

# **EarthSpeak Magazine**



**Issue 6**

**Winter 2010**

EarthSpeak Magazine  
Issue 6: Winter 2010

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Cover Photo:

Upon Arrival taken by Sarah Rehfeldt at the base of Franklin Falls near Snoqualmie Pass in Washington State.

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## Buff Whitman-Bradley

Buff Whitman-Bradley's poems have appeared in many print and online journals. With his wife Cynthia he is co-producer/director of the award winning documentary film Outside In, and co-editor of the forthcoming book About Face: Military Resisters Turn Against War (PM Press, 2011). He is also co-producer/director of the new documentary film Por Que Venimos. He and his wife live in northern California.

On the Slopes of the Mountain Between Storms

The rambunctious waters  
Are flinging themselves helter-skelter  
Down steep rocky gullies  
As if hell-bent  
On making it all the way home  
Before dark

Summer Morning

After I have raked leaves and pulled weeds  
And watered the garden  
After I have dug up a few fat garlic bulbs  
And placed them on the porch to dry  
I prop myself up against the fence  
Between my workmates  
The broom rake and the red-handled spade  
And because we have no more chores for now  
The three of us can lean here in our ease  
Watching the morning fog lift  
The day set about its bright blue business  
And sunlight pull sparrow after sparrow  
Out of its glittering hat

## Carol L. Deering

Carol L. Deering was born in Massachusetts and has also lived in Arizona, Michigan, Germany, Washington State, and, for many years now, Wyoming. She once received the Wyoming Arts Council Literary Fellowship for Poetry and was selected for a writing residency at Devils Tower. She teaches English at Central Wyoming College and is currently vice-president of Wyoming Writers, Inc.

Mayfly Destiny

Everything comes back  
to haunt or buoy us  
in the body of the night.

Choices assail us  
by the thousands  
twitching their triple tails

and in the sparkle  
of wingtips passing  
we cross the river and run

with ancient mysteries  
of rhythm and consequence,  
scrabbling  
to greet the dawn.

# Becca Deysach

Becca Deysach lives in Portland, Oregon where she stalks lichen, practices Indonesian Kung Fu, and teaches creative writing and environmental studies for Prescott College and her business, Ibex Studios: Adventures in Creative Writing ([www.ibexstudios.com](http://www.ibexstudios.com)). "Wild from the Inside Out" is excerpted from her book-length work-in-progress tentatively titled Aching Beauty: Coming to Terms with Being Human.

## Wild from the Inside Out

I've been taking a lot of night hikes lately. I often head out during the fuzzy hour, that time of evening before the black of night when everything loses its color and clarity of edges. Branches of ponderosa pine arching over the trail, rigid canyon walls, and my friend beside me all seep into the air until I can hardly tell where they end and the night begins.

The blurry lines between trees and air may just be one of light's tricks, but for me, they are more. They are a reminder that the boundaries we see between earth and sky, liquid and solid, my skin and yours are just a matter of perception, of a dramatic difference in density. Although the fluid inside each of my skin cells is bound by a membrane, there is a constant and dynamic interplay between my flesh and the air around it. Without intention on my part, electrons fly off me to dance in a charged attraction with the dry night's. I know this electricity is always there, but I feel only after shuffling my stockinged feet on a carpet before touching a doorknob or someone else's skin.

This firing of electrons crackles the air around me the same way it did to my body every time I looked at Adam Johnson's dark eyes during my first years after college. Every day at work, I braced myself against the inevitable heat that rose from my thighs to my face at the sight of him chopping vegetables across the deli table from me. My body tugged with an insistence as real as gravity's to touch the skin concealed by the butcher's apron hanging off his boy bones, to feel the muscles beneath his skin. No matter how much I willed my body to understand that he was just a young, dumb boy, the wild firing of synapses that is my nervous system responded in its own way, heedless of my mind's desire.

I was equally controlled by the knowledge of my body last week when, driving down Chicago's Lake Shore Drive in rush hour traffic, a semi-truck pulled in front of me. Before I was consciously aware that the hulking vehicle had almost crushed

my passenger and me, my foot was on the brake pedal. In that moment, I felt calm. Only after there was an appreciable distance between the truck and my car did I shudder from the river of adrenaline that has saved my life more than once.

Solid gives way to gas, electrons heat us up with constellations of uninvited sparks, and life-saving chemicals bypass our ponderous consciousnesses when there is no time for thought. We are wild from the inside out. No matter how bound by our minds, skin, or cell membranes we may feel, we are each a universe of atoms working together to carry out millions of processes, most of which we are unaware from moment to moment. My heart is beating about sixty times a minute and I probably couldn't will it to stop if I tried. My lungs rise and fall, my diaphragm expands, and the hydrochloric acid and gentle squeezing motion of my stomach turns my breakfast of eggs and potatoes into forms the rest of my body can use. An intricate network of nerves sends messages to my brain, though I am aware of very few: *Should I scratch that itch on my nose? Oh, now my armpit itches. Gosh, now that I'm thinking about it, it seems like every part of me tickles—my shoulder, my left breast, my upper arm, my forehead, and now my nose again!*

As I scratch my itches, I see the veins beneath the thin skin of my hand spreading like the fingers of a delta toward my wrist. This network of blood vessels is filled with a fluid as wet and salty as the ocean into which a delta spills. Their blue glow reminds me that I am more ocean than Earth, more wet than dry. And yet, just as my smooth skin tricks me into thinking I am separate from the air around me, these channels of blood disguise the truth that I am three-quarters water. My veins barely hint that the ten-thousand-trillion human cells and one-hundred-thousand-trillion bacterial cells my body is made of are really miniature ocean ecosystems that hold inside of them the history of the universe.

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Stretched out in the dry sauna heat last night, we waited for the moment our pores loosened up and that primordial story spilled out. Brianna said she could see hers open and, like a spring, ooze water. Hot rocks heated up the cedar space and pushed the molecules in the membranes of our cells far enough apart for tenuously bonded hydrogen and oxygen atoms to stream down our sides, our legs, the space between our breasts. Soon we were drenched from neck to foot, slick with each of our skin cells' primeval sea.

We talked about how crazy it is that over four billion years ago those hydrogen and oxygen atoms first united on this planet in a liquid combination powerful enough to cultivate life. About how together they covered the earth in a scalding sea that nonetheless welcomed carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, and all the other ingredients necessary to build the first proteins, cell membranes, and winding ladders of nucleic acids that carry the secrets of one generation to another.

She reminded me that we are alive thanks to the distortions those secrets have gone through in the past four-billion years, and yet there is nothing remarkably different between us and the first blueprint for building a life. Like the DNA molecules in the cells our sweat came from, we are just massive permutations of elements that a symphony of star births created about fourteen-billion years ago.

We imagined what it must have been like during the one-hundred-million years before those stars were born, when the universe was a dark and undifferentiated place filled only with hydrogen, helium, and traces of lithium and beryllium. The same laws of attraction that held us strong to the wooden benches last night brought hydrogen and helium together in a spectacular burst of light all those millions of years ago. Those searing fires were so powerful that they fused atoms together to make enough new elements that galaxies, planets, and we could eventually form.

Dehydrated and delirious with heat, I sang a Joni Mitchell song while Brianna showered herself cool. "We are stardust, billion-year-old carbon." She may be at least twelve billion years off, but other than that, Joni's right. We are stardust, we are fourteen-billion-year-old carbon. And we're wild with it.

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Too hot to take the sauna anymore, I stepped outside in my brown and green-striped towel. The stark night sky that I have seen a thousand times before caught me hard in its gaze. Orion was in the same place it always is in January, the Pleiades tricked my eyes with their usual fuzziness, and I was as slain by their familiar beauty as I am by the people I love the most. What makes something as consistent as the night sky so consistently striking?

Every bit of carbon in my blood, in my bones, and in my brain came from some of those early stars. Perhaps all the elements in me are drawn to the fires that gave them life. Perhaps I am.

As my sweat turned to vapor in the backyard, I had the same thought I've had every time I've looked at the stars since I first learned that distance can be measured by the amount of time it takes for the light of one thing to reach another. I almost never speak that thought aloud because it reminds me of the "deep" conversations I used to have with my stoner boyfriend in college—"Ohmygod, I'm really looking at some of those stars as they were millions of years ago. For all we know, they're not even there anymore. Who knows what the sky really looks like. Dude."

High or not, it is crazy to think that the map of the sky we see is not the one that is there now, but a historical record of the universe and its unfolding. If only we could look deeply enough into the space we're suspended in, we could see the instant of our origin.

Scientists with access to big telescopes can see the background radiation from the moment during which a vast almost-nothingness became the very big something we inhabit, but the darkness of that instant will never reach the earth. No matter how far I stand from the lights of the city, I will never be able to see the quarks, neutrinos, and other impossibly small particles that spilled out of a single point about fourteen billion years ago. I don't have the capacity to grasp the force that pulled protons and neutrons together despite the pace at which the universe pushed into emptiness to create space, itself, all those years ago. All I will ever see from the vantage point of a backyard is a time-warped display of fires caught in the act of creating the kinds of atoms that made us possible.

Every atom in our bones, in our universe, is one of ninety-one naturally occurring combinations of a positively charged nucleus and one or more electrons flying around it billions of times every millionth of a second. You never can say exactly where an electron is at any moment in time, nor predict where it will be in the future, but the patterned clouds of energy it makes around a nucleus shows us it is there. An electron may give form to this basic unit, but an atom is more space than matter—if a hydrogen atom were four miles wide, its nucleus would be the size of a tennis ball. Between the electron defining its outer boundary and the inner nucleus, there is a *nothing* as empty as interstellar space.

"If every molecule, every body, and every thing on this planet is just a collection of protons, neutrons, and empty spaces bound by the probable presence of negatively charged particles, then what is the difference between my sweat, the Milky Way, and the organism contemplating them?" I asked Brianna before I headed home.

"When you look at it that way," she said as I stepped into the night, "the definition of life slips through your fingers, literally."

\*\*\*

What is life? It is a result of the chance event that a cloud of stellar dust formed a planet at just the right distance from the sun to make the seas we came from and that live on in us. Four-and-a-half-billion years ago, earth was just a messy mixture of silicone, iron, magnesium, and a few other elements bound together by oxygen. During its first few million years, frequent asteroid poundings, the power of gravity, lightening storms, and the decay of radioactive elements heated the planet-to-be into a frenzy. By about a billion years after its origin, earth was so hot that its iron melted and sank to the core of the planet. As it slid to the center, the scorching element melted nearly everything in its path, helping to create the multi-layered structure of the modern earth. The hot and viscous world hidden beneath the thin layer of crust on which we live gave our planet volcanoes and plate tectonics. Along with water, the earth's molten core made it a place dynamic enough to engender and sustain a thing as crazy and complex as life.

In a universe the size of something approaching infinity, I shouldn't be surprised that this multi-layered planet coalesced where it did, in just the right spot for the misty skies to condense into ocean once things cooled off. Statistics say it shouldn't amaze me that one of our galaxy's one hundred million stars had a wet, hot, and active planet with all the necessary ingredients to stir up life by four billion years ago. But I can't escape the knowledge that if earth had formed just a little closer to the sun, it never would have become cool enough to make water. Much farther, and it would have been locked up in a perpetual winter, as devoid of biodiversity as the other planets that travel around our sun.

Probable or not, there is magic embedded in earth's perfect position to house the liquid compound that every breathing thing depends upon.

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Becca Deysach

*What is life? It is the flash of the firefly in the night.  
It is the breath of a buffalo in the winter time;  
it is the little shadow which runs across  
the grass and loses itself in the sunset.*  
--The dying words of Crowfoot, a Blackfoot hunter

What *is* the line between the animate and the lifeless, between a firefly and its flash, a buffalo and her breath? What separates a creature from her shadow? What *is* life? Life is in the flutter of a firefly's wings and in its reaction to a child's attempts at catching it in a glass jar. It is in the sureness of the end of an existence, and in an internal chemical and electrical system complex enough to create the glow of phosphorescence. It is about an organization of living cells that together give shape and movement to a being, and it is the necessary act of energy intake, growth, and metabolism in which an organism spends its days engaged.

Life is two fireflies flirting in the darkness in hopes of passing their genes on to another generation of shimmering insects. It is a firefly in the night fertilizing hundred of eggs with its deepest memories and silent instructions for building a new glowing beetle. And life's secret is contained in that microscopic packet of information first compiled four-billion years ago. Without DNA there would be no firefly, and there would have been no Brianna or me in the sauna last night.

"Isn't it weird," I said somewhere between the first mention of our pores and her insistence that the definition of life is as hazy as an electron's path, "that a strand of DNA may draw a line between the living and the non-living, between a firefly and a fire, but a double-helix made out of carbons, sugars, and base pairs is not, by itself, alive?"

"It depends on your definition of life," Bri replied. She teased me for being such a reductionist, but I maintained that, without a context for the stories it holds, DNA means very little. It

needs a membrane to contain it and fluid to float in. It needs a bound environment that takes in and processes energy, that grows and eventually reproduces. Only when it has a liquid home, separate from the environment around it, can DNA make life.

The earliest genetic code probably found the context it needed in tiny suds foaming on the shores of our ancestral seas. Not long after fatty membranes came together in mutual aversion to water, DNA took up residence within them. The sheer variety of beings that have lived on earth are testimony to the genius of that early partnership. Our bodies today are filled with close relatives of those creatures—bacteria that thrived in the hot, oxygen-depleted world and presided over earth for two-billion years.

Unlike sexual organisms, bacteria reproduce simply by making carbon copies of themselves and have little opportunity to change without an outside push to do so. Sometimes, however, bits of DNA are translated incorrectly from one generation to the next. The genetic language misspoken usually produces an offspring too deformed to pass its warped story on to another generation, but altered codes occasionally result in a new bacterium quite capable of navigating its way through the environment and making more of its kind. Bacteria also transform themselves by swapping bits of DNA in an act more akin to kissing than making love.

During life's first two-billion years, these translation errors and one-celled kisses filled the acrid ocean with a range of tiny beings of all shapes and abilities. Some of those hereditary changes eventually led to a bluegreen, or cyano-, bacteria with the ability to split water molecules into hydrogen and oxygen, using the hydrogen it needed for energy and discarding the oxygen into the air. In no time, congregations of these photosynthesizing creatures covered the planet in a slippery film, and we see their descendents today between our shower tiles, floating on ponds, and almost any other place that's warm, wet, and unscrubbed. Unbeknownst to them, their unique ability to make

free oxygen was also a cruel one; the molecule with which they filled the sky was as poisonous to most of their relatives as the early methane, cyanide-, hydrochloric- and sulfuric acid-filled world in which they thrived would have been to us.

After hundreds-of-millions of years of their microscopic exhalations, the cyanobacteria had filled the sky with so much oxygen that other bacteria began dying in droves. Many species vanished forever. Others survived only by finding refuge in the deepest recesses of the ocean, sulfuric hot springs, and other oxygen-free areas. The bluegreen bacteria, however, flourished by turning their waste product into something usable. In the brilliant act of respiration, they used the free oxygen they made through photosynthesis for energy and eventually brought atmospheric oxygen to the levels we breathe today.

What is life? It is the relationship between a storytelling molecule and the membrane that contains it. It is an endless transformation of those stories to help the next generation survive in an ever-shifting landscape.

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As saltwater stained the contours of our hips in the sauna last night, the little bodies inside our cells navigated their fluid habitats as their ancestors have for the last two-and-a-half billion years. Lysosomes, golgi complexes, endoplasmic reticula, and mitochondria carried out their different intracellular jobs while Brianna and I pondered the cosmos. And those organelles were as unaware of our words as we were of the conversations they were having with one another and their ecosystems' nucleus.

The cells that comprise you, me, and every multicellular organism are complex in a way that the bacteria living alongside them are not. Unlike bacteria's free floating DNA, ours is protected by a membrane-bound nucleus. The rest of our cellular bodies, or organelles, live in a cytoplasmic sea outside of the cell's command center and work together to carry out instructions from the nucleus. These things make each of our cells

more intricate than those of the earliest life forms. However, looking more closely, it appears that our cells are merely finely-tuned collaborations between several of our most common ancestors. Mitochondria is one of those squiggly organelles rolling with the tides inside our cell membranes, and it hints at how specialized cells could have evolved out of such long-term simplicity.

Each mitochondrion has its own strand of DNA that is different from the rest of the cell's and replicates independently of it. This discovery led microbiologist Lynn Margulis to propose in the early 1970s that complex life evolved out of symbiotic relationships between early life forms.

Like mitochondria, chloroplasts, the little bodies responsible for photosynthesis in plants, also have their own bundle of genetic material and are strikingly similar to bluegreen bacteria. Margulis suggested that life became more complex when one bacterium ate, attacked, or simply embraced another. Although many of those combinations failed, both parties sometimes benefited from their experiment in cooperative living. Some unions allowed host cells to turn oxygen into usable energy or to photosynthesize, while others gave bacteria the ability to control their motion. In some cases, winding hair-like bacterial cells attached themselves to larger bodies and helped them swim with a rhythm and grace all their own. These mobile creatures were finally able to actively seek out food, evade predators, and commingle with others in ways they couldn't when they depended on the ocean's undulations to move them.

By about one-billion years ago, some of these newly complex cells had all the necessary components for sex. We can all appreciate this new kind of genetic exchange for many reasons, and especially for the unique offspring that come from mixing half of one being's inherited stories with half of another's. The range of combinations sexual reproduction made possible set life on an explosive path full of development and diversification, one small branch of which eventually resulted in humans.

What is life? It is a series of inventions that fail at least as much as they succeed. It is one mitochondrion finding a safe home in the body of another cell. It is a string of creative acts as dependent upon cooperation as they are on rivalry.

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I walked home along the creek between our houses last night, still hot from our sweat and wild conversations. I wanted to stop in that spot where the trail bleeds into the river to look at the *Equisetum*. But when I got there, I found that looking wasn't enough. After hours discussing things I can hardly envision, I wanted the assurance of matter. So I picked one. *Equisetum* grow as straight, hollow shoots out of the wet ground. Like the collapsible plastic cups I used to take to grade-school slumber parties, they are segmented and fun to snap apart at their joints. I felt a bit guilty playing with one like that, but there was something intoxicating about attending closely, if violently, to a plant whose ancestors were among the first to transform the rocky landscape into the green world we take for granted today.

Along with *Equisetum*, the continents were softened by giant tree-ferns and other broad green plants by 450 million years ago. Once land plants made earth a home more inviting than the vast rocky plains had been, descendents of the first globular animals successfully ventured out onto solid ground. Their occupation of land may have been driven by innate curiosity, but the never-ending fluctuations of sea levels gave some individuals no other option. Those animals living near the shore that were able to endure the aridity of land became amphibians, creatures equally at home on *terra firma* and at sea, but dependent on water for laying their eggs. Over time, some of them evolved into land-based reptiles who cut their ties to the external ocean by laying hard-shelled eggs with membrane-bound waters still inside. By 250 million years ago, some reptiles had grown into dinosaurs while others eventually radiated into birds and mammals.

Delicious prey for velociraptors, mammals had no choice but to remain nocturnal and as inconspicuous as possible during the long reign of the dinosaurs. If a humungous meteorite had not collided with the earth sixty-five million years ago, these warm-blooded creatures might all still be timid creatures of the night no larger than a mouse. But that massive extraterrestrial rock shot into the sky a layer of smoke and dust so thick that the sun's rays could no longer warm the cold-blooded giants. After 200 million years of living large in the tropics, dinosaurs quickly became nothing but piles of giant bones.

Though I mourn that I will never be able to run my fingers along a dinosaur's cool skin, I would not be here to have that ache if their rapid extinction had not allowed mammals to emerge from their hiding spots. Endowed with hair and the internal fire of warm blood, our ancestors dealt with the new climate just fine. With no dinosaurs to pluck them up, mammals grew with a new freedom to take up space with their bodies and across the landscape.

By about thirty million years ago, mammals had spread to every continent but Antarctica, and some had become the earliest primates. These creatures were not much larger than a chipmunk, lived in the forests of Asia and Africa, had interactive cultures, and eyes on the front of their faces. These prosimians eventually gave way to a range of families, one of which eventually became the one that includes chimpanzees, bonobos (also known as pygmy chimpanzees), gorillas, and orangutans. And then, just six million years ago, our earliest humanoid ancestors took a small but dramatic step away from our closest relatives, the chimpanzee and bonobo.

Ninety-eight percent of the stories in each of our cells are the same as those in any chimp's or bonobo's. That small adjustment in the structure of our common ancestor's DNA allowed some apes to begin a mostly upright, two-legged lifestyle about four million years ago. The nucleotides carrying the information necessary to build our predecessors instructed early humans to give birth to babies whose brains weren't completely developed

and were thus dependent upon their mothers for the first four years of their lives. The heightened vulnerability of hominid children and the help a mother needs to raise them probably played a significant role in developing the intricate, interdependent communities we know today.

In the last million years, a significant number of hominid species lived in Africa, but one after another mysteriously disappeared. One branch of upright primates, however, adapted well to the contours of Asia, Australia, and Europe. These early humans—known as *Homo erectus* and later, *Homo sapiens*—used fire, tools, wore clothes, built shelters, and by at least forty thousand years ago, something significant had changed within them. They had become *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the twice-knowing humans. They had become animals who not only used what they knew about the world to survive in it, but expressed what they knew through the abstractions of art, elaborate burials, music, and syntax-based language.

They had become creatures we would recognize as ourselves.

In just forty-thousand years, those primates have spread throughout the globe almost as successfully as bacteria; developed spoken and written languages; domesticated plants and animals; built civilizations; enslaved others of their kind; fought massive organized wars; invented cars, electricity, suburban lifestyles, and television; landed on the moon; communicated globally and instantly; tinkered with the genetic blueprints of other species and their own; and have made a bomb with the capacity to destroy life by breaking the nuclear bonds that made their story possible.

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When I told her about all that last night's sauna conversation inspired me to write, Brianna scolded me for laying out humans' story in such a linear fashion, as though the evolution of

life was a single thread with you and me on one end and the origin of the universe on the other.

She's right. I did. To do evolution justice, I should nestle the stories within one another, the way that atoms are contained in the molecules in the cells that comprise my tissues that make my organs that function together to make the system that is me. To really tell this story right, I would do it with flames and heat and a true sense of the vacuum that exists on the other side of time. I would stack word upon word the way that canyon walls stack the story of one landscape, one era, right on top of one another.

If I were to tell this story right, I would bring heavy rains, hot lava, crashing continents, and a true sense of how long it took to make life from dust. If I could speak in several layers at once, I would show the mountains that never stopped growing or eroding; the oceans that rose and sank; the rivers that cut canyons; the ice that bore down on the planet; and the bacteria, protists, fungi, plants, and animals that dealt with those never-ending fluctuations by dying or changing.

If I were to tell this story right, I would make it evident that life changes earth as much as earth changes life.

But no matter how I tell it, our curvy bodies know the story of the universe. Its fourteen-billion-year saga whispers through our elusive electrons that we are as welcome here as any other thing the cosmos holds. It tells us that we belong to this planet as much as the oceans, the molten core, the trees and fungi and bacteria and wolves do. It says that we are a network of relationships that began with the first cascade of energy and resulted in a being that can appreciate this version of the truth. No matter how bound we are to a chair, office, or room that rarely touches moving air, we are wild. Wild from our DNA out. Wild from our wet cells with little organelles swimming inside of them, living in seas as salty as those the earliest of their kind did. We are wild from the hearts we can't will to stop, from the

Becca Deysach

adrenaline that floods us, and from the heat a crush's gaze draws from our thighs to our lips.

Our bodies are inextricably bound to the ancient past, and that relationship will never end. When we die, the processes that make us unique individuals may cease, but our bodies will not. We may be cremated or buried in a mahogany box, but eventually the same carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium we are made of will go back into the soil and sea to make new life, while we live on as charged particles with the history of the universe growing inside of us. Wild with it all.

## Matthew Haughton

Matthew Haughton has published one chapbook, Bee-coursing Box (Accents Publishing). His poetry has appeared or is set to appear in many journals including *Appalachian Journal*, *Now & Then*, *Still*, and *New Southerner*. Haughton lives and works in his native Kentucky.

Before His Eyes Could Open

His skin is raw, just a slip  
of flesh —  
having been spit  
from a cat's mouth.  
She must've lost the taste  
for him,  
after he went still  
on her raspy tongue.  
I've found him,  
uncovered on the ground  
like an arrowhead  
upended by a plow.  
She stalks somewhere  
further out,  
after disregarding  
this grain of a life.  
Having left him here;  
his little neck  
tucked under half-a-wing.

## Lauren Henley

Lauren Henley is a graduate student at Pacific University of Oregon. The low residency format allows her to live and work in Arcata, California, which is a Mecca for nature enthusiasts. She enjoys hiking, yoga, writing, and the visual arts. Recently, there has been clear-cutting behind her home. Ancient Redwoods are being cleared for a new housing development. Lauren's work has been published in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *WORK Magazine*, *Projector*, *Eclectica*, *The Delinquent*, and other places.

Clear-Cutting  
(For Lisa and Allan)

Most obvious are the car alarm warnings of starlings, the exiting of yellow tanagers dressed in the grain of shrub. Next, fattened rabbit-eared ferns that clench then unfurl their fists, clench again, and the mirrored surprise of the dark eyed junco with the white throated sparrow, the sparrow dressing in white robes, as he has seen the priests, the doctors, the brides and carolers do, believing in resurrection. But the junco picks a black suit. He knows better. He knows how the unhappy groom, with a smile, loops his tie like a lariat, knows the businessman's meeting and the dead woman in the open casket, how the women who peer inside see their own bodies—the boulder above the yellowed grass, the twenty orange flowers—how the women work to make sugar skulls and candied pumpkin to ease the coffin down.

The earthmovers and the caution tape, parade floats and banners, these are obvious to the point of screaming. You can see it all from my window. There was forest and everyday this Spring there will be less. There will be more spaces like rips in the transient's dress. Instead of breasts there is sky. Then, quickly made houses with quickly made people inside. The people will stare back, the grooms and doctors, the students and housewives, we will stare at each other, the small space between us full of nothing, just shadows of warblers, no slugs getting larger, no warning songs of the starling, no blue eggs laid in holes, no secret den of fungus, and everyday there will be less. No secrets. Only our noses pressed to the glass, breathing out, only out, making bubbles that pop like facts in the hot blood of the clear-cut.

## No Remorse for the Death of an Ugly Bird

We feel worse when beautiful people die  
than when someone not so attractive does,  
even worse when the person is young and golden  
like a newly lit candle in the centerpiece  
of the world's flat, unending table.

This extends to animals as well.

That's why we're staring on our balcony from under the brims  
of our beach hats, with smiles on our faces, fascinated,  
across red tiles of the sloping hotel roof at a red-tailed hawk,  
how it separates

feathers from the leather skin of a gull.

The hawk's proboscis bobbing as it plucks  
contours and bristle, then semi-plumes and down,  
the down floating like half seeded dandelion clocks.

This is gore, yes, but it is not so bad to see.

The hawk is like a master chef, removing this gull  
of its buggy jacket, freeing it from its muggy sheathing,  
scrubbing it clean like a pink potato,

polishing it like a prize sapphire, a sacrifice to the Hawk-god.

The air smells of the storming Oregon sea,  
and we're happy for this reprieve, for this little bit of time  
where the sun is shining and the hawk is feeding.

Probably somewhere in a high up nest, the hawk's babies are  
waiting, napping,

and when the food comes they will dance the Flamenco  
and the Hawk-god will be happy.

You ask me, what if it were a canary?

A small, soft to the touch, golden thing being torn to bits by the  
hawk,

instead of a greedy, marble eyed, sea gull  
with an incessant rasping squawk.

No, I would not be watching that. I am not that kind of woman.



## Andrea Lamson

A native of Northern California, Andrea is currently serving as an environment volunteer with the Peace Corps in Madagascar. She speaks fluent American English, Mandarin Chinese, and Sakalava Malagasy, has a smattering of French, Japanese, and Spanish, and can say “It’s too expensive,” and “I’m having stomach troubles,” in several other, more obscure languages. Ten years in academia led to a Master’s Degree in Chinese philosophy, which in turn led, down roads both winding and wondrous, to ten year’s work in natural resources management. Her work has previously been published in Pay Attention: A River of Stones.

## Rara Avis

Peter closed his eyes and murmured “safe travels” as he slid the small magnetic box shut, the gold coin secreted inside. His normally adroit hands dropped the box on a stack of real estate ads before he managed to tack it to the ceiling of the newspaper rack. After closing the small door, he backed away and leaned against the brick facade of the Old Navy store, staring at the now-hidden coin as if his hope alone could empower him to see through the steel. As if hope alone could carry the coin three thousand miles, and imbue the small gold disk with a magical capacity to heal.

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The woman in the teal knit scarf consulted the printout she had with her, then the handheld GPS. The GPS was having a little trouble acquiring satellites this deep into the city. The problem, for a change, was not cloud cover—the day was bright and sharp, a typical specimen of San Francisco’s quietly beautiful autumn—but rather the canyons formed by the skyscrapers. She waited for the signal to change, then walked halfway across Market Street to the concrete island separating the bus lane from the busy automobile traffic.

Her printout-cum-treasure map told her that “X marks the spot” stood at N 37° 47.20 W 122° 24.97. Walking from her relatively open position in the middle of Market Street, she managed a satellite signal just long enough to approach within thirty feet of whatever it was she was looking for. From there she had to rely on her ingenuity, experience, and the hint: “right advertiser.”

On the busy corner of Market and Fourth Street, in front of an Old Navy department store, a street-level escalator sank underground to the Powell Street BART station. With an eye for potential hiding places, she observed a garbage can, a mailbox, and a series of coin-operated newspaper racks in addition to the building’s brick façade and large display windows. The garbage

can and the mail box were possibilities, if the cache was magnetic, but she thought the newspaper racks were more promising. She walked over and saw that two held actual newspapers—The Chronicle and USA Today—but three others were freebie magazines advertising real estate and automobiles. The far-right dispenser was half-full of real estate magazines.

The sidewalk was not crowded, but neither was it empty, and this moment required stealth. People who don't play the game—"muggles" in geocaching parlance—sometimes found caches by accident and, not understanding what they had found, took the cache, its log, and any goodies that might be inside. So the woman in the teal scarf waited until the sidewalk cleared a bit, strolled up to the magazine dispenser, and casually opened the plexiglass door. She reached inside, all the way to the back of the dispenser, and felt around a bit with her hand. Nothing on the back wall, but when she ran her fingertips across the top, voila!, she detached a magnetic box about the size of her palm stuck to the inside top of the dispenser. She grabbed a magazine for camouflage as she extracted the box, then strolled down the block to get away from the racks.

Squatting against the Old Navy brick, she turned the magnetic box over and slid the cover open. Inside, she found a small pencil and the log, as well as several geocaching trinkets she temporarily set down on top of the real estate magazine. She signed the log with her geocaching alias "RangerOne" and the date, returned the pencil and the log to the box, then picked up the trinkets for a quick review.

She returned to the box a small olive-green toy soldier, cheaply made with a prominent seam from the plastic mold. Also back into the box went a pair of dice and a florescent green eraser. She picked up the last item and held it in the palm of her hand, then frowned and raised it up to her eyes for closer examination.

Most geocaching items were cheap, throw-away things people didn't mind leaving for the next person to find. Mostly worthless in themselves, they nonetheless enhanced the feeling of having

“found something” when you opened a cache. But this, she thought, scrutinizing the item in her hand, might actually be treasure. About the same size as an old silver dollar, the geocoin was substantially heavier, and finished in antique gold. Worked into the metal was a tree of life design, its roots twisting together and curling around the bottom of the coin, its branches and leaves reaching up, framing the top in an intricate curved canopy. Peering closely, she spied several miniature birds amongst the leaves, their tiny beaks and eyes perfectly wrought. The tree was raised slightly on the face of the coin, the antique gold contrasting with a background of translucent enamel the deep watery blue of Lake Tahoe in the summer.

Deeply impressed with the craftsmanship on the obverse side of the coin, she turned it over to inspect its reverse. The words, “Rara Avis,” were inscribed against a blue and gold background of interlaced leaves and branches, and underneath a tracking number was stamped into a blue enamel rectangle. She had never found a geocoin before, but knew the etiquette—the tracking number was searchable on the geocaching website, which would describe the coin's goal.

The woman in the teal knit scarf reached into her bag and extracted the GPS unit. She pulled the unit out of its leather case, dropped it back in her bag, then carefully folded the geocoin up in the case and placed the case in the inside pocket of her bag. She closed the magnetic box, replaced it and the magazine in the newspaper dispenser, and rode the escalator down, disappearing underground.

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In a crumpled business suit, his shoulders tight with exhaustion, Peter logged on to the geocaching website from the airport in Denver. He had a three-hour layover on his way back to Boston, and when he checked before he left San Francisco the geocoin had not yet been found. But as the page for “Rara Avis” came up he unconsciously straightened a bit and smiled, reading the

message RangerOne had left: “A rare bird indeed. I’m both delighted and reluctant to send this one on its way.”

Nelson looked over his shoulder as he was reading the page. “Working? If you are, you can stop. I officially give you permission to take an hour or two off.”

“Not working. This is the webpage for the geocoin I left in San Francisco.” Peter looked up to see if Nelson recognized the term, and was answered with a puzzled expression. “It’s part of a game. The basic idea is to find hidden containers, geocaches, then log your finds on a website. A geocacher can put a cache anywhere in the world, pinpoint its location using a GPS machine, and then share the cache’s location online. Anyone with a GPS can try to find the cache. When they do, they post to the cache’s webpage. The website keeps track of who’s found which caches.”

Nelson’s wry smile turned to simple amusement. “I won’t ask why—you’ll say something in California-speak about the journey versus the destination. What’s a geocoin?”

“It’s what they call a ‘trackable item.’ A geocacher will pick one up in one cache, and then leave it in another for someone else to pick up. A geocoin has its own webpage keeping track of the coin—where it’s been, where it is, and where it wants to go.” Peter gave Nelson a smart-alec look. “Another thing you wouldn’t understand: it relies on the kindness of strangers to complete its quest. Here, read for yourself...” Peter turned the laptop so Nelson could see the monitor more clearly.

The webpage displayed small pictures of both sides of the coin. For “Current Goal,” the page read: “To adventure my way to the Tree of Life cache in Boston, MA, there to be collected by my owner.” He had set up Tree of Life before he left and activated it on the website three days ago, immediately after receiving the phone call from his wife. Under the “About this Coin” heading he had written, in a juxtaposition of corny and genuine that he hoped would amuse her: “I wish I could have been there, baby,

Andrea Lamson

but here's my promise to you: Wherever this coin goes, we will go, too."

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Two weeks later RangerOne deposited the coin in a cache on Castle Rock, a granite outcrop at seven thousand nine hundred and four feet of elevation on the south shore of Lake Tahoe. She wrote on the coin's webpage that she thought the coin should see the lake whose color it reflected so perfectly. The tanned, compact forest ranger who found and captured the coin the next day lounged at the summit of Castle Rock, folding the coin in his callused hand and surveying the vista before him. Tourist literature called Lake Tahoe "The Jewel of the Sierra," a phrase he always considered gaudy, but in the mid-afternoon light the water sparkled as if it really was full of sapphires. High Sierra peaks stood above the lake, silent and inscrutable, cradling it as if in the palm of its hand.

The US Forest Service geologist took the coin to a Tupperware cache at an overlook in Sedona, Arizona. The man who found the coin in the Tupperware container was a professional photographer, capturing images of the "New West" for a calendar company. He shot yoga students balancing among the snake-weed in Sedona, then eco-tourists backpacking the mazes of the South Dakota Badlands. He kept the coin with him on the Big Foot Trail to Wounded Knee, where he spent the hours between four and five thirty photographing the ugly chain-link fence, the entrance arch made of bulky brick pillars topped by a thin bend of white wrought-iron, and the offerings of tobacco pouches and faded plastic flowers that adorned some of the graves. After he lost the light, but before it became full dark, he searched out a cache near Wounded Knee Creek, and stowed the geocoin in it. Five days later the season's first storm arrived, and the geocoin spent the rest of the winter buried, lost under six feet of South Dakota snow.

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At the same time Peter checked the geocaching website in the Denver airport, his wife Renee drooped in a recliner in the living room of their brownstone in Boston, gently rocking their three-day-old son to sleep. In the kitchen, Renee's sister reduced a sauce for a ratatouille. Diane had been her birth partner, and was now helping her take care of Berkeley until his father came home. Renee was intensely grateful for the padded edges of the overstuffed rocker. She existed in an exhausted haze, her vision narrow, fuzzy at the periphery but watery clear at the newborn in her lap. "Just wait 'till you meet your daddy. He'll be home this evening. I wonder what you're going to think of him..."

One very cold evening the previous February, Peter had stamped the dirty snow off his boots and poured himself a scotch. She sat at her computer, writing a report on the potential effects of a windmill project on the local avian population. He padded into the office in his socks, kissed her on the head, and asked her to join him in the living room when she came to a stopping point. He needed to talk with her. It was important, he said.

She finished up the section she was working on, saved the file and shut down the computer. When she came into the living room, he was sitting on one end of the sofa staring into his drink. She sat herself down at the other end of the sofa and folded her legs under her, facing him. "What's up?"

"Nelson asked me to second for him on oral arguments in front of the California Supreme Court."

She smiled wide. "Mister Nelson is a very smart man. Congratulations." She paused. "Why don't you look happy?"

"They set the court date. September twenty second."

The breath in her chest froze, then collapsed as a star collapses into a black hole. "You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was."

A pewter silence fell. She looked at him, then down into her lap, and heard the ice in his scotch tinkle in the glass.

She looked up and reached for his drink. One swallow would not hurt the baby, and it might hold the storm at bay. He didn't protest. Their hands did not touch as she took the glass, and she asked him, "What are you going to do? You know the doctor said I have to have the baby here." The scotch burned her teeth.

"Talk it over with you."

She set the glass down on a sandstone coaster on the coffee table, staring at the petroglyph design through the amber liquid. "I hate February."

"I know, babe. I'm sorry."

When she spoke again, she said simply: "You want to go, don't you?"

He hissed, explosive, like a balloon suddenly losing its air. "Of course I want to go!" Then, still tense, but lower, "How can I? Shit. I have no idea what to do."

She inhaled, long and slow. "When do you have to tell Nelson?"

He spoke to the Moroccan carpet hanging on the opposite wall. "He wants an answer by Friday. He made it clear he understands about the baby, but needs a commitment or he'll give it to someone else." He reached for his scotch and poured the last of it down the back of his throat.

She was absolutely still. "I need to sit on this. Can we talk about it tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Me, too. Let's go for oysters tomorrow and talk."

Most of their major relationship decisions were made over oysters. The mollusks helped her keep perspective in difficult conversations, breaking through the hard outer shell that protected the soft innards from a harsh environment. And she'd learned she could read her husband based on the sauces he used, like a poker tell. It was over oysters that they decided to put their careers on hold for a two-year stint in the Peace Corps, and oysters again when they were considering his job offer from the Boston law firm and the move from California. They had found this particular oyster bar on one of their early geocaching expeditions through Boston.

Since the conversation on the sofa he'd had time to let the lawyer loose, and she listened for half an hour while he ran through the analysis. Arguments in favor: He'd been working on the gay marriage case for four years. It was a social justice issue they both believed in. A hearing in front of a state Supreme Court could make his career—it would almost certainly make him partner if he performed well. The case could go federal. Cases like it were popping up all over the country, and after this he could probably write his own ticket. His successful career would be good for the family.

Under the cold light of reason, the arguments against looked weak. Distinctly feminine. And he had switched from Worcester-shire sauce to lemon juice. He talked about the importance of family, the miracle of life, his excitement about being a father. She knew his feelings were genuine, but the argument itself was dishonest, designed ultimately to assuage his conscience. She listened, and drank the oyster brine.

"Lots of feelings, Peter."

"Yeah. Tell me what you think."

She didn't think. She pressed down into her feet, feeling the thin floor underneath her. She took his hand in hers and looked at him. "This one's yours. Whatever you decide, I'll accept it."

His eyebrows went up and the beginnings of a smile played at the edges of his mouth. "Nice try, girl. Really, what do you think?"

Her face was set. "Really." She pulled her hand away, and the white noise in the restaurant became momentarily unbearable. "There's nothing I can say here, Peter. You want to go to California. I understand why, but I want you to stay. To put your family before your career on this one. But what am I supposed to say? Talk you out of it, and have you wonder for the rest of your life what might have been?"

He sat back in his chair looking at her, his face neutral, a lawyer face. "I wanted us to decide this together."

She softened her tone. "You've already decided, Peter. If you stay, it will only be because I want you to. That's the wrong reason to stay."

"Making you happy is a good reason."

"Not good enough, not on this one."

He didn't speak for a long time, and she let the silence stretch out through another round of oysters, another pull on his beer. She inhaled the primeval smell of the ocean, and a deep part of her kept still through the tempest of the table's emotions. Finally he ate an oyster without sauce, and said, "You're right."

Her throat closed a little, and her eyes became full and heavy, then spilled over. He said, "I'm sorry."

She smiled at him, pressing her wrists into her eyes. She said, "I know," and nothing else.

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The following spring, when Berkeley was just six months old, a dentist interested in American history picked up the coin at

Wounded Knee Creek. He was traveling west, though, not east, so on his way to the airport he left it in an easily accessible cache near a statue of Benjamin Harrison in Rapid City. The same afternoon a woman from Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, toured the new installations in the City of Presidents on her annual trip to visit her aunt. She had heard about geocaching on a recent episode of Oprah, and on a dare from her PTA friends she decided to give it a try. The cache near Benjamin Harrison's statue was her first find. She took the trophy home with her to Oklahoma, and from there it leap-frogged across the Midwest with the summer migration of RV's, landing in three successive Walmart parking lots.

The coin crossed the Mississippi River at Mark Twain Avenue in Hannibal, Missouri, to arrive at a KOA campground outside Springfield, Illinois. An intelligent, well-spoken boy of seventeen found the coin in the small plastic cylinder hidden near space number one hundred seventeen. He showed the coin to his grandfather, who admired it at length, and left a flattering, if erudite, comment on the coin's webpage. The grandfather-grandson duo left the coin at their ultimate destination: Millennium Park in Chicago, Illinois.

Two days later the park cache was mugged, and the coin disappeared.

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For Renee, the thing that was now between her and her husband existed in the past, and was as impossible to remedy as time was incapable of flowing backwards. She felt sorry for Peter, and her marriage became leaden: a burden to be carried, and catered to, like Berkeley. She tried to mask the new heaviness with caring for the baby. When she and Peter talked, it was about the baby. When they were together, it was with the baby. She stopped wanting sex, and pretended it was because she was too tired, after taking care of the baby.

Decisions that had been easy before—what restaurant to go to, where to spend a Sunday, what flowers to plant in the beds of annuals—they now made with a self-conscious eye to The Family. They threw all their caring into the wrong things. It was as if, slowly, the strands of light that had connected her and Peter were cooling and hardening, forging themselves into chains.

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Peter monitored the progress of the coin on an almost daily basis. He installed a large map of the United States on one wall of the nursery, out of Berkeley's reach on the opposite wall from the crib. He added brightly-colored map pins as the coin's log grew. Renee asked him about it once, and he responded vaguely that it was a surprise for Berkeley that wasn't quite done yet. He didn't tell her it was a surprise for her as well. She didn't pursue it, but let it alone with a warning to make sure that Berkeley didn't get into the pins.

He read the note from ThxGeo1138 late on a sticky summer evening. "Found the empty plastic box and the discarded log not too far away. Looks like someone found the cache and took the toys. Restored the log to the container and left it under a bush next to the bathrooms." The owner disabled the cache for three days while he made repairs, but nothing more was heard about the geocoin that had been in the green painted box.

Over the next two weeks Peter stood with unusual frequency in front of the map in Berkeley's room, staring at the pins' bright primary colors against the earthy browns and greens. His fingertips traced the zig-zag path, gently brushing the paper south then north then south again, but inexorably eastward. The coin had made it two thirds of the way across the country. He had known from the beginning that losing the coin was a possibility; indeed, given the craftsmanship, the journey all the way from San Francisco to Chicago in the hands of strangers was itself a small miracle. And he took comfort in the fact that everyone who

encountered the coin admired it. Many people had thanked him in the log for bringing an unexpected beauty to their day.

Renee still didn't know about the Tree of Life cache he had set up in Boston—he was waiting until the coin arrived so he could present everything to her as one package. But with the coin gone, there was now no reason to wait. They hadn't been geocaching together since before the baby was born, and he missed it. He decided he would tell her about it on Berkeley's first birthday—he would give her the printout at breakfast, and they would set out on a little family adventure. The cache would still be a surprise. Without admitting it to himself, he hoped, irrationally, that the coin might reappear before then.

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In the late afternoon of August fifteenth, a six-year-old girl sat playing with her toys in a house in the Chatham neighborhood of Chicago. She heard the doorbell ring and ran into the living room, beating her mother to the door. Her mother slid an earring into her right earlobe as she opened the door and greeted the teenager. "Come in, Janna. Thanks for coming over. Brie, say hello to your new babysitter."

The girl looked directly at the newcomer, and stuck out her small hand. "Hello Janna."

The teenager crouched down and solemnly shook the girl's hand. "Hello, Brie, it's nice to meet you."

The woman smiled at the tableau. "Jeoff and I are just finishing getting ready. Brie, why don't you show Janna your room. I'll come find you and show you around before we leave."

Brie had a large collection of toys, with few dolls and several different construction sets. An elaborate campus built primarily of Legos occupied fully one third of her room, and what dolls she had were set as props in this constructed urban setting. Brie was just starting to give Janna the tour of her miniature city when

they were interrupted by her mother, and as soon as her parents left she picked up again right where she had left off. She pointed out a shopping district, houses in the neighborhoods, and a central square bounded by a library, courthouse, and city hall. She had installed paper cut-outs for trees, Hotwheel cars along the roads, plastic hot-dog stands and a small aluminum helicopter parked on the flat roof of one of the larger buildings. Everything was out of scale, but the entire effect was remarkably lifelike, busy and urban.

Janna picked up the blue and gold coin with the tree design leaning against the mock City Hall. "What's this, Brie?"

"That's the Seal of the City. It's pretty, huh?"

"It's very pretty." She turned it over and examined the back. "Where did you get this?"

Brie smiled proudly. "I found it! It was in a box in the park, like somebody had left it there for me to find. There were some other toys in it, too, like this car, and some stickers."

"This is a very special coin, Brie. It has a name. And someone wants it to get somewhere. Do you want me to show you?"

"Yes, please!"

"Is there a computer that we can use in the house?"

"We can't use the one in my dad's office—that one's off limits! But my mom lets me use the one in the living room."

"Then let's go take a look."

And "Rara Avis" was found.

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Janna left the coin in one of her favorite caches in the city, at the Art Institute where she took weekend classes funded by her babysitting gigs. She posted a note on the coin's log, explaining what had happened. Brie cried when Janna, however gently, explained to her what she had done, but cheered up when Janna told her she would send the coin once again on its way. Peter wrote a long message on the website thanking Janna for bringing the coin back into circulation.

The geocoin was picked up at the Art Institute by a painter on her way to her first gallery show in Lima, Ohio, and from Lima a blacksmith drove it to Columbus, where he was attending a metallurgy conference. The blacksmith admired the metalwork, and eventually corresponded privately with Peter asking where the coin had been made. Peter was happy to give him the name of the jewelry sculptor in Boston, explaining how the jeweler had worked with the geocaching website to obtain the tracking number. The exchange prompted Peter to add the name of the jeweler to the coin's website; he hoped it would drum up business for a man he considered both a talented artist and an honest businessman.

An advertising agent found the coin in the cache near the Greater Columbus Convention Center, and flew it all the way to Providence, Rhode Island, where it resided briefly near the grave of H.P. Lovecraft. A Belgian college student backpacking his way up the east coast picked it up, and walked it north to Boston Commons. It arrived at the Tree of Life cache on Thursday, October third, a week and a half after Berkeley's first birthday.

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The morning of Sunday, October sixth, Berkeley sat strapped into his high chair, banging on the tray and scattering Cheerios all over the breakfast room. Renee sat next to him at the breakfast table holding a pen, staring at the Sunday paper over coffee and a bagel. She looked up when Peter pushed the printout across to her, under her nose and on top of the crossword she was working on.

Her voice flat, she asked: “What’s this?”

“Read it.”

She did. Her brow furrowed as she read, and Peter watched her, smiling.

“You set up a geocache?”

“Look at the date.”

“But... This was the day Berkeley was born. How...?”

“I hid it before I left, then activated it after you called me in San Francisco. Wanna go find it?”

She sat back in her chair, crossed her arms over her chest and regarded him. Finally, she surrendered to a smile and said, “Yes.”

Renee cleaned Berkeley up and packed him into the baby backpack while Peter gathered the GPS unit, snacks and water, the complete printout for “Rara Avis”, and a smaller version of the map in Berkeley’s room, yellow highlighter dots taking the place of the map pins. The website for Tree of Life listed its coordinates at N 42° 35.500, W 71° 6.560, a little over a mile from their brownstone in Clarendon Park. Renee carried the GPS unit and the backpack with Berkeley while Peter walked behind her wearing the other backpack full of supplies. Following the GPS, she headed straight for the Commons. “God, we haven’t done this in forever. I’m rusty.”

“We’ve been busy,” is all he said.

“But that’s why we liked doing it—an excuse to get out of the daily routine. See new places and get some perspective on things.” They crossed Arlington Street into the Public Garden. “If the cache has been up for a year, why didn’t you take us here

sooner?” She paused, and turned to look at him. “Or are you mad at me ‘cause I haven’t been checking the website and didn’t notice the new cache on my own?”

Peter laughed. “No, I’m not mad. In fact, I was worried you would find it before I wanted you to.” She looked back at him, puzzled. “You’ll see. Just find the cache.”

“Hmmm. Mystery man.” And then they were on the Commons, between the bandstand and the monument, approaching a crossroads where three paths meet. The GPS told her she had arrived, so she set Berkeley down under an elm with Peter to watch him, and started her search. Boston Commons was free of shrubbery and undergrowth, but benches and lightposts lined the paved walks. Her GPS told her the cache was off the path about fifteen feet, but the machine was only accurate to about thirty, so she started her hunt with the obvious anthropogenic features. Twenty minutes later, she still hadn’t found anything. Peter leaned against the tree and played with the baby, barely suppressing the urge to show her where the cache was hidden. Instead, he called out to her, “Why don’t you take a break and sit with us for a while. Play with your son.”

She walked over, her mouth a line of mild frustration. “You’re not going to give me a hint, are you?”

“Others have found it. Sit down. Take a break.”

“The hint on the website is too cryptic: ‘Sorry it’s not a redwood’? What does that mean?” Peter shrugged, but failed to banish his mischievous smile. She sat down with her back against the tree trunk. “Of course it’s not a redwood. There are no redwoods on the Commons. Only..... elms.” Understanding dawned. She scanned the area without standing up, and her gaze immediately fell on three rocks grouped not five feet from where she was sitting. She threw Peter a semi-serious “you bastard” look, gathered up Berkeley and scooted the two of them over to the rocks. Peter picked up the backpack and joined her just as she was opening the bottom of the false basalt stone.

Out fell the log, and the “Rara Avis” geocoin. She ignored the coin while she devised a suitable comment for the log, then put the pen in Berkeley’s hand and helped him make a crude “B” in the notebook. In the meantime, Peter fished the coin’s printout from his backpack. After replacing the log, Renee finally picked up the coin. “Jesus, Peter, take a look at this. Somebody left a geocoin - it’s beautiful.” After a close inspection, she held it out for him to see.

Peter traded her the coin for the printout. She murmured, “What’s this,” but he didn’t answer and left her to read. He held the coin in his hand and closed his eyes. The solid weight of it in his palm was too real. He was afraid everything would evaporate—the coin, the cache, his wife and son—so he just sat with his eyes closed, holding on, listening to Renee flipping pages and Berkeley playing in the grass.

He felt Renee’s hand cover his. “Let me see it again, Peter.” He opened his palm without opening his eyes. Renee’s voice was low. “Is it really for me?”

“The cache is for Berkeley and the coin is for you.” He smiled and opened his eyes. “There’s one more thing.” He rummaged in the backpack and pulled out the map. “I want to take a trip, the three of us. Visit all of the places the coin saw.” He handed her the map. “Instill some wanderlust in our son.”

“As if he hasn’t already inherited it from his two parents.” She lay back on the grass in the speckled sunlight, examining the map. He joined her, wrapping his arms around her until she turned on her side and pressed up against him. They were silent for a long time, holding on to each other, listening to Berkeley’s awkward movements next to them on the lawn.

“You know how sorry I am that I wasn’t there.”

“I didn’t really know. Not until now.” She traced her finger slowly across his chest, from left to right, west to east, San Francisco to

Boston. She moved her finger slowly, imagining the miles. Six hours by car up Highway 80 from San Francisco to Lake Tahoe. A plane flight to Arizona, from the dry, cold mountains to the dry, hot desert. More highway miles to South Dakota, where she had never been. She shivered in the sun, thinking of the long, cold winter, then the long, slow journey across the vast Plains, eastward in RVs instead of westward in wagons. She imagined the White City of Chicago, a sanctuary of civilization in an ocean of corn, and then more plane miles, until it finally it was carried by foot to this place, here, her home.

She imagined every single mile as she traced her finger across his chest. Her husband had done this for her - thrown himself on the mercy of the travel gods, fickle and crafty as they can sometimes be. And here it was: thirty-five hundred miles later, through fifteen caches in ten different states. As she made the journey in her mind, every mile she traveled melted a link in the iron chain they had forged between them, and turned it light. She closed her eyes, and caressed him with all her forgiveness.



## Kenneth Pobo

Kenneth Pobo teaches Creative Writing and English at Widener University in Pennsylvania. He has a new poetry chapbook coming out this year from Thunderclap Press called Closer Walks. His work can be read online at *Stickman Review*, *2River View*, *Forpoetry.com*, *Centrifugal Eye*, *Word Riot*, and elsewhere.

## Saving the Root

1.

Fog covers the house and yard, a hint that July heat will strengthen. I'm growing cotton, for the first time, in a new bed Stan and I dug up this year. We ground up dead branches and twigs and made our own mulch. I reserved a part of it for cotton, not normally raised in Pennsylvania where we live. Maybe to the two-dozen cotton plants, the heat will feel like a visit from an old friend. I'll be shut up in air-conditioning, the closed-up house smelling more and more of three litter boxes and dirty dishes.

Spring and fall attract me more. Winter and summer seem like two inflexible uncles butting heads, though summer offers the occasional terrific gift--a cool evening after a thunderstorm breaks the chains of heat, a tigridia's colorful mosaic coming as a surprise where the blue of false indigo faded.

Summer hours feel more open-ended--summer's great deception. Time moves the same as always. The freedom promised by the longer days is already packing to go.

2.

So much is in bloom! Spring came early this year after a mild winter. Dahlias we didn't dig up and store in the basement are in wide open—Hissy Fits with its red and yellow tufts, Margaret DuRoss's orange muscle flexing beside the giant coneflower's yellow sombreros.

When autumn temperatures skid below freezing, I can't bear to see the garden wither. I lug in way too many plants, watch them spend December and January dying slowly in the bay window and on silver racks by the dining room window which normally shelve dishes. Stan says I've got to stop this, learn to let go. I promise him I will. But the gumdrop begonia's little pink frills--I've

overwintered her three times now. Surely I can take her in again.

The garden tries to teach me to let go, but I “Rage, rage against the dying” as Dylan Thomas said. My plants will not go gentle—or ungentle—into that not-good-at-all night. Like us, they have to go. Some can’t grow when spring returns unless they’ve spent many days in frozen ground.

3.

When it comes to saving I’ve had good training. In Sunday School I learned that it was up to me to be a light. If I would let my light shine, God would direct it to the appropriate soul who was, of course, in darkness. It’s hard being a light. Light sometimes wants nothing more than to rest in darkness. If the light is off, God can’t work. He gets miffed. When miffed, He starts kicking your spiritual furniture. To calm Him down, you turn on your light again. You have to—you’re outnumbered. There’s three of Him—Father, Son, Holy Ghost—and one of you.

Jesus told a parable about looking for a lost sheep, not resting till it gets found. The sheep may not know it’s lost even if the owner does. He’s thrilled to find the sheep, but being “found” doesn’t occur to the sheep. My lost sheep, plants I take in from the approaching cold. Even some annuals, whose cycle is only meant to last a single growing season, I take in. Bedraggled plants, past their blooms, green seeping out of the stems, brown and black deepening each day. I hope for a miracle, eventually give up and pitch the stiff stalks.

The Bible has many references to God’s light. What about God’s darkness? If it were always sunny, nothing could grow. After dining on sunlight’s energy, blossoms form during the night, open at dawn. In constant light, buds couldn’t form. Heaven is described as a place without darkness. Count me out. And count all of the flowers and trees out, too. No bouquets in Heaven, no leaves. Just endless light, sterile, unyielding.

4.

My parents garden, yet when I was growing up, we had little more than a few marigolds, some sedum, and an Easter lily by the sidewalk that led to the garage. Dad worked as a scientist at Argonne National Laboratory. Mom took care of me, Dad, and the house. Marigolds and sedum don't ask for much. The Easter lily comes and goes quickly. Gardening grew more interesting to them when I went to college. And to me too.

Near the end of high school, I started buying cheap plants from stores close enough to bike to such as Pittsburgh Paints four blocks from our house in Villa Park, Illinois. I started with bare root roses on sale at Walgreens: Peace, Queen Elizabeth, Mirandy, Helen Traubel. In 1972, the year I graduated from Willowbrook High school, I dug the holes and snugged them. My first college spring had many thriving roses. I lived at home and in spring saw the roses leafing out before the buds and blossoms.

Phil, a gardener who is a member of the gym I go to says, "Roses will break your heart." Where we live now, in Middletown, Pennsylvania, we have deer. When we moved in four years ago, we bought a dozen rose bushes, dug holes all in a row beside this prairie which has a gasoline running underground. Rarely mowed, it thickens with gangly weeds. Foxes dash in and out of it. Deer saw our dozen roses and figured that we were a smorgasbord. Only one survived—the ballerina—a tough, light pink rose which I learned of through reading Jamaica Kinkaid. The others are either dead or so piddly that canes easily break off. It's a fight to yank out dead roses. The roots get deep, even in our clay soil. It's like pulling out hope. Roses will break your heart, yes, and they will make it beat faster when you see one, fully open, on a June morning.

Over thirty years have passed since I planted those roses in Villa Park. My parents have moved from the house where I grew up to a retirement community closer to me and Stan. I wish they could have packed up those roses, sent them to us. We'd have

found a place with less deer traffic, honest. More trying to save, to hold on.

5.

From roses, I went to other plants. Vesper irises, which open in late summer, usually in late afternoon, intrigued me. If you sit and watch them around five p.m., you can watch the blooms open. A healthy plant might produce fifty in a single afternoon, all gone by morning. Over time, I've become more and more attracted to less common plants. Gardening catalogues and eBay listings widen our choices. That doesn't mean I don't love phlox, coneflowers, impatiens, and zinnias. We grow them too—but we also seek out African foxgloves, arums, oleander.

I'm usually not an experimental person. A friend once told me, "You eat like a five-year-old," meaning I have no variety in my diet, no yen to try new things. He's right. When I'm offered a new food, I'm on my guard and assume I won't like it. I like routine—getting up around the same time each day, eating chicken for lunch at noon, writing, napping. Our garden is an experiment. Some new plant will add just that touch of surprise. By now, our whole garden is a big surprise, probably too much so. Neither Stan nor I wants to grow the same garden year after year. Perennials keep some consistency over the years, but we always look for the new, the strange, the flower that normally doesn't appear in local gardens.

For every delight in the garden there's a grief. A tender shoot rises and a groundhog chomps it. Glads come up but make no stalk. This year, by yanking out and clearing away weeds--a Sisyphean task since weeds always return--I got a raging case of poison ivy. My arm looked scraped by fish hooks. Hibiscuses, which slowly grew for almost three months, are days away from opening. When I stand before a red Lord Baltimore, a face-round blossom, bugs and insects seem less daunting. Or I minimize their importance, enjoy the bloom show, and go back indoors to take the doxycycline for Lyme disease.

Gardening is expensive. I'm constantly looking for TNCP (the next cool plant). When I find it, I'm out looking again. The horizon never shrinks, only widens. I'm the same way with old records. I find one rare single and discover two more I must have. Or martini pitchers—there's always another antique store with a silver pitcher on a shiny tray.

6.

Sunday School teachers told me that Earth began as a garden. God made the Earth and put two people in it. The animals all got along. Did mosquitoes not bite? Adam and Eve disobeyed, got kicked out, and eventually horrible things happened. Gardens didn't last. An apple tree can be so dangerous that if you eat something from one, you end up riling God again. He got so riled that he told Adam he'd have to work like a dog and Eve would have painful childbirth. That would fix them! He put flaming swords at the garden's entrance to prevent them from going back to it, a nice Cecil B. DeMille touch. Perhaps in my garden I am God. I decide what plant will go where. I can water or withhold water.

God gave people "dominion" over the Earth. In my church, "dominion" meant to dominate. Better than the rest of Nature, we were created just a tad bit lower than the angels but higher than bears and walruses. And definitely higher than a talking snake that tempted us to disobey, to want to know about good and evil. Being higher than animals and plants, we had *carte blanche* to treat the Earth as we wanted. Yet we were to be good "stewards" of the Earth. No one made it clear how we became good stewards. You were called a "tree hugger" if you said that animals and plants were living too and deserved respect. A good "steward" isn't a "tree hugger."

In her fundamentalist years, most of my childhood, my mother worried that animals might not be with us in heaven. She found it hard to hope for this wonderful heaven without birds or dogs. When she questioned our minister, he told her that animals have no souls and won't be in heaven. When they die, they die.

Would we want cockroaches for eternity? Do cockroaches have souls? I no longer believe in heaven.

The minister assumed people had souls which would live forever, unlike the cockroach, whose short life was of no consequence. He couldn't know that. Maybe the cockroach will outlast humankind.

7.

When I was five, my parents started taking me every summer to Wisconsin's northwoods. At 54, I still go every summer, only now my parents have their own cabin at the resort we stay at, and Stan and I get a cabin next to theirs. He had never been to Wisconsin before we met in 1992. We take long walks among trees and wildflowers. He looks more relaxed during this week than at any other time of the year.

Thoreau says in *Walden* that he went to the woods to live deliberately. I go to the woods for a vacation—and to be among lakes, owls and herons. The week we're up north is the one week of the year when I have no technology toys—computer, phone, and best of all, no TV. I get pangs of longing for the computer—briefly—but those pangs drift away on the backs of loons. When we get back to Pennsylvania, machinery seizes me once again. 200 emails await.

To live deliberately? How to do this when gadgets turn us on, when the attention I gave to an unexpected patch of wild trillium now centers on electronic wails from an in-box? It seems hard to live even vaguely, let alone deliberately.

My northwoods world isn't an Oz I'm trying to escape back to. When I'm in the woods, I'm not a complete cheerleader for nature. I wouldn't dream of camping out. I don't want to be that close to the lumpy earth, much preferring a bed and pillows. The temperature has to be just right or I can't sleep. When we hike, I slather myself in Off, walk warily. When the week is over and people ask about my trip, I expound on the glories of pink lady-

lippers, the moment when an eagle soared over our rowboat. I don't mention annoying gnats and mosquitoes--it's selective memory, a postcard view of nature

The northwoods of my childhood has changed greatly. Clear-cutting of the forests increasingly leaves pocked, empty places where thick forests had grown. The road leading in to a two-mile walking trail we enjoy which takes us around a small lake was once robust with trees. Now it resembles a bombed-out death land. Some mulleins stand among busted stumps, their long green arms unable to hide the devastation. Few birds. I would be a tree hugger if there were trees left to hug. They've been sawed into dollars, our dominion complete.

8.

Many trees no longer inhabit my life. In the house I grew up in, my bedroom window looked out onto a Chinese elm. On hot summer days, my friends and I would sit in its shade with Kool-Aid and bologna sandwiches. Slender green leaves gave the tree a cheerful, graceful appearance. I took it for granted—that it would always sway and tower. One February when I was in college I awoke to see that during the night an ice storm had hit and ravaged it. Dad called a company that dealt with wounded trees. They cut and carried away big branches. The tree survived for a decade more but was never the same. Where the stump was, my mother put a small round flower bed.

Near the Chinese Elm, a cherry tree provided many pies. When the tree blossomed, a small wind made it look like snow falling on spring grass. When it fruited, my friend Greg and I played The Cherry Game. The cherries were people in horrible accidents. We were the doctors. The stone was the heart. We performed open heart surgery, pulled out the stones, "saved" the cherry with a gauze of mud. Even cherries had to be saved.

That tree died too. I've only been in our new house for four years. My home office looks out on a big maple. I'm fond of this tree but I don't think of it as one of "our" trees yet. The maple

and I are still developing a friendship. Trees offer an extended love. Where the portulaca blossoms, gorgeously, for a single afternoon and if I am to love it, I respond quickly; a tree usually has many afternoons, many seasons. The play of shadow and sun on a tree changes each day. A tree in the morning can be vastly different from a tree at dusk. Or at night.

Every year we get a “real” Christmas tree--a dead tree stuck in water with wrapped boxes beneath it on a ratty green blanket to catch falling needles. Neither Stan or I are Christians, but we want the “real” tree, nothing artificial. He’s an atheist and I am an almost atheist. His Methodist training left him angry; mine, as a fundamentalist, left me angry too—but also, like the poet Charles Wright, looking in the pockets of landscapes for the idea of God. The fake tree bought at Macy’s is as alive as our dead one. Some tree farms end up as three-week decorations in living rooms across America. Ka-ching!

9.

Stan and I recycle. We give to environmental organizations such as Defenders of Wildlife and The Nature Conservancy, and we don’t drive gas guzzlers. These approaches to green living are thin band-aids on a gaping wound. Like many others, I feel impotent—nothing I do will make any difference. Stan and I eat animals. Grocery stores wrap in plastic what we eat as if the creature had never lived.

I say I “love” Nature, but I only love the parts that don’t bite, the parts that never get over 85 or under 32 degrees. My “love” is narrow. When I teach a poem or a story which has a character in some life-changing encounter with nature, I often speak as an advocate for that character, saddened when my students, mostly suburban young people, often have little connection with nature. Malls and cell phones replace herons and ferns.

This spring I taught Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*, in which Ray and Japhy climb a mountain together. The experience helps to solidify their friendship and also suggests to Ray how he might

live more fully—or deliberately. Japhy leaves for Japan and Ray becomes a look-out living on a mountain. As much as I admire Ray's decision to leave contemporary culture for a mountain, for aloneness, for a chance to live in the moment in nature, I could never do it. My enthusiasm for Ray's choice grows as I read on my soft bed, a bathroom down the hall, the air-conditioner a few steps away should it get too warm.

10.

A storm attacked suddenly. It was thrilling. After another 100-degree day, around 7:00 p.m. the sky bruised up and the wind galloped and surged. Stan and I decided this was a perfect time to visit the garden. Rain was coming but not here yet. In a matter of minutes, the heat broke and the temperature dropped into the low 80s, then the 70s. My spirit rose as the thermometer fell. The day had been saved from the grinding force of heat. I can't do anything about a storm. The storm will do what it will do—yet as the wind pitched and slapped, I ran from plant to plant, fearing that the wind would break the thin stalk of our 6 ½ foot tall meadow rue. I tried to tie wispy branches of a nearby Japanese maple around it. The maple came undone. Thick-stalked dahlias looked like they could tip over at any moment. My joy in the storm faded.

In the morning, after a night without power, bent dahlias faced the sun. The four o'clocks leaned as did some scrawny sunflowers, but I found no fatalities. While Stan ate breakfast and got ready for work, scissors-in-hand I inspected each bed. A reddish pink glad had fallen. Snip—and it was part of a bouquet. I wanted to make sure we didn't "lose" any plants. I was out saving again.

I mistrust dominion--it means control—anyone who gardens knows that you can control some things—but only to a point. Storms heave. Plants wither and die. A prickly pear cactus, buried under big cucumber vine leaves, suddenly looks greener and healthier than ever.

Liar. I want dominion—I just want it my way. Air conditioning. Bug repellent. Windows that keep the rain from blowing onto the quilt. A snow blower. Weather.com. I want the garden, but I want the indoors too. In Stanley Kunitz's poem "The Mulch," a man is "mindful of his garden/ which prepares to die."

Letting go comes naturally to the garden. It lives and dies deliberately. Roots need rest. They shall have it. Many let the world above ground go and bide their time.



## Sarah Rehfeldt

Sarah Rehfeldt lives in western Washington with her family. She is a writer, artist, and photographer. Her most recent publication credits include: *Assisi Journal*; *Windhover*; *The Awakenings Review*; *A Prairie Journal*; and *Magnapoets*. Her photography web pages can be viewed here: [www.pbase.com/candanceski](http://www.pbase.com/candanceski)

The Return

(followed by image: Upon Arrival)

Upon arrival,  
there will be the sound  
of clean and heavy falling water  
into hard, cracked ground.  
There will be piles of stone around you –  
semi-precious, freckled brown and white ones  
marked with red –  
these will be the ones we'll borrow.  
You will learn to recognize them by their color,  
pick them up, and take them home.  
This is only the beginning.



Sarah Rehfeldt

Fall Planting  
(followed by image: Turning)

We fall.  
We make ourselves into the earth.  
We puddle into darkness.

We turn inward.

We learn to listen to the silence --  
how to recognize the soft sounds underfoot  
of yellow-turned-to-saffron;  
how to listen to the brushed strokes overhead  
of dark clouds passing.  
We learn to let the rain speak,  
slowly,  
its holy, sacramental language.  
Eventually, we'll learn to trust the seasons on the outside.  
But for now, we wait indoors.  
It's cold,  
and hard drops splinter on the surface.





## Wally Swist

Wally Swist is the author of seventeen books and chapbooks of poetry. His newest collection is Luminous Dream, the finalist for the 2010 FutureCycle Poetry Book Prize. A short biographical documentary film regarding his work, In Praise of the Earth, was released by award-winning filmmaker Elizabeth Wilda (WildArts, 2008). Also, he has published a scholarly monograph, The Friendship of Two New England Poets, Robert Frost and Robert Francis (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009). A recording of a poem from his reading in the Sunken Garden Poetry Festival, accompanied by jazz cellist Eugene Friesen, a member of Paul Winter Consort, is archived at [npr.org](http://npr.org).

Wally Swist

Dream of a Holy City

In the dream, I visited a holy city.

The city was numinous: it was  
white-walled; several of the domed

buildings, reserved for the use  
of practice, prayer, and service,  
were constructed of a kind of white

alabaster; all of the architecture  
was smooth, all of it shone.

What was communicated, wordlessly,

was that it was not my time to be  
there. However, it was made salient,  
that this was home, and this is where

I am to return to. It is not  
your time yet, quietly and clearly  
instructed a voice, as I was bathed

in such well-being: a sense  
so palpable, yet so much beyond  
description. Upon waking, I lay in bed,

and became aware—  
Or was I still dreaming?—  
that your life and mine have been guided

to be together, that the geometric  
lines of our meeting were planned  
sometime before. Upon waking,

I was to know this,  
to understand that in our being  
together we are meant to learn from

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one another, and in  
    doing so, to advance previous  
        capacities for becoming, to go beyond  
  
what we had already  
    experienced, separately and in unison.  
        Only if we allow ourselves, we may still  
  
awaken to pre-dawn  
    birdsong, any morning, whose  
        intermittent flourishes deepen the silence.

The Penedulum

I watch the first juncos, those augurs  
of winter, flock after late October snow  
  
in their charcoal gray feathers,  
as if they just emerged out of the ashes  
  
of a hearth, their beaks the color of pale flame.  
I think of us that first autumn—  
  
how you laugh before you toss back your hair,  
how we bask in the light  
  
that emanates between us—  
how deep we walk into and out of what  
  
we think we want, how I try to find a way  
to still the pendulum of our going  
  
back and forth the same way again.  
I walk the pine floors of this cabin in the woods  
  
where I hear your voice, saying:  
Why haven't other people written about this?

Wally Swist

This is where I weather the irony  
of your being unable to accept what you told me

that you waited for all of your life.  
This is where I learn to cease grieving.

# About EarthSpeak

EarthSpeak is a newly-founded online literary journal that hopes to open up a small but honest space where writers of various persuasions can pursue a dialogue concerning one of the most crucial issues of our times, namely the fitful relationship between humanity and the natural world.

It also hopes to support an array of different conservation/restoration organizations through its Donation Program, which aims to funnel some of the magazines modest proceeds into organizations which exhibit a strong sense of environmental stewardship and integrity.

EarthSpeak is interested in essays, stories and poems that explore a wide gamut of different issues and experiences as they pertain to nature and our own place within it. Submission deadlines follow a seasonal rhythm, further information for which can be found on the website's submissions page.

All submissions and inquiries may be sent to:

[submissions@earthsspeakmagazine.com](mailto:submissions@earthsspeakmagazine.com).