distance, much too far for an accurate shot. For weeks he's had nothing but such long-range sightings. Each time he pursues the wolf, the coyotes sing out and the animal climbs one of the rocky mesas where he leaves no tracks. From there he clocks off in a new direction. H.P. must circle the entire mesa to regain the trail.

Now he squats on his heels and brings up the wolf in his fieldglasses, bouncing him close to view. He watches the animal slink low-bellied through the grass, angling along the edge of the herd. Soon the mustangs become aware of him, their heads popping upright like the hackles of a single beast. They begin to close ranks, clotting into a motley cloud of horseflesh, the foals buried behind the wide barrels of the mares.

The wolf works the ragged edges of the herd, shaping and molding them, crisscrossing like a cattledog. His tongue slings from his mouth and H.P. could swear the old wolf is having fun. He thinks of the empty brown beer bottle he found in a sandy wash several days ago, standing strangely erect amid a jumble of cowhand trash. Paw prints on every side of the bottle, radiating outward, as if the animal were in awe or worship of the small glass temple. It hits him with a jolt. The wolf had been playing with the bottle, trying to nose it upright. And had.

The wolf spears toward the hard knot of horses, spurring an abrupt contraction, a muscular shift sure to leave behind any animal too slow or sick or old. He cuts a horse from the herd, a crest-sunken nag who can

barely hold up her head. She stands alone, but the wolf leaves her be. The herd would trample him if he felled her; he has no packmates to keep them at bay.

Strangely the nag seems unafraid, staring at the wolf, as if he is the death she expects.

The old wolf wheels and trots away.

—

H.P. rides through a sea of grass. The sun is melting across the horizon, flooding red over the prairie. That twitch at the base of his skull again and he looks to his right and the wolf is not one hundred yards away, walking in his same direction at his same speed.

H.P. swallows. He isn't afraid; wolves don't attack people, no matter what the fairytales say. But how strange to discover a shadow you didn't know you had. One that watches you back. He reins his horse, the wolf stops as well. When he starts, the wolf starts. Again he stops and so does the wolf. He slides his hand up his thigh for the tobacco pouch at his hip. Drops the reins and rolls a smoke. Lights it with a trench lighter. The wind whisks the sea of grass. They watch each other a long time. The Custer Wolf a red ember in the dusk, aflame in the last of the sun. His eyes narrower than a dog's, shoulder blades sharper, his front legs so straight they look elbowless. The ancestral hound.

H.P. flicks away the last of his cigarette and puts his hand back on his thigh. Rests it there a time. Then he reaches for his rifle.

The wolf is gone before he touches the gun.

—

The Custer Wolf has killed a stray cow. An old dam staggering beneath the sun. He jumps on one side of her and then another, too excited to eat. Stomach too tight. After a while he lies down beside the still-warm carcass to wait. Not even the flies have found it yet.

He's dozing when the coyotes tell him to run. He hears their twin-headed bark on the horizon and races from the carcass, flying over the grass. He's nearly to his stony mesa when he hears distant shots. He flinches hard, as if the rounds have passed through his own flesh.

At dawn he returns to the kill, finding where the coyotes died. Their bodies are gone. Just the scent of them like shadows in the grass and that of the rider who haunts him. He finds the bodies hurled into a deep wash and starts down, paws scrabbling in the loose rocks and silt.

—

H.P. whistles. The coyotes are laid out just where he shot them. He drops from his horse and walks to the ravine and leans to look over the edge. Steep as something made with God's knife. It seems impossible the animal could've hauled them out of there. For some reason he hadn't wanted to kill the coyotes, as if that would be akin to cheating, but.

He looks at his horse. “Some wolf.”

He drags the cow carcass to a different spot, like a predator has been toying with it. Then lays a set of traps around it. A minefield of teeth.

Come morning he stands shaking his head. In the night the old wolf moved the kill right back to its original spot, dancing between H.P.’s traps like they’d sprouted little red flags of warning.

He looks at his horse again. “We got to widen our thinking about this animal.”

The mare says nothing, bowing her head to graze.

This time he sets his traps in a wholly different manner. A broad constellation around the carcass, each placed where he himself might step if trying to sneak up on an enemy encampment, a group of sleeping Comanche or 7th Cavalry riders. As if stalking them, waiting for the time to attack. The words of a colonel or war chief sounding in his ear, telling him to bring back scalps.

—

His coyotes gone and distant lightning calling the sharp pale teeth of the badlands up out of the dark horizon. A creature newly naked on the plains, newly blind. His bones brittled, joints stiffened. An ache inside him he does not understand. The same storm that filled him when his father was poisoned, his mother trapped, his mate shot, his pups dug out of their den.

The ground uncertain beneath his paws, dangerous. Everywhere a trap. The earth full of teeth, waiting to drag him down with his ancestors, with the bison and lion and all the cows he’s killed. Still he returns. He must know if his kill has been moved again, his coyotes. A fire burns in his mind. He slinks and watches, slinks and watches, circling the site. He waits in cover. The grass rattles and thunderclouds grumble, bouldering unseen over the horizon. Distant bellies swelling with violence.

He steps from behind a large rock, eyes on the distant carcass instead of the ground beneath his feet. He knows the moment his paw touches the trigger. Metal jaws snap from the earth. His scream shears the night.

He flees but the jaws hound him every step, the long snake of steel chain rattling behind him and the drag hook tumbling through the dirt, clanking off stones. He aims for a cottonwood and the hook catches on the trunk and breaks free of the chain. An excruciating lightness.

He runs and runs.

Before him hovers the mesa, a high thrust of earth. A place he cannot be tracked. He scales the slope on three legs, his left paw held to his chest, mittened in steel. His hindlegs dig sharp narrow furrows in the washy trail. He makes the flat top of the mesa and limps across the stone, the loose chain slithering behind him. A place he’s always safe, high over the badlands, trackless as the wind. He can go anywhere from here, any direction.

Then the dawning sun breaks the rim of the mesa, flooding the highland of stone, and he sees the long trace of himself stretched behind him, marking him down. The bright scrawl of his blood shines like a lance.

—

H.P. crests the top of the mesa, horseless, following the track of the wolf. A long red poem, staggering and brave, a three-mile sentence even a blind man could read. A story he could rub between his fingers and dab on his tongue.

Soon he stands before the Custer Wolf. A creature smaller than he expected, tattier, spine-hunched like a racing hound. No longer dark. A wolf so old his pelt has turned fully white, like the pure ghost of himself. He holds the steel trap to his chest, the broad plane of his shoulder shivering with fatigue.

The wolf shows his teeth. Fangs frightful enough to deter any beast but one with a gun.

H.P. shoulders the rifle but hesitates. He who's killed a thousand wolves in his time. A question burns in his mind. It's haunted him these past weeks, growing ever closer. Whether such an animal might wear some spell of protection, some blessing of the land or Cainlike curse. A shield or myth his rifle can't penetrate. A power higher than his own.

The Custer Wolf hackles and growls. He wants to die alone.

H.P. licks his lips. "I hear you, partner. Other circumstances, I might let you. But that trap on your leg, it won't never let go. Not till you're starved to bones or ate alive. Likely both. A death I wouldn't wish on nobody. Not the Devil himself."

High Power aims for the animal's heart, his finger curling around the trigger.

"Probably the gun'll misfire," he tells himself.

The old wolf stares back at him. A creature who lives by no such illusions.

H.P. pulls the trigger.



Taylor Brown is the author of *In the Season of Blood and Gold* (2014), *Fallen Land* (2016), *The River of Kings* (2017), *Gods of Howl Mountain* (2018), *Pride of Eden* (2020), *Wingwalkers* (2022), *Rednecks* (2024), and *Wolvers* (2026). You can find his work in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Garden & Gun*, *The Bitter Southerner*, and other publications. He is a recipient of the Southern Book Prize, Montana Prize in Fiction, and Georgia Author of the Year, and serves as editor-in-chief of *BikeBound*. His forthcoming novel, *Wolvers*, involves Mexican wolf reintroduction. You can find him at @taylorbrown82.

Edible Plants of Point Isabel

Samuel Lorraine Goldsmith



Wild Oats. Photo credit: Samuel Lorraine Goldsmith

I was brought up immersed in the magic of grains and bread. My mother was a worker-owner-baker at the Cheeseboard in Berkeley, where she turned her creativity toward bread recipes, including the aptly named Experimental Bread No. 7 and, my personal favorite, the Friday Spelt Loaf. When Mom was working on the store cookbook, adapting recipes for home ovens, I would come home under the weight of my backpack and adolescence to a table clustered with scones or rolls or loaves, accompanied with instructions to taste one from each batch to compare the amount of butter, or salt, or density, or moisture. Even in retirement, Mom continues to be a student of grains.

So, when in 2019 I began the practice of walking daily at the Point Isabel Regional Shoreline, a popular 50-acre off-leash dog park along the east shore of the San Francisco Bay, it was only a matter of time before I became fascinated with the wild grains that grew there. And not just grains. Point Isabel is a bouquet of edible plants, medicinal plants, and a handful of poisons, plus the diversity of wildlife that gorges on it all. I was shocked to realize that my

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Before continuing, a brief disclaimer: do not eat the edible plants at Point Isabel even if you have the skills to accurately identify them. Not only is it illegal, but, due to Point Isabel's pre-park history as a dump site for batteries, the plants may carry a disconcerting concentration of toxins.

Wild oats were the breakthrough for me. Most will recognize this grass; it's all over the place. It grows quickly and dries golden, toasting fields and hills with its signature color. It rustles in the wind next to the freeway, ignored by motorists, but if harvested could be rolled or steel cut into oatmeal, or soaked and pureed into oat milk. These ancient grains have long been a part of European agriculture where farmers traditionally grew oats to feed livestock, as a cover crop, for bread making, and to flavor alcohol. Native wild oats grew aplenty before colonization, but today non-native oat varieties are far more common.

The seed of a wild oat is protected by a chaff, and beneath that, a husk. These structures guard the seeds from animals—that either can't break in or can't be bothered to—and moisture. The seeds must dry out in order to germinate later in a process called desiccation, so oat plants must shield their seeds from rain, fog, coastal mist, and dog urine. The seed is attached to the stalk by a black, rigid stamen, which assists the seed in detaching when an animal brushes against it. The stiff hairs on the chaff cling to the animal's fur. If you pull on the protruding stamen to remove the chaff, then pinch the top off the chaff with two fingernails, you can squeeze out your prize, the oatmeat. If you harvest the seed while immature and creamy, and trickier to extract by hand, you can incorporate it into a herbal folk tincture said to heal a strained nervous system or connective tissue.

That's a lot of work for a small snack. I've gotten fast with practice for fun, but it still takes too long to justify a large-scale effort. There is an easier way. You can lay your dried-out bounty on a tarp and shuffle your feet over them for a few minutes to strip the seeds from the chaff, stalks, and husks, a process called threshing. Then you can gather the material and empty it slowly through the gusts of a box fan, which will expel the lighter husks and chaff before they can fall into a container below, winnowing them out and leaving just the heavier oat seeds. Native Californians used a different method to process grass seeds, such as wild oats, once they had spread throughout the state. After beating seeds off wild grasses with a special-woven basket, they would toast the seeds by shaking them in a shallow basket alongside hot stones. Then, they would toss the toasted seeds into the air in repeated, measured motions, allowing the wind to carry away unwanted husks.



Field of Foxtails. Photo credit: Samuel Lorraine Goldsmith

A handful of spear-like grass species known as foxtails also thrive at Point Isabel, but, while technically also edible, are known best for the dangers they pose for dogs. These pretty tufts of barley husk turn vicious, even deadly, when they dry out and detach from the plant. It's an ingenious and sinister model. The husk's sharp point splits into a finely serrated fork, so when it gets lodged in an animal, like a sniffing dog, it won't come out. If it buries in the skin, next comes infection, and some dogs may even die. One dog autopsy revealed that the foxtail had penetrated the poor creature's brain (Dennis 840). By the time the animal passes away (from the husk or otherwise), it will have whisked the seed far afield of its birthplace to begin a new crop.

Yet, these foxtails and similar grasses serve an ecological role for birds and rodents, who use them as nest-building materials, shelter, camouflage from predators, and food. Once, following my ears towards the rustles of a Botta's pocket gopher, I saw only a foxtail stalk being sucked inch by inch into the ground.

The Point Isabel fields are mown perhaps once or twice a year to protect dogs. The city of Berkeley uses a different strategy a few miles away at Cesar Chavez Park, refusing to clear away foxtails even in the extensive off-leash areas. Dog walkers at the Park become irate when Berkeley does nothing to protect dogs from foxtails that take over after rains. Fed-up rogue dog walkers took weedwhackers into their own hands in 2014 and hacked away the grass themselves. There is irony to their rage: grasses that produce foxtails at Cesar Chavez and Point Isabel—like hare barley, Mediterranean barley, red brome, and ripgut grass—are invasive Eurasian species. In fact, the golden California hills glow in their iconic hue largely due to Mediterranean grasses.

There is irony to their rage: grasses that produce foxtails at Cesar Chavez and Point Isabel—like hare barley, Mediterranean barley, red brome, and ripgut grass—are invasive Eurasian species. In fact, the golden California hills glow in their iconic hue largely due to Mediterranean grasses. It might seem impossible for humankind to enjoy a place to its full character without curating it, or even despite curating it.

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Grass is a botanical powerhouse that has transformed the trajectory of the world and, some say, human civilization. Grasses introduced at least two watershed realities that pushed human evolution to modernity. First, grass fires have shaped landscapes differently from any living thing that came before. Dry grasses burn fast and hot, a quick burst of searing energy that anyone who has built a campfire knows cannot be sustained for long. This is not the slow and steady destruction of forest fires. Most grasses have adapted to landscapes with frequent hot fires, recovering quickly in their wake; grasses reproduce and mature many times more quickly than trees. Some grass seeds will not even germinate without being triggered by fire-hot temperatures. Grasses outcompeted trees in fire-friendly areas and spread into the first grasslands. The borders between grassland and forest may have caused human evolution to take a vital turn, according to one theory, with precursors to early humans learning to stand erect to see over the tall grass.

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Researchers have not been able to determine whether grasses have evolved to encourage wildfires or merely to withstand them, given that some highly flammable grasses flourish in environments rarely touched by flames today, since the practice of controlled burning was banned. Flammable grasses probably adapted to frequent fires, even in places where fires are scarce now, because Native Californians deliberately and carefully spread preferential seed-bearing plants and stimulated their productivity with regular burns for millennia. Regardless, the characteristics that make a plant more flammable—like dryness—often correspond with other independently beneficial traits—like the ease of releasing and spreading seeds. It's not clear the evolutionary purpose, if any, for plants to have different levels of flammability to begin with. One research paper suggests thinking of plant flammability as three distinct sub-characteristics: ignitability, flame spread rate, and heat release. Whether or not grasses thrive in spite of wildfires or because of them, fire events occur up to three times more frequently in areas where nonnative grasses grow rampant (Pausas 289).

Second, grasses give us wheat. The earliest human agriculture came to exist in order to cultivate wheat, supporting settlements of previously unheard-of populations fed by wheat ground in stone mills, kneaded into dough, and baked into bread. Bread: the focal point of gastronomy for thousands of years, on Mom's dinner table in a form similar to that traded in Mesopotamian markets in exchange for what was then the novel phenomenon of currency. Bread-making techniques are a source

of regional character and pride, be it Turkish simit or San Franciscan sourdough. Bread occupies a role of holy symbolism, a bond of fellowship, the body of Christ in communion, the Passover afikomen.

All this is thanks to an evolutionary mutation in grasses that made wheat seeds harvestable. Previously, ripe dry wheat seeds would detach from the stalk at the slightest touch and cast themselves into the wind. This was effective for rapid seed-spreading, but impractical for our ancestors to harvest at scale. Ancient einkorn wheat seeds evolved to cling to the plant instead. What might seem at first to be a disadvantage instead prompted a symbiotic relationship with humans, who learned to cultivate these tasty, nutritious grasses into history's first farms that would feed history's first cities.

In the history of the planet, the arrival of seeds made it possible for plants to flourish in previously uninhabitable land relatively quickly. Before seeds, plants reproduced either by literally tossing chance (spores) to the wind or by sprinkling sperm into nearby water. The arrival of seeds allowed plants to strike relationships with animals that could distribute them farther and wider than plants had ever managed to travel, no longer dependent on wind patterns. Seed-bearing plants painted a hitherto sparsely populated globe green. The proliferation of plant life injected previously unheard-of levels of oxygen into the atmosphere, accommodating land creatures in enormous numbers and mass. Global temperatures cooled. The moisture expelled by breathing plants bloomed thick clouds and near constant rain—the first tropical rainforests — on a scale so massive that they birthed the first global weather patterns. Seeds were well-suited to colonize arid landscapes because most seeds germinate only under proper conditions (which vary from plant to plant), so the tiny components of life inside seeds sprang into growth when the time was right rather than relying on the chance of life-sustaining conditions at the time of dissemination. Delayed germination jump-started the planet's restoration following the meteorite impact that wiped out the dinosaurs 66 million years ago.

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Mom feels connected to those early peoples who milled flour when she kneads a ball of dough on her counter, sprinkles seeds over it, and scores the top with a bread plane (or, nowadays, instructs my father to score it for her). This labor is participation in early peoples' history. I don't intend to grind foxtails into a powder and add water and yeast, or attempt the Native Californian technique of roasting them, but I am nonetheless struck that the cousins of the weed-like white-dry grasses

shedding arrows on the romping dogs of Point Isabel are responsible for such a proud legacy, that without these grasses I am inclined to take for granted the current state of everything I see would be unimaginably different.

I understand Mom's feeling of connection, because I feel it with the fauna I now delight in seeing foraging for seeds at Point Isabel. One common year-round seed-eater is the highly adaptable house finch, one of the many small brown birds usually too antsy to get a good look at, with a splash of red on the males' head feathers. Many people are charmed by their songs, though I personally find them harsh in tone.

Entrepreneurs started an illegal house finch trade in the early 1900s that smuggled birds to far-off cities throughout the country, where they were marketed as Hollywood finches or red-headed linnets, with males reportedly traded at a ten-to-one rate because of their prettier heads. One dealer guessed that 100,000 house finches were shipped east (Elliott and Arbib 31). The law caught up with the illegal trade in the 1940s, prompting pet shop owners to release their contraband into the air to avoid the authorities. It was house finches' first time on their own east of the Mississippi, but the hardy birds made do in their new environs. Today they are common throughout the country, even in Hawaii.

California towhees stick around Point Isabel to munch on its seeds, though they will also feed on insects or invertebrates. Everpresent in the Bay Area landscape, the California towhee seems designed to slip by our notice, with its monotone chirping and bland, uniformly brown plumage. I find these defining characteristics to be unintentionally subversive. The California



California Towhee. Photo credit: Samuel Lorraine Goldsmith

towhee's song eschews melody to the emphasis of rhythm, blasting a shrill *cheep*, then another, then five more in rapid succession, all in the same tone, followed by a few identical deeper, upward-lilting bursts. Most songbirds preoccupy with melodic structures, while the California towhee approaches birdsong with the rhythm of a percussionist. At other times, a California towhee might make a single *cheep* to proclaim its territory. Once I learned to identify it, I heard it everywhere.

The drab brown feathers seem to serve a contrarian purpose as well. The males of many other bird species deploy attractive visuals each spring to woo a mate, but the California towhee doesn't need to because it forms a life bond with a single partner. With no need for elaborate mating dances, elongated breeding feathers, or colorful displays, brown camouflage emerged as a practical adaptation. California towhees also opted not to migrate, and so the individuals I see at Point Isabel

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It's not just the birds that go after Point Isabel's seeds, but also rodents. Botta's pocket gophers, the most common gophers in California, booby-trap the Point Isabel landscape with holes. The creatures themselves are far less likely to turn up than the evidence they leave behind; I went nearly two years at Point Isabel before seeing a live one. For good reason: pocket gophers spend most of their time underground, and they tend to hide away when the park fills with dogs during the day. These creatures' prolific digging nurtures the ecology. The tilled soil benefits earthworms, which in turn benefits plants. Gopher burrows usher rainwater deeper underground to be stored in rich, moist earth for deep-reaching roots. Pocket gophers spread seeds by caching them in their burrows, some of which go uneaten for one reason or another and end up sprouting. Some non-digging animals lay claim to gopher holes once abandoned.

On the other hand, agriculturalists have not yet worked out a symbiotic relationship with the prolific diggers. Gophers' powerful jaws terrorize vegetation roots in farms, gardens, and reforestation sites, and they have been known to gnaw through plastic pipes, electrical wires, and other underground infrastructure. Irrigation buckles from the rodents' activities, which weaken canals and earthen dams.

For early western pioneers, the gopher had to go. Jurisdictions tried different gopher control techniques, with varying success. An early tactic was to place bounties on the animals. The practice began at least as early as 1866 when Benton County, Iowa, offered ten cents per scalp or tail. Other localities followed with similar incentives, all ill-fated, through to the early 1900s. The programs were so popular that they quickly depleted public funds. Bootleggers didn't help. Multiple parts of the same gopher, or of other small furry animals, could earn an opportunist good money from public officials who often couldn't tell the difference. All the while, bounties did little to control local gopher populations. So governments turned to another strategy: subsidizing gopher traps, which had been commercially produced starting in around 1870, with a device patented in Santa Cruz. Gopher trapping is still going strong today, especially on organic farms that don't use chemical poisons. (Marsh)

Once I had learned to identify wild oats, I began adding other edible plants to my repertoire, making broader connections with natural history through



Wild Fennel. Photo credit: Samuel Lorraine Goldsmith

food, starting with wild radish blooms. This member of the mustard family puts out clover-sized purple flowers with dark veins—not to be confused with another mustard, milkmaids, which bears white flowers of an identical shape. Beware: some have both white and purple flowers, while still others bear the yellow of yet another mustard's flower, the annual bastard cabbage (one of the strangest plant names I have ever come across). There seems to be frequent cross-breeding among Point Isabel mustards.

These plants of Asian origin are likely close relatives of the original wild radish from which grocery store varieties like the daikon descend. The roots of wild radishes are reputedly edible, but I'm not sure you'd want to eat one. The roots I experimentally harvested have been dinky and tough, with just a pencil-thin morsel as pliable as a pair of take-out chopsticks remaining after I had finished hacking away at it with a vegetable peeler. The young lumpy seed pods and soft flowers are also edible. I tried boiling a handful of seed pods, which gave off a scent like okra or broccoli, tasted inoffensively bitter, and had an inconsistent, stringy texture. I haven't tasted the flowers yet.

You might have better luck with wild fennel. A tall, tenacious weed, this is not the fennel you might see in a grocery store, though both types are edible. Unlike the cultivated variety, wild fennel grows from a thick, unappetizing taproot rather than a bulb, and the flavor of its greens packs a punch that domesticated fennel lacks. Its most commonly used treasures, its seeds and pollen, boast the same licorice flavor profile as cultivated fennel. Fennel pollen and seed traditionally garnish some dishes in the coastal Mediterranean, where the plant comes from, especially in Italy and Turkey. They give off a scent at once sweet and curdling (I am not a fan), often described as similar to aniseed. This scent dogs me on my morning walks when those yellow flowers bloom alongside the water and the Bay Trail.

Wild fennel regrows each year (it is "herbaceous"), so dried-out brown fronds crowning mold-spotted stalks are not actually dead. After a rain, I watch the brittle gray stalks give way to fresh green inflating with life from the roots. In fact, wild fennel's strong taproot makes it nearly impossible to eradicate once established, vexing agriculturalists nationwide. It earned itself the derogatory nickname "Johnnyweed," after Jonathan Chapman, better known as Johnny Appleseed, who evangelized the frontier United States with wild fennel and other plants (such as apple trees, of course). Chapman spread fennel because of its medicinal properties, having been used to treat colic and stomach aches, plus it is said

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to increase new mothers' milk production. Wild fennel probably didn't need Chapman's help; the highly invasive plant spreads quickly to disturbed soil. Beware of wild fennel's white-flowered, shorter, blotchy-stalked, and less pungent cousin, poison hemlock, a famous toxin.

Arguably even more versatile for humans is North Point Isabel's Pacific willow. Native Americans found many precolonial uses for all parts of Pacific willows, from root to crown. Their flexible yet durable branches were manipulated into supports for homes. Leaves made good thatching, and they along with smaller twigs were woven into baskets, hats, and serving dishware. Strips of bark were beaten into thin flexible sheets and used as clothing material. The strong and pliable wood was recognized as the ideal fire-starter, or it was shaped into hunting weapons and foundations of ceremonial sweat lodges.

The use that endures today is for pain relief. The leaves and bark of trees in the willow family contain salicin, a chemical from which you can synthesize salicylic acid, the active ingredient of aspirin. You should have little trouble finding this remedy in pill form, but alternatively you may be able to bring down your fever with some Pacific willow-leaf tea, if you don't mind the prospect of waiting eight hours or so for it to kick in. Native Americans used the leaves and bark to treat a vast range of ailments causing pain or discomfort, including laryngitis, arthritis, diarrhea, bladder irritation, eczema, and gangrene.

Alternatively, you might look for healing aid from any of three species of plantain that can be found aplenty at Point Isabel: broad-leaf plantain (or "common plantain"), narrow-leaf plantain, and buck's-horn plantain, all three introduced from Eurasia. The *plantago* family to which these greens belong has been recognized as a boon for folk remedies. One common story stars a parent who crouches down and chews up the fat leaves of a nearby plantain and applies the paste to a sobbing child's bee sting. The plants are said to treat a host of similar maladies such as cuts, boils, and infected wounds, as well as various internal ills such as digestive issues or respiratory inflammation.

Little has given my city-boy mind a greater sense of empowerment than the realization that I can draw food out of the everyday landscape, that I have the knowledge to extract some nourishment out of the scenery so mundane that I had stopped seeing it. The world I've lived in without noticing opened up to me. Evidence left from seeds appeared around urban parks, on the medians of busy streets, in the cracks of sidewalks, suddenly meaningful.

Buck's-horn plantain lacks the medicinal reputation of its two cousins, though its leaves can be used to treat the same ailments. It is far more popular as a salad green, especially in Italy. It has a reportedly nutty flavor that has recently become vogue, despite coming from a plant many consider to be a weed. When researching buck's-horn plantain, I found a mix of irritated gardeners looking for or giving weeding tips, and irritated restauranteurs or diners struggling to source the semi-exotic vegetable. Buck's-horn plantain has another unique advantage over its Point Isabel relatives: it is what's called a halophyte, which means it can tolerate salty soil. Only about two percent of plant species are halophytes, and fewer would excite in a salad. With global stores of fresh water rapidly dwindling, halophytes like buck's-horn plantain may become part of the recipe for human perseverance, though halophytes lose their resistance to salt in the soil when domesticated. I pilfered a couple of seed pods from a healthy-looking buck's-horn plantain and sprouted the seeds, smaller than the freckles on my arms, in my home garden. Wish me luck cultivating these weeds.

Another group of Point Isabel halophytes are the plants in the *carpobrotus* family, known by various common names such as sea fig, ice plant, and, strangely, pigface. This highly invasive succulent, originally from South Africa, grows on the North Point Isabel sea wall with velvety purple flowers silky to the touch, though some in this family grow white. Thin strands of petals twist into the shape of a chocolate kiss, then stretch wide to display a pillowy pollen-dusted center. Once the flower withers and falls off, it reveals a bulb of fruit similar in color to its rich green succulent leaves, with a thick, unappetizing layer protecting a small edible fruit with a taste that I have read slightly resembles the flavor of strawberries or watermelon candies. The syrup-thick juice from the samples I experimentally harvested tasted only of a vague saltiness; I had gathered them too soon in my overeager curiosity. You can chew on the tip of a *carpobrotus* leaf and swallow the juice or gargle it to treat a sore throat, or you can rub the juice on a skin malady, like a bee sting.

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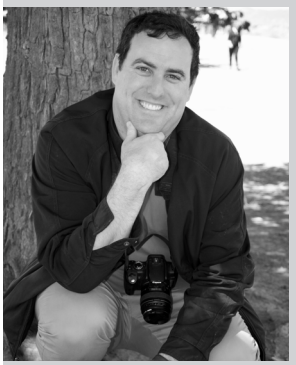
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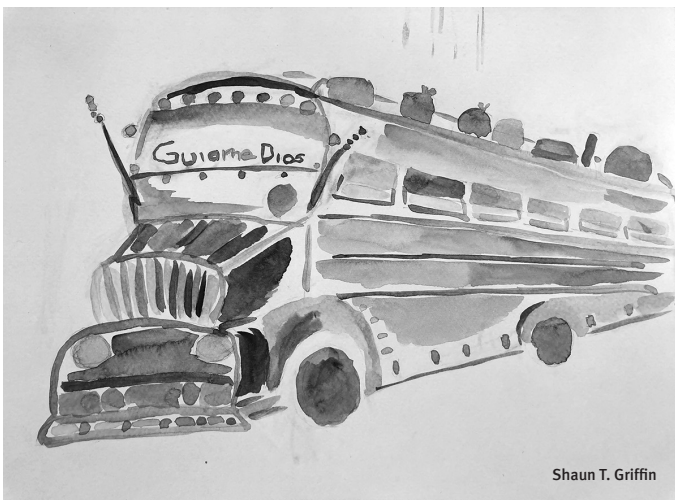
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Portrait of the Artist in Guatemala

Shaun T. Griffin



Shaun T. Griffin

In the morning, we walked along Santander, the main street through Panajachel that my dear friend, the poet Gary Short, refers to as C Street—the tourist street in Virginia City—where he used to live in the United States. We sat down for coffee at Café Cardamomo, one of those *milagros* that happen in Central America: a Finnish couple in the middle of their lives drops everything and moves halfway across the world to open a coffee house. The proprietor tells me she is selling it because she misses her grandparents in Finland, and with a smile she confides that she and her husband will return, this time to Chile, to open a coffee house there. This is how my wife Debby and I disappear into an aperture of Mayan colors, how with very little effort, we become part of the street scene and wonder why it took so long.

Debby and I first visited Gary and his wife, Astrid Maria Rodas, eight years after they were married in our backyard, but Covid had kept us from them until recently. Gary has become a poet of some stature. Many in the West think he will leave his mark on American poetry. I'm one of them. But it is also true that Guatemala holds Gary in its grasp: it is more than the desire to live as a poet in another land; it is close to belonging. There are writers whose tracks he follows: think of Elizabeth Bishop in Brazil, W.S. Merwin in Chiapas, Paul Bowles in Tangiers, and dozens of others. It takes some *cajones* to strip from your life the distractions of staying present—a willingness to live without the convenience of instant access to things—especially now, when writing can seem like such a careerist activity in the States. Clearly he's chosen to embrace the absence of subterfuge. If you write, that is all there is—no monetary or marketing considerations. You do the work and let it find its way. This is a freedom most artists cannot articulate, but it is a necessary one. As a poet, Gary has always

gone slow into the next book, the next stanza, the next idea. For many years, he taught in the U.S. for a semester and then returned to Guatemala. This is his twenty-third year since he first arrived to hike the perimeter of Lake Atitlán, the volcanic lake that abuts "Pana," as the locals refer to it. After years of renting, he and Astrid built a stone house, and tonight we are on the rooftop terrace with a view of the lake. The house has a big sitting room, a garden, and a patio where he writes.

His second-story office is filled with books and poems in various forms of revision. For several years he has been working on a long poem for his fourth book. I tell him to send the book out, not to worry about finishing the long poem. When it's done, you can publish it. These are small words from one poet to another; they usually mean very little in the construct of literature, because poems have their own requirements and Gary honors them. Before our visit is over Gary confides his new and selected is coming out in 2026.

Debby and I sleep in the guest cottage that faces another garden. I think of the days I could spend painting here, the tropical beauty of the place. It is temperate, and Lucius, their dog, keeps me company. But one must let go to live here, reach into another pocket for what sustains. To begin without obvious structure requires patience. Gary walks each day, sometimes smokes a cigar, reads always, and if he is lucky, writes some lines for a poem.

Astrid is from Guatemala, perfectly bilingual, and runs a preschool. On the first day after summer vacation, we walk with her to see the place she has built from scratch. It is everything a child could want: vibrant colors on the walls, willing teachers, and a playground. Her school is the common denominator of access to language, books, and social skills for the mostly Mayan children. She tells me many of the kids are here on scholarship. Some of their parents did not attend school or very little of it, and education is like a transfusion to parent and child alike. Debby has worked around young people all of her life. She and Astrid constantly ask themselves: how do we free a young mind?

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On the way back from the school, we meet Anna and Nancy, Anna's daughter. Gary has been sponsoring Nancy since she was born. Anna is

Mayan and lives in a room with no floor. Nancy ate some undercooked pork and now must take medication to keep the worm from returning. She is the sweetest young dandelion I have met: black hair, quiet, beseeching eyes, and a smile that will not leave her face. Gary holds her close: "This is Nancy, my almost daughter." Nancy hugs him too. She is like family with whom he shares daily visits, food, and money for prescriptions. Gary has been here long enough to report on most of the people we meet: the expats who stroll Santander, the good ones who bring something to Pana besides a dislike of their home—like Jennifer, who works at the school with Astrid. She has been here thirty years, through civil war, boyfriends, and adulthood. Not such a big deal until you do it. But there are the others too: the expats who live like it was their home to exploit.

We go to the store, buy beer, cheese, bread, and then on to the open-air market for vegetables. The produce is overwhelming—strawberries, *jacotes* (a popular fruit), limes, bananas, green beans, fresh tomatoes. I ask Gary where they come from. "From the nearby farms," he says. A Mayan woman sits with a chicken in her lap. So docile is the bird that I hardly notice until it flutters. Her baby sleeps in the colored blanket at her feet. She is perfectly still, and there are dozens of people bartering, weighing, and exchanging *quetzales* for food. This market comes into a poem, this flesh and food and commerce press the stanza for sound until it vibrates. Walking across the soccer square back to Gary's house I ask about the adjacent gym. Strangely, they're playing basketball, not indoor soccer. Michael Jordan is as big here as he is at home. These are suppositions I cannot reconcile, and I let them go in the dust.

This is the dry season. The hills reaching up to the highlands are brown and the vines crawl like aphids over everything. We cross a labyrinth of small alleys and, magically, Los Tres Tiempos appears: a *tortillería* with small hands in the dark and white patches of dough cooking on the steel oven—fifty square feet of woodsmoke and corn flour. A motorcycle slides between us and then a tuk-tuk, the three-wheel version of a taxi. Tuk-tuks are everywhere, everywhere like food and hunger and the *indígenas*, the Mayans who have lived here for millennia and make up forty percent of the country—a country that cannot admit to such proportions. As with most Central American nations, we *nortemericanos* have had our hand in the country's demise. This too hangs in the air since Guatemala's previous president tossed the UN anticorruption team from the country, but the current center-left president, Bernardo Arévalo, is determined to undo the corruption and graft that have plagued the country.

It's hard to notice such discrepancies in Antigua, where Debby and I spent our first and last nights. It takes very little to stay where so many things are within reach—bicycles, ecotours, birding, and a belief that out of this will come a better tomorrow. The sun is out, the beer is cold, and students from a dozen countries come here to study Spanish. For outsiders with means like us, we found good food and music at Frida's. Kahlo's image on the stage wall is larger than life, and it belongs here—she is another artist to whom the world returns when the contradictions bear down too hard as they do here.

We started the day in the café on the square—strong *café con leche* and a croissant. We were jet-lagged and the brush with Antigua came slow: the

landscape was clouded with volcanic sky, bougainvillea, and grackles, the omnipresent bird of Central America. We would not see a *quetzal*—it will come to us on our next visit to Gary and Astrid's—but it was painted everywhere, and the bird changed hands on the currency. Driving to Pana, we stopped at Iximche, Mayan ruins from five hundred years earlier. The providence of their history began to unfold. Iximche is not as well-known as other sites, but it survives as an entire community forged in stone. The breadth of such places makes you reconsider: what am I doing with my life?

In this I don't worry about Gary. He has made a choice to be in this landscape, to address the constant revelation of Nancy, his "adopted" daughter in his arms. We stop at Rincon Suiza, a Swiss place on the mountain ridge, for *carnitas*. Gary wants to take a kilo to Pana. Pine trees are everywhere but I am wont to know how the Swiss found *this* very place? Coming down the mountain, we drive through the Sololá, one of the few communities that has two local governments, Mayan and Guatemalan. They work together on most things, a model for how a shared government might be. We stop and see the lake for the first time: it's cobalt blue, surrounded by volcanic ridges. There are small Mayan communities dotting the shore. Before long, we take the water taxi to San Juan. This village is only Mayan, and they speak Tzutujil. Inside one of the textile shops, Candida shows us how they dye, stretch, and weave the cotton into fabric. She prepares a lesson for us: this is how I come to cloth. We donate ten *quetzales*—a little over a dollar—and buy some of the clothes she and the other women have made. San Juan juts up from the lake to a square where the Spanish built a church in the 1600s. It is used to this day. We eat lunch in a restaurant on the main road up the hill. A young man and woman scurry about. She cooks and he attends to our drinks. We are just about finished when a group of adults walk in who are visually impaired. There are guides with them. They have just come from kayaking on Lake Atitlán, and now they are eating with us. They are from the UK—Travel Eyes. Gary, Debby, and I think we are small by comparison, worrying over things that have no bearing here.

We started the day in the café on the square—strong café con leche *and a croissant. We were jet-lagged and the brush with Antigua came slow: the landscape was clouded with volcanic sky, bougainvillea, and grackles, the omnipresent bird of Central America. We would not see a* quetzal—*it will come to us on our next visit to Gary and Astrid's—but it was painted everywhere, and the bird changed hands on the currency. Driving to Pana, we stopped at Iximche, Mayan ruins from five hundred years earlier. The providence of their history began to unfold. Iximche is not as well-known as other sites, but it survives as an entire community forged in stone. The breadth of such places makes you reconsider: what am I doing with my life?*

From the water taxi back to Pana, the houses on the lakeside look like Malibu. We stop at a dock; a Mayan woman gets out of the *panga* with a thirty-pound cloth basket she balances on her head. She can barely reach the post to climb from the boat. I hold her back and push, hoping she does not take offense. There is none to be taken. Her smile could liberate an army. She and her son walk to the house they caretake for the owners who live in Guatemala City. A parable of second homes and second lives. When we disembark in Pana, Gary tells me that Astrid's niece is working on a sewage treatment plant for the town. They have to save the lake before this harbor becomes too polluted. Again, the nexus of privilege and necessity, how Astrid's family has made this community a little stronger.

Astrid comes home from work and takes Debby and me with her to Jenna's B & B for Matilda's goodbye party. An Aussie expat, Matilde is leaving for the United States and then to Europe. She reads futures but not idly: she has learned this from thirty years of practice. Like a poet's apprenticeship, I think. Matilda slept in our room before we arrived, and she is ebullient when we meet her in the hillside bar that is Jenna's dream. Out of dirt, rock, vines, and trees, Jenna sculpted a series of interlocking yurts and terraces filled with olive, date palm, hibiscus, *jacote*, succulents, and flowers in every crevice. A Canadian Jew whose bohemian parents raised her in Morocco, Italy, and Spain, she has built this wooden and stone paradise out of nothing. She told us of her marriage to a Guatemalan on the lake: surrounded by flowers in a kayak in a traditional Mayan ceremony. How she defined purchase—the ledge from which you look upon the world. I heard Seamus Heaney use that word and he meant it similarly: the stone from which you take your first steps. Perhaps this is what Gary intuited about leaving what he knew: it was from another purchase he would set out to articulate a new landscape, but paradoxically, from an older purchase.

Issa arrives at 8:30 a.m. to take us to Vivamos Mejor, a sustainable agricultural NGO in the highlands. It has run for almost thirty years and has made remarkable progress on reforestation, plant and tree rotation, public health, early childhood education, and maternal health. Issa is the picture of optimism: driven to change the complexion of the highlands, to help build a stronger community of Mayan people whose leadership will help them live into the next century. On the road up, we stop to look at the lake. A young man rises from the cliff below with fifty pounds of wood on his back. He has cut it—all green—with a machete. This is the wood he must gather in order for his family to cook. This is why the forest is disappearing. This is what Vivamos Mejor is working to address. We try to fathom such daily hardship. But this struggle is not unusual; this is how much of the globe harnesses heat. It is we who are the exception, the tourists on this road. Issa is a Fulbright Fellow in the making: she has the energy, moxie, and desire to change a small, Central American country.

At night we go to the Circus Bar for more *indígenas* music and food. By this time, both Debby and I have begun to slip away from our past; we are not part of another place, only trying to live in this one. Gary shows me a poem about Flaubert's letters to George Sand—a reckoning of two minds set in the garden outside our room. He has been reading their letters, and the poem

is what surfaces from the florid landscape. Gary's natural affinity for the underdog and his acute ability to sift from his predecessors give his poems a gravitas and metaphoric detail that separates him from his peers. Again Guatemala seeps onto the page: slowly, the novelist's letters surface beneath a green canopy in his yard.

In the morning, we are back at Café Cardamomo, and a boy, not more than five, comes to our table. He wants to shine my shoes. Embarrassed, I point to my sandals. Gary says, "Guatemala will break your heart every day if you let it." I believe him and try not to look too hard into the eyes of the boy whose mother sent him here to work for five *quetzales* a shine. It is our last day in Pana. Debby and I want to stay, but we cannot shirk enough of our lives at home. I have poems on the other side of the border. We have things not said, not completed, but still we ask: how can we remain on Santander, in this Finnish coffee house with the boy who will not stop looking at me? We wake early to say goodbye to Gary and Astrid; she leaves for the preschool on her moped at 7:45 a.m. She is eating avocado on tortillas. The night before, we finished all of the leftovers from the week—the last of Gary's *carnitas*, Debby's shrimp pasta, and some chicken from our trip to San Juan. Gary asks how I feel: happy and sad. He says, "I'm just sad," and starts to cry. We all start to cry because it is not the end of our journey, but it is the end of this time with each other, with the place that he and Astrid have chosen to define their days.

The day before, Astrid drove us to see their old house that has been strangely renovated into a burger joint. The leaky roof, the cranky plumbing, and more finally pushed them to build a house. I imagine building a house in Pana. I imagine trying to live without what I see every morning: seven mountain ranges, snow at this time of year, mountain mahogany, and piñon. This is what Gary left; he loves Virginia City, taught in the schools here. In fact, it was here that he decided to become a poet when he met Tom Meschery, poet and former NBA star, and an artist in residence. He told Gary to read "these thirty books of poetry" if he wanted to become a poet. Gary did, and he has—but it is not this easy for him or any poet I know. The devotion to the craft of poetry requires daily effort buttressed by belief that cannot be seen or, by many, understood. I believe Gary chose Guatemala because in it, he has solace with Astrid, with the economy of place. It is a physical presence he wades into every morning, a Mayan face that has a life: the itinerant woman who stores her belongings on the street only to retrieve them the following day; the young man who sells nuts from a wooden cart he must push with his feet facing each other; the man next door who is trying to teach Gary to speak Kakchiquel; and the woman on the alley to the preschool to whom he brings wood once a week. This is the family he chose. As we hug, Astrid says, "You are his North American family," but I think his family is here in this land that will not let him go. Sure, we are part of his former home and he and I share the ephemeral lens of poetry, but at this time in his life he has rooted in a home of otherness. It sculpts him, like the wind does me in Nevada. Place is not what makes a poet, but it is a presence, and if it is addressed it will unfold in unimagined ways. I write from alkaline playas; he from volcanic, rain-filled skies. They assert themselves; they belong to what is honed from the poet's vision of those places.

It is a physical presence he wades into every morning, a Mayan face that has a life: the itinerant woman who stores her belongings on the street only to retrieve them the following day; the young man who sells nuts from a wooden cart he must push with his feet facing each other; the man next door who is trying to teach Gary to speak Kakchiquel; and the woman on the alley to the preschool to whom he brings wood once a week. This is the family he chose.

We board the minivan for Antigua. On the way up the hill to El Tablón we pass the vendors and chicken buses. Out the window is a casket maker, and there are purple coffins stacked for the time when words will not suffice. I want to go out in a purple casket, but here it is only one of the many beautiful colors that decorate every Mayan person we meet. In Chimaltenango—the suffix of which means place of—Gary tells me it is a place of shit. He doesn't like it, the traffic, the swarm of trucks and chicken buses, and the hustle: women wedged in door fronts selling their wares, and some, their bodies. He feels the dread of money and its tendrils. That night, Debby and I stroll the square. We don't want to leave. We think we could stay like Gary and Astrid. We walk once more to the coffee place. I have a hot chocolate; the cinnamon rises to my lips. The evening is almost cold. I have my heavy jacket on for the snow of home. In the square, a shoeshine man holds my left foot: "*Ponga su pie aquí*," and he pulls it down on the wooden box. He is seventy-five, has made a living on this square for forty years. He is missing a front tooth but tells me my congresswoman still demands U.S. sanctions against Guatemala for pulling out of the UN agreement. In an instant history weighs on both of us, and the boy who walked up to my table earlier that day has spoken. Without education, without a degree, the man has directed my attention to the thread that runs from my country to his. How is it that a lifespan unfolds on the shoeshine box?

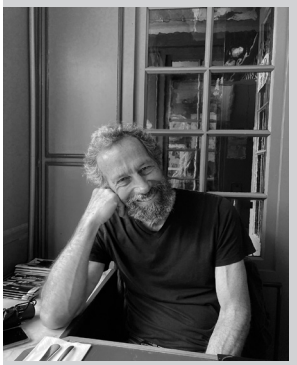
We try to sleep at Placida Antigua, but the 4:00 a.m. taxi comes too soon. Inside a rusty Datsun, it smells of gas and exhaust. Our driver will drive this taxi all day; he will drive us into Guatemala City and unload us at the airport. By day's end, his lungs will know the cost of the foul air. We eat eggs in the sunrise. I wish Gary could see this part of the city he does not like: the waiters whose kindness keeps us from worry, the baggage handlers who do not care where we're from, the mothers who lift their purses to their laps. This filters in the poem that he will write once we are gone. This emanates from the hollow of goodbye. My words are stifled with travel. I want to paint and write in his garden for weeks.

Today, I think of Gary, almost home, with his cat, Concha, Lucius, Astrid, and his almost daughter, Nancy. An imperfection of wills—his, Astrid's, and others—that brought him to live in Central America, an embrace of the intractable stones in its midst.

We return to the snow and cold of Nevada. I listen to the radio—there is fear that the new president will not

be able to quell further turmoil from the UN expulsion from Guatemala. I think of the women in the market, sitting, surrounded by vegetables, their children, and I hear Issa's voice in the highlands, and the children at Astrid's school, and I see Lake Atitlán, and for a moment, I cannot believe a word of it. Beneath the thousand arms of this Mayan village in which Gary and Astrid live is kindness without guile. A vision of how life might be. In a place where so little is chosen, Gary has chosen well. His poems will circle back to their origins, what he remembers of home and what it's become, now that he has taken them in.

Author note: Gary Short's New and Selected Poems, The Stars that Fell*, is forthcoming from the University of Nevada Press in 2026.*



Shaun T. Griffin co-founded Community Chest in 1991, a nonprofit organization that directs more than thirty programs for northern Nevada. Griffin has taught a poetry workshop at Northern Nevada Correctional Center for over thirty years and published a journal of the men's work, *Razor Wire*. He is the author of numerous books of poetry and prose, including *River Ask Me Why* and *No Charity in the Wilderness*. In 2014, Griffin was inducted into the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame. In May of 2024, he was named Nevada's second poet laureate by Governor Joe Lombardo.

Still Life with Opossum

Brooke Stanish

"I have said that we have a right to destroy insects when they are a real annoyance to us; but it is a right which should be exercised very carefully and very conscientiously."

Mary Townsend, *Life in the Insect World*

DIORAMA 1: homo sapiens

If only
I could keep the outside:

out.

—

In the beginning, wilderness
did not mean what we
think:

William Cronon says that to such spaces, "one came only against one's will" (71)—as a fly to a windowsill, tapping glass, wanting sun. At the time, there was nothing romantic about such spaces, and it was the end of the 19th century before anything had changed. This is the point at which people started to perceive wilderness not as a desolate space; rather, it was "likened to Eden itself" (72).

The same holds true now.
And yet, I want it out?

—

Up through red brick grows: my wilderness. I tried to cover this with Persian rugs and furniture, a couch my partner bought from Amazon. And still the outside leaks in.

The landlady told us before we moved in: *a live oak is trying to grow through the foundation of the home. That's why you see this crack. You see? This crack?*

I nodded, thinking it entirely *lovely*, like some building in Edinburgh—a fortress or something. I figured I could hear the memory of the house through the tree. As Tarmo Pikner says in his work on ruins, their "visual appearance may hide some embedded ongoing processes and capacities related to the ruins. . . an obliteration of stable form and a presence of a void" (84)—a void I thought might communicate to me something I did not know.

Not long after, this opening in the floor upset me, as if through it, I saw not the earth but something evil. Something that does not care about me at all. The tree splits the floor in two; I wondered if it will get even wider and perhaps, draw me in. This did not happen. Instead, I drew closer myself, watching microscopic bugs come and go like tiny cars on a dirt highway; smooshed into one corner, there was a Milk Dud not even the bugs wanted to touch.

Then I thought:

the outside has ruined
this house, there is
nothing salvageable
now, not even
a Milk Dud.

—

Night. My partner wakes me, slamming a swiffer into the ceiling—rhythmically as if playing a song.

What are you doing?

I am scaring the rat.

After that, every night, we wake: to scratches and scuffling feet. Sometimes, a squirming sound in the wall behind our bed as if the Guest wants to sleep beside us, frightened of loneliness in an empty attic, a feeling for which I cannot blame him.

For a while, I think, perhaps, this is a *good* thing, as in: at the time, I too was fearful. Home alone. Some paranoia. An avoidance of mirrors and dark corners. The Guest diminished that. Cronon says that the typical understanding of "wilderness" entails "a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural" which, as he explains later, is not correct (80). The Guest and I are both creatures, fearful of something—death, glass, metal cages with cat food placed at the end—but maybe, when two are afraid, then one cancels out the other and turns both into something akin to non-fear.

This is ridiculous, I know. My partner says, *you cannot keep an attic rat as a pet.*

And yet, I tell the exterminator: *I kind of like him.*

The exterminator lifts himself into his truck, staring at me strangely—as if my eyes just fell out of my head.

I can tell he does not think very highly of rats.

DIORAMA 2: didelphidae

I imagine what dark corners he roamed: lonely, looking for his mother, perhaps? Probably not. I wish I did not think of the diseases he carried in his little body—the germs he tracked through *my* house.

I want him out! Think of all the diseases. Through the AC, we're breathing in everything.

My prior affection could not overwhelm the fear I stored up for myself.

Mel Chen says: "the 'animal' is relentlessly recruited as the presumed field of rejection of and for the 'human,'" (24) meaning that I, in one sense, am wrong to pin my fears onto the skin of this rat. Still, I cannot help but think that he might one day break through the attic and land on our heads, scratching at our eyes, our mouths, until our faces are only pieces of paper with eraser marks. I fear he might start sleeping in our bed.

My mother said: *that will not ever happen. He just wants a place to be warm. He is more afraid of you than you are of him.*

In other words: "Nature and human culture, wildness and domesticity, are not opposed but are interdependent" (Berry 11–12). Modus Ponens: if the rat needs me, then I need the rat. I wonder if this interdependence creates a kind of telepathy. And maybe it really *is* his fear of me that I am feeling instead—a fear that, I admit, is not entirely incorrect.

—

It is not even a rat. My partner and I heard the door of the trap snap shut.

Outside, in a metal cage, stood a small opossum. His hair was coarse and wiry; it looked as if it was instead a mass of splinters, like my own head in elementary school when my mother used to call my hair a *rat's nest*. She said she couldn't get a brush through it if she tried. After that, I grew intensely self-conscious, as Chen says: "dehumanizing insults hinge on the salient invocation of the nonhuman animal" (35). Of course, I do not think my mother was trying to "dehumanize" me then, but it was a *rat's* nest she turned toward to express her disappointments with my appearance. Strange language. Infectious like this.

The opossum's eyes were jet black, inky with cataracts.

I couldn't stand looking at him like that. The day was cold, I remember. He was not used to that. I could tell by the way he looked with his eyes—as if not seeing anything. As if his pupils were frigid.

I'm so sorry.
I'm so sorry.
I'm so sorry.
I sang into the cage,
but he wanted nothing
to do with me,
staring with his
crocodile teeth
as if i was the enemy
& *he's right*.

—

Cronon writes that when we overvalue expansive "wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and too many other people become less than human, thereby giving us permission not to care much about their suffer-

ing or their fate," (85) and the same is true for the non-human creatures who crawl out of "wilderness" and into our more human-dominated domains. *What of them?* For instance, would we have trapped this opossum if we had not lived in a domesticated suburb? Would we have understood that we do not own the space any more than we own him? I don't know.

Berry writes that "by diminishing nature we diminish ourselves" (10), and I am inclined to think this is true. After we caught our first opossum, we started to smell something rancid, dead—as if sent to us from God to tell us that we, in fact, were wrong. In every room, we lit a candle, but still, death grew more permanent. I felt it deep in my t-shirt, my hair, the ridge of skin where my nose meets my lip. I imagined the color emerald green, coating the pores of my skin.

Do you have a crockpot? Our landlady asked. *I'll bring you a roast – that way you can fi ll the house with good smells.* The woman offered this, kindly, but she did not offer to remove whatever was dead. She told us *the exterminator must've used poison even though I told him not to. The poor thing must've died in the wall.* We did not want the roast, and thankfully, she never brought it.

I saw no benefit in smelling two dead bodies at once. I saw no benefit in sharing the house with yet another ghost.

DIORAMA 3: periplaneta americana

Sometimes I wonder if my partner and I are going to drop dead someday—not in the usual way, as all humans do, but in an unusual way, as if poisoned like a roach. Ever since the exterminator sprayed the perimeter of our house, we've never seen a roach who is not already on its back, thin legs wiggling upward as if peddling a small bicycle. I do not like to see them like that, so I crush them quickly and wash my hands. One day, the roach I crushed burst:

cerulean
it explodes
into blue,
into
my hands,
everything
explodes
including you—
my own self,
in this house of bricks
laid down over tree roots
rising through
like bones
dripping with
rat skin, poison
from my first life
as an opossum, i suppose

i do not believe
that. i only believe
in revenge,
that is—

Disgusting! is what my partner called it, when I raised the napkin stained neon blue, cradling the carcass of the roach I crushed with my own hands. I did not agree; I found the blue lovely, only I wished it did not indicate a death by poison, a suffering last.

—

Berry writes that since what thinkers have called the "Great Chain of Being" was rejected but never replaced, we no longer have a definition of what constitutes a "human" and "lacking that definition, or any such definition, we do not know at what point to restrain or deny ourselves" (15). I do not believe that the "Great Chain of Being" is anything we need to replace, but I do agree that without knowing who we are, we often go too far. We kill roaches and rats with poison, hurling them into derangement and confusion before a lost and lonely death. All for the fact that we think we can do this. Will nature never seek revenge?

Chen criticizes the influence of this great chain of being which necessitates "an ordered hierarchy from inanimate object to plant to nonhuman to animal to human." In this chain, humans are "effectively 'dehumanized,' and simultaneously de-subjectified and objectified" when associated with creatures lower on the ladder (40). Necessarily, a roach would be very near the bottom of this chain, perhaps above fruit flies and venus fly traps but nowhere near the humans who exert what they assume is rightful control over the creature. He is an "object" in their eyes, not a subject. "Animacy is political, shaped by what or who counts as human, and what or who does not" (Chen 30), and a roach absolutely does not count the way a human does. A roach is less alive than we are in our own eyes.

And so he can be crushed without a guilty conscience.

I am having trouble believing this.

—

I did not know a roach could crawl into your ear until recently.
I fear falling asleep now, more than usually.
I fear lifting my pillow from my bed and finding a roach.
I fear one night, when I am deeply asleep,
I will wake to the feet of a roach tapping my ear lobe.
I fear the roach might explode inside of me
bits of rat poison, lodged in my ear, like wax.
I fear that, like the roach, I might die too—
azure blood laced with poison, dripping down
my neck.

In her work, Jane Bennett explores the "ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (6)—an ability I've grown to fear recently as I do not know how it will affect me. Perhaps, again, I am falling victim to the kind of thinking that displaces the flaws of human beings onto animals and also I might add, dead or inanimate things (Chen 24). But if a roach crawled inside my ear, and I crushed it, and if it had just eaten rat poison, this dead roach would be far more effectual than a living one—far more threatening. As Berry writes of the relationship between the human and the natural world, Bennett observes that "in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself" (13). And when I think of this roach, the dead opossum who inadvertently infected it, and my own self who hired the exterminator who poisoned the opossum in the first place, I know this cannot be false.

It's my own poison that will kill me in the end.

My death will have nothing to do with the opossum or the roach.

DIORAMA 4: sarcophagidae

When I was a child, I watched *The Fly*. My mother showed my siblings and me the film one night along with the quite similar film entitled *Spiders*. This was a period of life during which my siblings and I were enamored by the grotesque. We liked to search up pictures of humanoid dogs and the mermaid of Fiji and anything else that was somehow, most likely digitally, composed of both human and nonhuman parts. Then, I did not think of what this implied.

"Dehumanizing insults hinge on the salient invocation of the nonhuman animal," (Chen 35) and perhaps, the same is true for the way in which placing parts of the nonhuman animal onto a human body evokes a sense of the grotesque, a not-entirely-human dissonance. *The Fly* and *Spiders* were *horror* films, after all.

—

On my wall, dime-sized:

l , , s
f i e
, f s , ,
e , , l e i
l f
, i , e f s f
l , , s
f i e
, f s , ,
f i l e ,
, f s , ,
e , f s l e i
s l f ,
i f e , s f
, l e ,
s , i

with pin-striped backs &
translucent wings. another
context might make them
beautiful, again—their
wings at least—or
language might
come apart sometimes. You realize what is in it. As Chen says, words "affect and effect. . . they complexly pulse through bodies (live or dead), rendering their effects in feeling and active response" (54)—a response in which, for instance, the word *flies* in the plural sense, manifests in me complete disgust. Images of rotting meat on the kitchen counter. A feeling of nausea. A neurological need to wash my hands, intensely—to scrub my floors with peroxide, or plunge my face in bleach.

—

Like Chen, Bennett too believes in the influence of seemingly inert substances. Dead or inanimate things have "the ability to make things happen, to produce effects" (5), which is a truth that, in theory, I can withstand. When this truth appears in reality though, I cannot help but react.

Drawing on the theorists Bruno Latour and Gilles Deleuze, Bennett writes: "An operator is that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event" (9). For her, the word "operator" functions in a similar manner to the word "agent," a word with which she describes dead or inanimate objects that have the capacity to act (9). Strange to think of the dead opossum in this light—as an assemblage in the right place at the right time, catalyzing the event that is my home's infestation of flies. Dead opossum as an agent—as instigator of the flies.

And then I think well maybe the flies are *helpful* in a sense, as in helping me dispose of the opossum carcass, the smell that clings to my curtains, the sheets on my bed.

—

Nonetheless, my partner and I bought fly traps.

Every night, I lower my face close to the blue light. I take inventory of the bodies—thread-thin limbs caught in a surface of invisible glue, disguised as pure light. This is the difficult part: their pea-sized wings won't quit moving, tugging their bodies upward, believing they might. "By diminishing nature we diminish ourselves" (Berry 10), and I do feel diminished.

In another moment—when the flies are no longer moving anymore—I think that I am just overly sensitive. There is nothing wrong with this at all. My guilt is the only thing that's wrong. Pikner says that in cities, "various entities of nature become part of (social) coexistence" (83), so perhaps, this is simply how things go and nothing is wrong at all. As if, by entering *this* particular home, the flies agreed to coexist with creatures who have the capacity to kill them. I don't know. There's something about the way they try to escape me, frantically, hurling their bodies against my

window—in panic—the way their quick little bodies crack and bleed in the napkin I slam against the glass that makes me believe this is not right at all.

DIORAMA 5: quercus virginiana / homo sapiens / anoplius samariensis

10 months, the tree continues to grow.
3 months, the smell of dead opossum is gone.
all that's left are bones, presumably. i have not ever
seen the body, after all. something strange about that,
my mother says, *there must be dozens of dead rats in your wall.* i say:
possibly.
i don't really care anymore–

"The autonomy of nonhuman nature seems to me an indispensable corrective to human arrogance" (Cronon 87), yes—now I know. There is something lovely in the fact that tree roots continue to pulse through the bricks as if, in their version of the world, these obstructions do not exist at all.

My grandmother used to speak to the tree outside her home; she told it *how beautiful* it was and *how tall*. To me, my grandmother's tree was lopsided as if it only had half its skull. Some construction men sawed off part of its face; they made way for a pole from which now hangs a powerline. *It's awful*, my grandmother said, *that men do that. Humans always have a way of destroying what is beautiful*. I nodded: *yes, I know.*

My grandmother does not go outside much anymore. If only a tree grew up through the foundation of her new home. Then, perhaps, I would feel less guilty; she would no longer be alone.

—

Pikner writes that, in the space of a city, "nature is continuously co-produced and recreated" (84), like the maiming of my grandmother's tree, becoming a new creation. Perhaps that is simply the natural course of things. If this is true, I'd rather not believe it. That kind of world is bleak—a mass of grey warehouses and silver smokestacks and powerlines slicing the sky in two rectangular pieces. Cronon says that "wilderness teaches us to ask whether the Other must always bend to our will, and if not, under what circumstances it should be allowed to flourish without our intervention" (88), and I think I'd rather not intervene anymore even despite the circumstances.

—

There is a wasp who lives outside my window—clinging to the bottom of the windowsill, right behind my bed. My partner and I watch her sometimes, especially at night when she buries her small head into each of the papery cells of her nest. We do not know what she's doing, but we watch. Sometimes it seems that she sees us too, through the glass: four larger, darker cells. Our eyes. I wonder what she makes of our eyes then. If she wants to bury her head inside of those too, or if she fears them.

I wonder if this mutual noticing counts as "an alliance, between the domestic and the wild" (Berry 11). Probably not. My partner and I are not actually *doing* anything, after all. We are simply watching, choosing not to get rid of the wasp on the other side of the wall. And I admit, as I did with the opossum, I feel a foreign sort of comfort knowing she's there, knowing I get to turn my head at night to watch her climb over her nest, or compress her small body into the shape of an almond, in sleep. I hope she really does see me.

Am I really that lonely?

—

Soon, we will leave this house. But the opossum will not, the tree will not, the wasp will not. In a sense, the house belongs more to them than it ever did to us; it never *truly* belonged to us at all, in fact.

From far away—someday, from heaven, even—I will think of the tree root, the way it traced a scar through the brick floor all the way outside to where it joined the trunk of itself. I will think of days staring out my window at this tree, my partner playing guitar from another room, softly as if it was only the memory of a sound already heard, in another life perhaps. Like the tree who in a previous life did not need to push through clay brick as if stretching its legs, a too-tall Alice in the White Rabbit's house in Wonderland. I think: this world must be a sort of Wonderland to the tree. Not in the sense that there is anything wonderful about it, but rather, in the sense that nothing makes sense. I *do* think trees have commonsense, and I imagine they find much of this world ridiculous. As the opossum did perhaps, if it had the time to think of it. Especially toward the end, poison lodged in its small, bony chest. *Ridiculous*!

In this house forever will be: the bones of an opossum who died in distress. In a strange sort of way, these bones might be the only imprint of my existence in this place once I leave it. One day, when this house is sold or remodeled or bulldozered—I don't know—what remains of those bones will tumble out of the wall and return to the soil, perhaps. And maybe the tree root will recognize them as the bones of the opossum who lived with me, for a time. Maybe the tree will remember my partner and me—the soles of our feet walking over her legs, the way we shifted Persian rugs to cover her. I hope she does not hold this against us, in the end.

I want this house to remember us. I hope this isn't too much to ask. I don't mean to be a narcissist; I'm only sentimental, and I miss things that may not even know I exist.

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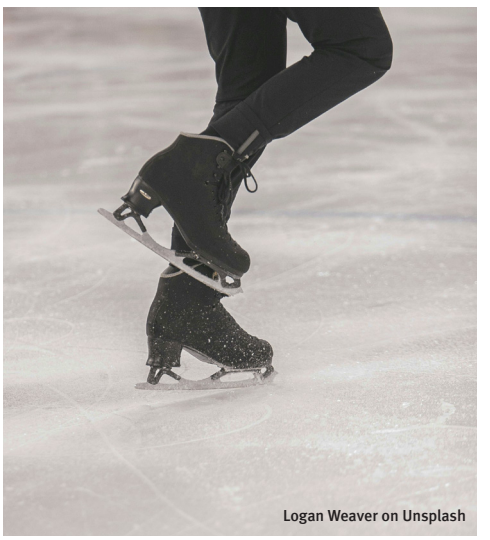
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Revelation Road

L. Annette Binder

The girls came early to the rink, at five or five thirty, when the mountains were still black. The cars pulled up and they got out with their rolling bags. He knew each one from the way she walked. Angela with her strange grey eyes and Taylor who moved her hands like one of those temple dancers they have in Bali. Danielle and Bree and Isabella with her freckles. The mothers trailed behind them blinking in the dark. Carrying thermos cups and extra jackets and decorating magazines for their time up in the bleachers. Forty years old and tired already, with their sagging eyes and their sagging jawlines, and there was nothing graceful in how they moved. How could they have such beautiful daughters? Some nights he couldn't sleep just thinking how they waited by the boards. They burst through like racehorses when the gate finally opened, all muscles and long lines. Like falcons in level flight and it was hard deciding which one to watch.

It wasn't even twenty degrees this morning. The wind was bending the bare branches. The third week in April and no sign of spring, no buds yet on the maples. He wore his winter parka and two pairs of Smartwool socks because even when things were running right it was damp inside the rink. He waited by the sharpening station so he could watch them lace their boots. He held his thermos in both his hands



Logan Weaver on Unsplash

and leaned against the door. A new girl was coming toward the lockers. She wore a hooded jacket, and he saw only a flash of pale pale skin before she turned to sit on the farthest bench. She kicked off her sneakers and stuffed her socks inside. Her feet were narrow. Even from twenty yards away he saw their perfect arches. She worked her skate socks up her calves, making sure the seams were straight. She set silicone discs against her ankle bones before pulling on her skates. She wore old-fashioned Harlicks and not those new skates that fit more like sneakers. They were thick as casts, her jumping boots. Hard like plaster to keep the feet from twisting.

He waited until the gate opened. He stood up straight as he could to make himself a little taller, but she never looked his way. She took off her jacket and blew her nose one last time before heading toward the boards. Her face was the right shape, he could tell this when she turned. Her jaw wasn't too square and her nose was narrow, but she was looking downwards so he couldn't see her eyes, and her eyes were all that mattered.

It was a simple defect on his eighteenth chromosome. He walked on his ankle until the doctors set the casts one after the next. Casts and splints and four years of daytime braces because his foot curled back if his attention wandered. Keeping it straight took all his energy. Even now his left foot was three sizes smaller than his right. The calf was weak and hairless as a baby's arm, and the shoes he wore couldn't hide it because he walked with a dragging shuffle. All the nurses who'd worked his muscles and taped his ankle straight, he felt ashamed when they saw it. Seven years old and he wanted to hide his foot under a blanket or a sock, but his mother pinned his arms so they could stretch those tendons. She held his arms even when he cried. She called him her baby and her sweet little man. *Be a soldier,* she'd say. *Be brave like your daddy*, and she didn't let go; she never let go until the nurses were finished.

The new girl came only on Mondays and Wednesdays. She didn't have a coach. The other girls called her Andy, and he wanted to correct them. Her name was Andrea Turner; he knew this from Carmela who sold the freestyle passes. It was a perfect skating name. Andrea was seventeen and she rode a scooter to the rink, one of those little Yamaha Vinos in a pale pearlescent gray. Andrea's hair was a dirty blond. If it wasn't freshly washed it could look a little stringy. She didn't fuss with it or use a little mirror to check her makeup between sessions. Andrea had all of her doubles except the Axel and the Lutz. She always ate a Kit Kat bar after working on her jumps. She didn't hide it either. She wiped down her blades and dried off her boots and she sat there eating the segments while the hockey players came through the double doors. Andrea didn't flirt with them the way the other girls did—all of them except for the youngest girls whose mothers were always watching. She sat there on the bench slouching the way boxers sometimes do, and she fixed her eyes on people like she knew all their secrets. He stood by the benches when he could. He stood there with his thermos cup and his morning checklist and he looked for her clear eyes. They were like opals how their color changed depending on the light.

—

Five and one-half miles of pipe for the brinewater. Three thousand welds to keep the surface frozen. Three thousand times somebody wirebrushed and fit the pieces tight together. Three thousand times they bent between the rows, working the torch until the puddle was just right, and what did it matter now. She didn't look down when she skated. She wouldn't care or understand if somebody told her. All the work it took just to keep it going. Thirteen layers of ice, some no thicker than a sheet of paper. Spray them on one at a time and wait for them to dry. You don't want too much water on the floor. You need to be patient to build up your layers. Make a mistake in painting the hockey

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lines. Waver a little with the stencils or track some paint on your shoe and your mistake will stay there rippling like a coin beneath the water. He built it for her, this perfect sheet. He made it with his hands.

The middle of May the irises began to bloom in the beds outside the rink. They were planted in interlocking circles like the Olympic rings. The girls came to practice in tank tops and leggings, and their skin was winter pale. They never could wait for seasons to change. They were always in a hurry. Don't stare when she comes in. Don't let her catch you looking. She's kneading the meat of her calves. She's spreading out her bare toes. Go through the checklists one item at a time. The dailies, the weeklies, the monthlies. Check the CO detectors in the bleachers, check the condenser bearings. Forget to keep them greased and the motor will blow and the contactor and all the fuses. Keep the ice at twenty-six for the figure skaters. A single degree will make a difference. *Hey, Fixit,* the girls would say, *you need to take a break. Hey, George, make it a little softer. We're not playing hockey here.* He waved at them when they teased him, when they called him Jorge, but the only one who mattered was sitting on the corner bench.

No marriages, no children, no ladies anymore who called him on the phone. Pam who worked the Macy's makeup counter got married years before and she had three kids now who were probably in college. Isabel the Spanish teacher who wanted to take a train from Denver to Alaska. *Let's do it together*, she said. *Let's do it before we're old.* She spent months trying to figure out a way, but Canada was a problem. There wasn't any connecting service. *You're always looking for reasons not to do things,* she'd said that morning at the Amtrak station. She took the train to Seattle and then a cruise ship to Vancouver and up the Inside Passage. She must have left the ship at Seward because she sent him a postcard from the railway station. Spencer Glacier came next and Mulcahy Stadium in Anchorage, four wolves eating a moose somewhere near Denali. She was working her way northwards. The last card came from Fairbanks. Just a picture of the northern lights glowing like a chemical spill above the evergreens. He'd never seen

a thing like that and he probably never would. Maybe she met a lumberjack up there or a salmon fisherman, maybe she became a survivalist collecting lichen and summer berries. *Do something before I come back,* she'd told him. *It doesn't matter what,* and she squeezed his hand like somebody who was telling him a secret.

—

Some days they moved like starlings or schools of tiny fish. The only thing they needed to know was what the closest one was doing. Weaving circles around the ice during the freestyle sessions. Setting up Lutzes in the corner, and behind the ballads and the overtures, behind the announcer's tired voice was the cut-cutting of their edges. There was no cleaner sound. The first ones were mothers now, maybe grandmothers if they'd had their babies early. They'd practiced figures on their little patches back when compulsory figures mattered, serpentines and paragraph loops and the other ones he'd forgotten. Six o'clock in the morning. Again at noon and four. The hush of the rink and the girls turning their perfect circles. They used to wear cardigans and tiny skating skirts and matching cashmere gloves. Turning, turning, never stopping. Being young was all they knew. Thirty-seven years making ice. Thirty-seven years of winter and he remembered all their faces. God keep them. Let their grace be their shelter.

By June she'd started to wave to him. She was coming five days a week. Most mornings her hair was still wet from the shower. He'd wait in front of the vending machines just to see her face. He'd stand by the doors where Carmela checked their freestyle passes. Carmela

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would talk about her husband's gout or how they were raising her Tricare premiums because something was wrong in Washington. Something was really rotten. Three thousand dollars for a toilet, she saw it on *Sixty Minutes*, but look how they treated their veterans, and he'd say yes that's right and it's a shame how things are going, but the whole time he watched the lot. He was waiting for that gray scooter.

—

There was a spot up on Revelation Road two miles past the rink. It was a residential street just like any other, but there was something about the curve of it, about the pale brick rancher at the corner and the elm tree in its yard. It might be the only elm left in the city, and in all his years he'd never seen a more perfect thing. How that tree was shaped like a tear drop, how it swayed over the asphalt shingles even when there wasn't any wind. In winter he could see the Peak through its branches. Every July the Mourning Cloaks hatched and the tree was purple with

their wings. He went there on Wednesdays and Saturdays after work and finished his turkey sandwich. Sitting in his truck and listening to Sherlock Holmes on the old-time radio station. Sometimes he fell asleep there in his spot beside the tree. Two o'clock in the morning he'd wake up with his head against the wheel, but nobody ever knocked on his window or gave him any trouble.

He wasn't tired. He just needed to close his eyes. His foot turned back if he let it, if he forgot to wear his brace for even a night. It curled because that's how God made it, his mother always said. But God had also made him strong so he could pull it straight. Larry Sherry and King Tut, the emperor Claudius in ancient Rome. All the folks who had club feet and they went on to greatness. His mother said nothing should hold him back. That's why she named him George. George like his father who ran the beach at Normandy. George the bravest of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, who saved the princess from the dragon with nothing but a sword. A hero is what a hero does. Sometimes she called it grace. He puts one foot in front of the other for year, after year, after year.

—

He was in his truck when she came through the doors. He was looking for his extra gloves in the center divider, and he saw her swinging her skate bag the way schoolgirls swing their books. She threw it in the rear rack of her scooter. She undid her hair and tied it back again even tighter. It looked almost reddish in the sun. He turned the ignition without meaning to. He wasn't done yet with his day, but he put his truck into gear. He wouldn't have followed her if she'd been wearing a helmet. The roads weren't safe, not with all those California people talking on their cells. They were worse than the Texans how they were wrecking the city. They always drove in the passing lane, and somebody needed to tell her.

He waited until she'd turned from the parking lot. Right on Venetucci to Lake where farther down the rich people lived in their old brick houses. She leaned forward on her scooter, her ponytail blowing backwards like a streamer. Past the stone walls and fluted columns, the lawn jockeys with their lanterns. Lake turned into Circle and he was two cars behind her. North on Circle just three miles, but those three miles made all the difference. They passed Union and Fountain, and now there were dollar stores and laundromats, sandwich shops with dirty plastic chairs. Brick ranchers from the Sixties

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with rusted trucks in their front yards. Motorboats on cinderblocks and broken baby carriages. It doesn't take much to change a place. A shopping cart left on the sidewalk, a guy who starts selling mattresses out of his garage, but once it starts the decay won't stop until everything is rotten.

She pulled into an apartment complex on Circle and Pikes Peak. It had a wagon wheel at the entrance and a fountain without any water. So many junipers against the walls the whole place was probably full of spiders. He didn't stop to watch her park or take her skating bag. He kept going once she turned into the lot. He made a right on Pikes Peak and took it up to Chelton. She didn't see him as he went by. She never saw him and she never would, no matter what he did.

Sometimes she's in a tower. Sometimes she's tied to the tracks. The other girls fell away when she came. They were the daughters of dentists and lawyers and engineers, of colonels in the Air Force. They lived behind gates in Kissing Camels or on Cheyenne Mountain Road, they parked their hybrids in three-car garages out by Mountain Shadows. Family trips to Cabo and they came back with braids in their blond hair. You can't blame them for their parents, but those rich girls didn't matter. Not even the pretty ones or the ones who sat like dancers, who felt the music when it played. Stack them like cords of firewood and nobody would care.

August with its cement sky. Four o'clock in the mechanical room and the first drops against the shingles. Every afternoon the storms rolled down from Monument Hill. They gave the day its rhythm. The fullness in the air just before it starts. The waiting, waiting and then the sudden release. He went into the lot, and the drops came slantwise and needled his skin. In another few minutes the first hockey players would pull up for their afternoon pickup game, but the lot was empty now. Nobody saw him when he took out her spark plug. Nobody saw him put the duct tape on the end and push it back inside.

—

"They say you've got bones in your basement," she told him. She was looking out the passenger window. She tapped her narrow fingers on the glass. "They can be a little mean."

"Live long enough, and you'll collect some bones. That's just how it goes." They passed the edge of Quail Lake Park. People were probably canoeing on the lake now that the sky was clear. They were pushing swings and walking the red trails because in another hour it'd be dark. He drove in the right hand lane. He went five miles under the speed limit, and he always signaled his turns.

She wrinkled her nose. "I don't think so. But you sound just like my brother. He plays the bass in Denver. He's trying to start a band."

He held the wheel with his left hand. He rested his right hand on the gear stick and her bare legs were only inches from his fingers. Her neck was so slender now that he was close. He saw the marks from her sports bra where the straps had shifted. The freckles on her throat and the blue of the veins where the skin was thinnest. He was close enough to press his fingers there and feel the beating of her blood. Somebody could crush those bones without meaning to. She needed to carry pepper spray and a little emer-

He rested his right hand on the gear stick and her bare legs were only inches from his fingers. Her neck was so slender now that he was close. He saw the marks from her sports bra where the straps had shifted. The freckles on her throat and the blue of the veins where the skin was thinnest. He was close enough to press his fingers there and feel the beating of her blood. Somebody could crush those bones without meaning to. She needed to carry pepper spray and a little emergency whistle. She needed to wear more sunscreen, even when it rained.

gency whistle. She needed to wear more sunscreen, even when it rained.

"Music must run in your family then. I can see it when you skate." He moved his right hand back to the wheel. He took the Frontage Road and crossed under I-25. All the cars heading north to Castle Rock and Denver, every year it was getting worse. Pretty soon it would all be one big city. The sun was behind them now. It haloed her pale hair and her face looked like one of those angel paintings you'd see in a museum. The fine gold hairs on her forearms and on her knees where she was sloppy with the razor. "Your Lutz is looking better," he said. "You'll have it in another week."

He turned on Janitell and then on to Revelation. He knew all the houses here and the Harrison School was up the road where he'd spent his sophomore year.

She shrugged. "I had 'em all when I was twelve. They go away if you're not careful."

He stopped by the curb and put the truck in park. He reached across her seat. "Look how big that elm tree is. I remember when it was planted." The street was empty except for an old lady in a straw hat working in one of the yards. She was kneeling on a foam pad and loosening up her beds.

Andrea looked the way he was pointing. She looked up and down the street, too. Maybe she was trying to get her bearings. "This isn't the way I usually go. Is this some kind of shortcut?"

He rolled down his window. He set his elbow on the edge and patted the outside of his truck. "I could live to be a hundred and it wouldn't be enough."

"It's nice," she said. "It's a really nice tree," and she reached for the skate bag at her feet and pulled out her phone. Her T-shirt rode up as she bent down and he saw the edge of a tattoo on her hip. It looked like a dragonfly wing, and it wasn't right that somebody had put a needle to her skin. She cradled the phone in her lap. She held it in both her hands, and there was a boy on the screen. He was wearing a blaze vest. He couldn't be more than eighteen. Freckles, he had freckles, and his red hair was combed into spikes. "Is that your house? Did you live there when you were little?"

He didn't answer. He sat there for a long time and watched that tree. It was like a church window, green and blue and silver from the light between the branches. In all the millions of years since creatures came crawling from the ocean, how many had died here in this spot? How many and they were all forgotten. He held the wheel with both

his hands, and the old lady was still there in her pressed blue shirt. She was standing now. She'd started deadheading her climbing roses. She was steady as a surgeon the way she dropped each brown blossom into a wicker basket. She didn't look up when he turned the truck around.

Andrea talked the whole way back. She talked like somebody who was trying to keep the sun from setting. The boyfriend's name was Tommy, and he was almost done with basic. They'd be moving when he got back, but they wouldn't know where for another two weeks. Her mother was in nursing school. Her mother was waiting for her at home, and her dad came down on weekends. She skated now because in another month she wouldn't have the time. She wanted to go someplace hot. Maybe India or Louisiana. Humidity wasn't a problem. She was almost giddy by the time he came to her building. Thank you, she kept saying. Thank you for the ride and for trying to fix my scooter. Thank you, thank you, and the fountain was running now. The setting sun lit up the droplets as he pulled back out.

His father was a smart man. Forty years welding pipe before the cancer got him. Two months in Normandy and then a winter in the Huertgen Forest, but the only time George saw him cry was when he talked about the dog. A shorthaired pointer he'd shot by mistake the month he turned thirteen. He had to take her behind the barn to finish what he'd done. Life is filled with hard decisions, his father said. It's just one after another. His father was smart as any scientist, but this time he was wrong.

Sometimes grace comes in the waiting. In the stillness of the mornings when he pulled the lever. The empty ice and the halide lights, the early girls pushing through the doors. Hundreds of them. Thousands in all these many years. Be grateful. Be grateful. Each one brought him closer. They'd go riding together when he found her, and there wouldn't be a mother. No boyfriend, no father, no friends laughing by the benches. This he knew for certain.



L. Annette Binder was born in Germany and grew up in Colorado. Her story collection *Rise* (Sarabande 2012) received the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction, and her stories have appeared in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, *the PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, *One Story*, *The Southern Review*, *American Short Fiction*, and others. Her first novel, *The Vanishing Sky* (Bloomsbury 2020), is inspired by her family history. Her most recent book, *Child of Earth and Starry Heaven* (Wandering Aengus Press, 2025), is an account of her mother's struggle with dementia.

Maureen Clark

Origami of Vanishing

When I think about little girls
in the moment of turning into big girls
(it is no slow timid development),
but something strangely sudden.

—Rainer Maria Rilke



Khristina Sergeychik on Unsplash

I.

birds carved on sandstone walls
soot painted gouged out

deep in red canyons where we began
to worship things that fly

II.

between slabs of stone
a fossilized bird folded origami-like

feathers precisely grafted on pages
of rock like ancient runes

III.

one heron rises from the reeds
snaps the strings of gravity

under the arch of October sky
a flare of wings blocking light

IV.

small arms mimic flight
a child dancing on a green lawn

wisp of a girl hiatus in a song
quick as a blink gone

V.

salt flats press against indigo sky
between stars a gibbous moon spills

on the crystal salt the reflection of night
and another girl becomes extinction flight

Poets at 7,000 feet

last weekend we listened
to water in a creek for five full minutes

wrote down the messages we heard gurgling
over stones in the throat of the water

rumors and secrets lyrics of mountain songs
aspens were everywhere yellow

brilliant autumn at 7,000 feet
water was vibrating like the comb

of a music box the cylinder turning
against the stone cold teeth



Maureen Clark's first book of poetry, *This Insatiable August,* was released by Signature Books in 2024. She has been nominated twice for a 2024 Pushcart Prize. Her memoir, *Falling into Bountiful: Confessions of a Once Upon a Time Mormon,* won Honorable Mention in the 2024 Utah Original Writing Competition. She received her M.F.A. from the University of Utah, where she taught writing for twenty years. She was president of Writers @ Work 1999-2001. Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals, including *Gettysburg Review, Alaska Quarterly, Thimble Literary Journal, Cool Beans Literary Magazine,* and *Kestrel*.

William Snyder

He Wishes

After, *Olive Orchard*
Vincent Van Gogh, 1889



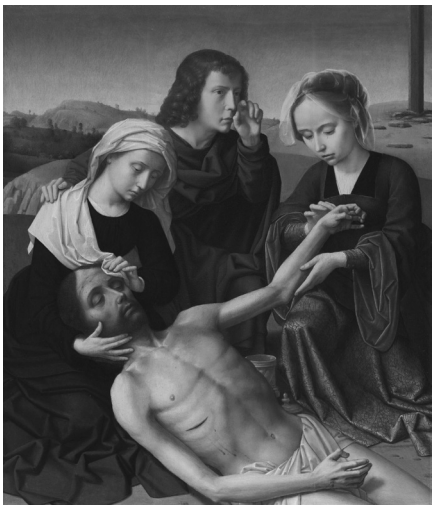
***Olive Orchard*, Vincent Van Gogh, 1889**

he were an olive tree, in a grove
beneath a blue-purled sky, though
with a heaviness of shoe and lace,
and rooted—a tree—legs hard,
chunk-like, holding knowledge
of wisp and swing, speaking
'olive tree' in swirl, knob,
dervishness there of crook, blue
pliés of bark, of underleaf.
Of shadow. That gnarly trunk, as if
it had no rules—with its desires,
its itches, its own decision to
sprout a limb on a whim, with a 'yes,'
with a 'go ahead,' permission
granted by brush or pen or words
spoken aloud—so rich in twilight,
day-bright, before there was
anything there at all—to bud so
from any place—up or down
the stretch of it. Those trees, lacking
symmetry, but symmetrical
nonetheless, as he is, as I am,

in the lack of it, and the faces there,
residing alive in branches
and twigs, in the apertures
and hollows behind them, though
'face' may be expectation only.
But there is truth in eyes, he's
told me, and in the surrounding
apparatus—brow, lash, tear.
His eyes of olive trees draw me in,
and into him, his gray-blues, his
dark and palish greens, the patient
olives themselves—slick, sweet,
salty, while their sister olives live
together in groves and stands,
and the fruit, the jaunty turn of leaf—
the music—hymns, galops, jigs
they play according to wind
and breeze—the soft breathing in,
the warm exhalations send me along
and up the curly branches, down again
to a grassy earth, earthbound still.

Then Our Officium

After, *Lamentation,*
Gerard David, 1505



***Lamentation*, Gerard David, 1505**

We purchased aloe, nardin, myrrh—a patera each,
enough, we hoped, for his body, to make our
handwork easy. We have slipped his eyelids closed,
drifting our fingers down to soft, pliant skin
beneath his eyes, tracing paths there through dust

and grit and we have drawn down his upper lip,
gently, and pressed his cheeks, his mouth, each
corner, to infuse his face to life, what might be life—
our attempt to mask the anguish, the agony there.
We closed the wounds, pinching edges together—

slices, gashes—fused the ragged puckers, those
holes-by-nail—tiny, deep calderas pursing out
like angry suns—we relaxed them. With cowls
and cuffs, we scrubbed dried sweat, dried blood,
cough, and saliva. He is light—so light he might be

borne aloft by hillside breezes, carried away
to gradient blue, that sky above us, this dry,
clear morning. Now we straighten limbs, try to—
that he might look, somehow, comfortable—
our own preoccupation—death has no regard

for comfort. I begin with his arm, lift it, rest
the elbow on my thigh, take his wrist, cradle it,
glaze my fingers down its curve, but, *You must be*
firm, she says—Mary, my friend—*You will not*
break bones. You will not snap joints.

You are not at work with roses, or filigree, a baby's
skull. So I clasp, squeeze, compress, push upward
over tight, gray skin—smooth now, with our oil—
tendons, veins now glistening—my thumb
and fingers urging, persuading, smoothing away

the clutch, the claw, the palmshape etched
by viciousness. I straighten the thumb—I do it—
the joint beside the wrist, the knuckle, then out
to cuticle, moon, and bed, then knead
his fingers, adjust them—he's breaking bread,

patting a donkey, rumpling a child's silky hair.
The corpse. The high, bright odor. The man now,
John, behind us, standing, who sidled up
like a thief, his hand on Mary's shoulder—as if
she needs a hand on a shoulder, of all the places,

of all the ways a hand might be needed—and as
he is, tentative, furtive, gospel swagger denuded—
hand limp, head turned. He is afraid—of death,
of mettle, of naked men. Of we two women.
On this hill, these rocks, among these silent trees.

A Helluva Blow

After, *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*
Rembrandt van Rijn (1633)



***Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1633**

We'd sewn nets, mended tackle, patched
and tarred our hull when a party stopped,
proposed an outing—a few short hours—
a jaunt, a junket, a sail around the sea.
Their man, they said, would have a quiet place,
far from the world. They'd bring bread
and olive, a Galilean Sultaniye—we'll share,
they said, as you tiller and trim—and some of us
are sailors. But, I said, if weather allows,
we would fish. We'll pay more
than a catch, they said, and we'll return before.
So we stowed their baskets, oared free
of reed and rush, hauled our sails—we'd be
richer for it—rejoice with children and wives.
A glorious day. No muscle, no brain, no
fingerslice, just the soft, green sea, the warm,
steady sun, the man in the stern—beard trimmed,
hair coifed, party asway around him gabbing,
spinning yarns. But later, a rapid slash of cloud.
Thunder. The sea fell quiet. Then wind.
And rain—grayblack sheets, a desperate cowl.
Lightning—spiked and sharp like tindered flint.
We lurched, heaved, yawed athwart, strove
headlong into it—to avoid a wallow, a broach.
So bright we were—in shimmer, in flash—
a wonder—the all of us—feet, hands, faces, hair
aglow as if by shafts of fire, legions
of torch. With thick salt foam cuffing faces,
we pulleyed halyards, muscled sail—
keelson groaning, thwart and strake,
keenest omens of catastrophe—the party abaft
tottering, stumbling before their man, arms
aflay like crippled gulls. Finally, three hours,
five, slowly, as storms will do, the torrents,
the winds gave up, languished, died.
We doddered back to shore. They paid us
for the canvas, rope, lost catch, and would we
sail again—such a marvelous
adventure, they said, and too, if storms
again tomorrow, their man would love
another go—a thing or two he longed to try.

Catherine of Alexandria Speaks from the Wheel

After, *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*,
Lorenzo Lotto (1508)



***Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, Lorenzo Lotto, 1506–1508**

Knotty wood, copper spikes, iron bolts poised
sharp above my ankle bones. To crush them,
feathery bones like the Nile-blue lily stems
I gathered as a child. Not that I was frail, mind you,
born of the river, traipsing its bank, scooping
mud, flinging rocks through hollow ripples.
But my father, the 'governor sir,' and the world,
had rules for ladies. It started with the men
he paraded—washed, preened, myrred—but still,
their thin, gray hair, their yellowed nails
like scallop shells. I would not have them.
But that old man who camped behind the kitchen,
who whispered, Jesus, Jesus this, Jesus that,
and it sounded splendid. Marry this Jesus,
and who would want me then—taken by a god.
But I never expected a child, a plumpish baby child,
flaccidy bottom spreading down his mother's thigh,
gut and leg eclipsing a tiny thing between
his legs, one little ball just visible, apparatus
unlikely to consummate, to even reach me—
even then I knew that score—brothers, sisters,
sheep, goats. And I had brains—Archimedes,
the economies of river traffic, irrigation best for

barley, banana, fig. That baby—pale skin,
pliant like balady dough Mama kneaded on a stone.
Tight lips. Soaring dome like a dry, fall gourd,
concentrating as he was just to hold the ring,
to get it right and straight and onto my finger,
his face as if he'd soiled his mother's gown.
I held out my hand, felt him prime my flesh—
I went ahead with it—better this baby's drool
on my lap than a man adrool on my breasts.
And his mother—how she pressed me down,
pressed us together. Though her clothes were grand—
soft, long-fibered cotton woven and fluted to cockle
and ruffle, the henna red cuffs, the sleeves, irtyu blue.
I would have waited. Ten years. Twenty. Watched
him grow. Taught him. Worn those clothes.
But, Maxentius pinned me to the wheel
in no time flat, that Christian thing riling him so.
Then, alas, the moment it touched my skin, cold
and rough—an explosion—sparks, smoke, cries—
the wheel just shattered. Age? Flaw? Intervention?
I don't know. But the wheelman groaned—
a hard, wooden shard piercing a lip, iron splinters
stabbing his chest. I am not dead. Not yet.



William Snyder has published poems in *The Sun*, *Poet Lore*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Agni* among others. He was the co-winner of the 2001 Grolier Poetry Prize; winner of the 2002 Kinloch Rivers Chapbook competition; the CONSEQUENCE Prize in Poetry, 2013; the 2015 Claire Keyes Poetry Prize; Tulip Tree Publishing *Stories That Need To Be Told* 2019 Merit Prize for Humor; and Encircle Publications 2019 Chapbook Contest. He retired from teaching writing and literature at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN, in 2021, and now lives in Gainesville, FL.

Georgia Tiffany

Walking the Rails

Bullet holes in the old railroad sign
whistle and whine. Here and there
a dust devil touches down.

I'm walking the rails.
Sometimes I can hear a locomotive's
single-note, the shriek,

the bellowed cinder and ash of it,
the squeal and wrenching of wheels,
feel the leftover tremors.

Sometimes I hear a hunger
arousing the spent grasses, something seized,
my mother's voice behind me

hardly a sound, more like breath across
the mouth of an empty bottle.
Don't look back.

Overgrown with knapweed and nettles,
one rotted tie to the next,
the tracks sometimes disappear.

This is the season of ticking
dry pods that break open,
cast thousands of black seeds to the sun;

of bloodsmells and bonesmells
of immigrant birds
and orient perfumes and thirst.

Need I tell you my mother is here?
But I'm the one wearing
her white cotton dress, the dress

with eyelets in the bodice and a skirt
that flared as she twirled,
I'm the one balancing, arms spread,

one foot in front of the other,
focused on the smooth savage shine
of metal in the sun.



***The White Dress*, Golden Ponds Nature Area, Longmont, Colorado, 2017. Art work by Tami Phelps**

Boy with Wood Louse

What does this pill-sized being really know,
or for that matter, my four-year-old son
gleefully watching in his open palm

how she crawls his heartline
without urgency, without a guide,
how he can fold his fingers just enough

to keep her there, this minute armadillo
smaller than a pellet shot,
this decomposer who breathes with gills

leftover from some other life?
(Can he say crustacean?)
He does not say love, but he loves

how he feels when she scuttles
out of his hand, straddles the ridge,
(Can he say *palmaris longuis*?)

makes her way toward the bend in his arm
and stops near the vein
engaged with the flesh of him,

and how much he longs to keep her safe
if only she would stay.
He would fondle her all day,

make her a house of willow sticks,
feed her strawberries. And lettuce.
(Does he know she eats arsenic and zinc?)

I could tell him more about her blood,
about the brood pouch, marsupial fluid,
and how she will tote her babies

(100 or more) for fourteen days.
But he's distracted, readying her bed,
fluffing mulch in the flower pot,

and is not prepared to hear
how long she might live, or why
during the night she could roll safely away.

Evensong

Will it come like witchgrass
or fiddlers in the leaves—
this half-hour between dusk
and the edge of town
where night crawls easily towards us
along the unpaved road,
even the thistle dying, a summons for air
that has never been there before?

Will it come like nightsweats
or howling wolves,
or whiskey kisses in dim rooms
where we lean our hearts back
into the birth of us who knew
everything and nothing
would change and go on changing
and we're alone as we will always be?

What the moonlight can bear,
will we bear, and go on touching?
What the warbler has seen in the glass,
will she fly into again?
And of the winds with their disheveling
pollens and rosaries,
their turbulence of birches
and willowing grace,

what if such winds settle into us,
inhabit every organ of us
now and after this hand which holds mine,
strokes my hair, my infinite need,
this hand which holds yours,
blesses all the body of you,
what sweet fragrance that never found us
will find us still?



Georgia Tiffany, recipient of grants from the Washington Commission for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, has served for years as a scholar for Idaho's "Let's Talk About It" library program. Her work has appeared in *Antigonish Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Threepenny Review*, and the *New Poets of the American West* anthology. Her chapbook *Cut From the Score* was published by Night Owl Press, and her first full-length book, *Body Be Sound*, was released in November, 2023, by Encircle Publications. She now lives in Moscow, Idaho.

Ron McFarland

Gregorian Chants for Breakfast

God bless Latin, grits, and scrambled eggs
and while I'm at it, bless Miss Weaver,
too, who nagged me through two years
of conjugation and declension with
nary a scar from a fractured translation
to show for it.

God bless the cloistered brothers who
moan or celebrate whatever fragments
remain of my boyhood faith in Cicero,
and bless the toast with blackberry jam,
seedless, not to mention the Holy Ghost,
and Chartreuse chasers

all around to help make the bacon go down
smooth as a Strauss waltz, and God bless
soothing melodies and the grumpy Viennese
demeanor along with their wiener schnitzel,
and bless Saint Gregory and hardboiled eggs
for lunch later.



Leaf from an Antiphonary: Initial H with the Nativity (recto), c. 1480. Photo credit: The Jeanne Miles Blackburn Collection of Manuscript Illuminations, Cleveland Museum of Art

Breakfast

Nothing much colder than cold cereal
on a cold morning so cold
not even cheery brand names
can warm you up, not even
snappy sonics that crackle
up from your cold milk can
make you happy. Pop!

A witch's teat comes to mind perhaps
or the falling balls of a brass
monkey maybe.
Cold cuts, a cold shoulder to cry on,
all these and others come to mind.
Cold wars galore.

Remember those years you resisted
porridge? the loving warmth
of oatmeal? even love?
As you grow older and colder
your needs shrivel.
Age economizes you.
You become coldly efficient,
an efficiency expert of sorts,

calculating coldly
what to fix for your next breakfast—
scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast,
not cold cereal—
which could be your last.

A Town in Southern Colorado

Late March I discover Rocky Ford
fading under the cottonwoods in Colorado.
Morning lingers into lunch with a vague
need for breakfast before I fold up the West
and head east by south by Kansas
by Oklahoma by Arkansas.

Sucker for "Homemade Pies," I park at a place
claiming to be a bakery, order banana cream
from what could be an old cowhand,
or a vagrant down on his luck,
or an eccentric who owns the café and
happens to be a millionaire in his spare time.

In twenty minutes, more or less,
a waitress of indeterminate age
emerges from the kitchen bearing coffee
and a gray smile, no sign of pie.
All they've got is two-day-old apple.

A beautiful ten-year-old girl whirls in
announcing she's won something at school.
She kisses the waitress on her wrinkled cheek.
The old cowpoke grins
toothless from the tarnished coffee urn.

Then I notice a chalk-faced boy
watching out the bleary window
squawking incoherencies,
excited beyond words, his mind gone blank.

Time shatters. This could happen
anywhere and it happens often
all the time. "Shut up! Shut up!"
the old cowboy shouts. "Shut the hell up!"
From the depths of his sagebrush heart.

Two for Ukraine

Outside Bucha
Easter 2022

Disordered row after row of battered artillery
tanks, and trucks blasted, rusted, crusted
with snow and dried blood
make for a silent, anonymous
cemetery welcome alike to heroes,
cowards, and those caught between,
for most of us, in short, we unsorted ones,
who ought to take all of this more to heart.
Most Orthodox will fast before Mass
on this cold morning.

Today's Breakfast

What are the Ukrainians eating
for breakfast today

among the bombed-out remains
of Mariupol?

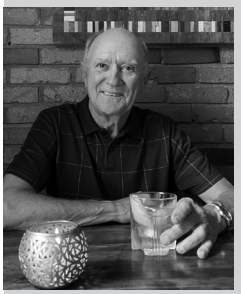
For me, it's homemade quiche,
and though I don't altogether

dislike quiche, I'd prefer
almost anything else,

even cold cereal,
but I love my wife.

Yes! You Have No Bananas

You profligate!
You've sliced an entire banana
and crammed it onto your cereal,
you who've never dared
cut more than half a Guatemalan
(this time) into your breakfast.
What were you thinking?
You were not this morning
thinking at all.
"It was small," you apologized
to yourself whining, as if size
excused anything.
You swine!
Tomorrow half a banana or nothing at all.



Ron McFarland is emeritus professor of English at the University of Idaho. His most recent books include his fifth full-length collection of poems, *A Variable Sense of Things* (2023), and a critical study, *Gary Soto: A Career in Poetry and Prose* (2022). If he can spare the time from fishing, he'll probably try to write a historical fiction story about Col. Edward J. Steptoe's exploit in the Utah Territory (1854-55).

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.

SKIING IN THE WEST – A BRIEF HISTORY

The first U.S. ski area opened in 1915 in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, followed by nearly twenty others throughout New England, the Pacific Northwest, and California.



Alta Lodge, 1945. Photo credit: Alta Historical Society

Utah's first ski lodge – the Alta Lodge in Little Cottonwood Canyon – a half hour from Salt Lake City, [was] financed by the Denver and Rio Grande. Also, in operation in 1939-40 near the lodge was a chairlift financed by Salt Lake City businessmen, cobbled together from long-unused mine hoists and other scavenged mining equipment, but it ran only fitfully until the 1940s.

The push to invent a new, even more effortless mechanical skier transportation system started in 1935 with Union Pacific's plan to build a ski resort. But first, the railroad had to decide where to build its proposed winter playground. [Averell] Harriman recruited an Austrian count named Felix Schaffgotsch to search the American West for the perfect spot. . . .

After unsuccessful searches in Washington, California, and Utah, Schaffgotsch had almost given up when he arrived in the Wood River Valley of southern Idaho in early January 1936. He spent a few days in the quiet ranching and mining community of Ketchum before wiring Harriman that this was the place. . . .

Harriman didn't waste any time. He arranged for the railroad to purchase a 3,388-acre ranch in Ketchum (for about four dollars per acre) and directed crews to start building the resort, with the glamorous, 220-room, X-shaped Sun Valley Lodge as its centerpiece.

. . . What set Sun Valley apart when it opened in 1936 was its all-inclusive nature – visitors could not only ski, but they could also spend the night in the upscale lodge, sample fine dining, take ski lessons, swim, and participate in other activities – and its national marketing campaign to attract skiers from across the country.

But just as the ski industry was getting its footing, World War II sent many of the young men who were building it to war. A group of skiers ended up in the 10th Mountain Division, an elite force hand-selected for their mountaineering abilities and toughness. Camp Hale, Colorado, a wide valley south of what's now Vail, became the 10th Mountain Division's high mountain base, where the troops could train at altitude in an unforgiving snowpack.

Those skiers were deployed for only a brief period, but after the war, the 10th Mountain Division veterans returned to the U.S. excited about the future of the sport. Over the next few decades, 10th Mountain Division veterans established sixty-two ski schools and started some of the biggest ski areas in the country, like Aspen and Vail in Colorado, and Crystal Mountain in Washington. Unlike the elite skiers of the early 20th century, they wanted to democratize and expand the sport.

Growth peaked in the winter of 1963 when big-name resorts like Vail, Crested Butte, Park City, and Stratton started spinning chairs. Skiing grew from half a million skiers in 1956 to three million by the middle of the next decade. During the '60s and the first half of the '70s, the sport grew at a rate of 15 percent a year, and it morphed from an outsider activity, to an accessible sport, to a luxury hobby.

In the '70s, as many of the initial ski area founders aged out or moved on, mountain management largely shifted from 10th Mountain veterans to real estate developers with MBAs. Resorts began to consolidate under corporate management. Ralston Purina bought Keystone and Arapahoe Basin in Summit County, Colorado, in 1973. The film corporation 20th Century Fox bought Aspen Skiing Co. in 1978. From there, numbers flatlined. U.S. skier visits have been in the range of fifty million skiers a year since 1978 when the National Ski Areas Association started keeping track.

Sources: Lund, Morten. "The 1940s: Americans Make Many Tracks…and Much War, " *Skiing History*, http://www.skiinghistory.org/gallery/1940s-americans-make-many-tracks-much-war, 24 Jan. 2026; Hansman, Heather. "The Hidden History of Skiing in the West." *Deseret News,* 30 December, 2022, http://www.deseret.com/2022/12/30/23509448/skiing-history-west-europe-world-war/; Kuta, Sarah. "The Invention of the Ski Chairlift," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2 February, 2021, http://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/how-railroad-engineer-from-nebraska-invented-worlds-first-ski-chairlift-180976878/

SNOWBASIN – BEST SKI RESORT (2025)

Snowbasin originally opened in 1939. It doubled in size in the 1990s after it was designated a venue for the 2022 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. In 2025, *Ski* magazine rated it number one out of twenty-two as the country's best ski resort.

While it's true that the Wasatch Back ski resort isn't a household name, survey data pinpoints exactly why Snowbasin resonates with people: The resort combines easy access, a fast lift network, and reliable snow coverage with great customer service that's focused on the quality of the ski experience.

Source: Berman, Samatha and Sam Pfeifle. "Best Ski Resorts in the U.S. (2025)," *Ski*, http://www.skimag.com/ski-resort-life/resort-guide-2025/best-ski-resorts-united-states-2025/



Snowbasin, Utah, 1940. Photo credit: Special Collections and University Archives, Weber State University

SKI RESORTS CLOSING

In the 1960s, approximately 1,000 different ski areas operated across the United States. Today, that number has been cut in half, with roughly 487 resorts still operating. According to the American Birkebeiner Ski Foundation:

In the Northeast, at least 670 ski resort closures have been documented by websites like the New England Lost Ski Areas Project, with another 31 closures documented in the Mid-Atlantic by DCSki. The Midwest has seen about 483 ski areas close over the years, according to the Midwest Lost Ski Areas Project. While many resorts have closed across the Western USA, the Midwest and Northeast have been disproportionately affected. Western states like Colorado have lost ~137 ski areas, while California has lost 134, 48 in Washington, 72 in Idaho, over 57 in Oregon, 12 in Utah, 10 in Wyoming, 10 in Nevada, and even more in states like Arizona, New Mexico, Montana, North Carolina, etc.

Source: Heil, Greg. "Over 1,600 US ski resorts have been abandoned. Now, many are being reborn as MTB trails," *Singletracks*, 22 January 2026, https://www.singletracks.com/mtb-trails/over-1600-us-ski-resorts-have-been-abandoned-now-many-are-being-reborn-as-mtb-trails/



Park City Mountain Resort, Utah, 2020. Photo credit: Matt Omann on Unsplash

SKIING AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The U.S. ski season is starting later and ending earlier. There are growing concerns about the future of the sport. Earth.Org, an environmental news website, observes:

From 2000-2019, the average ski season in the U.S. has shortened by five to seven days, with the number expected to double and possibly even triple by 2050. . . . The U.S. ski industry has collectively lost five billion [dollars] from 2000-2019 as a result of climate change from human activities and could lose another one billion a year in the 2050s depending on global emissions reduction efforts. Winter activities that once boosted local economies are now seeing a drastic loss in numbers of tourists and visitors.

Source: Yalof, Rachel. "The Impact of Climate Change on the US Ski Industry." *Earth.Org*, 6 March 2025, http://earth.org/the-impact-of-climate-change-on-the-us-ski-industry/

FUTURE OF SKIING IN UTAH

Utah has seen record high temperatures this winter. Just before Christmas, the freestyle skiing World Cup scheduled for Jan. 16-18 at Deer Valley was moved to Lake Placid, New York, and Waterville Valley, New Hampshire. According to a 2024 climate change study supported by the International Olympic Committee,

[Utah and the West] are among the most climate reliable locations in North America and globally. . . . But the findings also show that may no longer be the case by the 2080s. . . . Just four locations studied around the world are expected to remain consistently cold enough then to keep or make snow through the second part of the Winter Games. The only site in North America determined to have a reliably cold climate under that scenario?

It's not Utah but Lake Louise, a ski resort about 114 miles from Calgary in Canada's Banff National Park.

In an update to this report, author Daniel Scott, professor of geography and environmental management at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, clarified:

By 2050, of the 93 cities deemed suitable to handle the logistics of holding both the Olympics and Paralympics, just four would be able to host the events without snow-making, according to a study published Wednesday. Those cities are Niseko, Japan; Terskol, Russia; and Val d'Isère and Courchevel in France.

Sources: Roche, Lisa Riley. "Will Utah stay cold enough to host more Winter Games beyond 2034? What new details of a climate change study show." *Deseret News*, 14 January 2028, http:/:tdesert.com/utah/2026/01/14/what-an-ioc-climate-change-study-says-about-utah-hosting-winter-games-after-2034/; Niiler, Eric. "As Winter Warms, Olympic Athletes, Organizers Hunt for Elusive Snow." *The New York Times*, 21 January, 2026, http://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/21/climate/winter-olympics-climate-change.html

EDITORIAL MATTER

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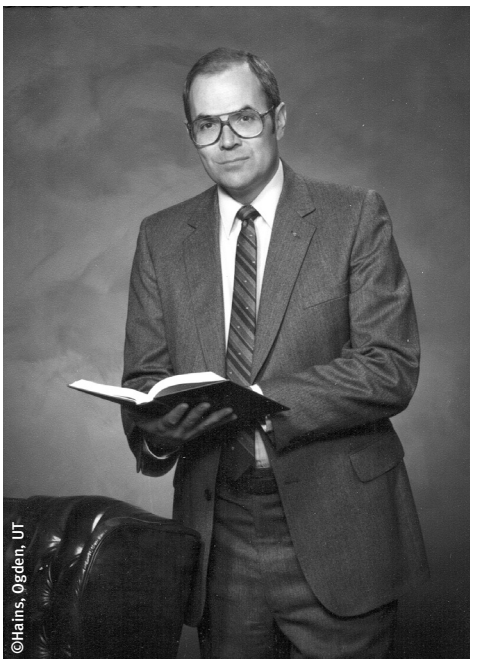
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