

EarthSpeak Magazine



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EarthSpeak Magazine
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Cover Photo:

Near Trout Lake in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness in Washington State
taken by AJ Velon

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Jenny Ward Angyal

Jenny Ward Angyal lives on a small organic fruit and vegetable farm in Gibsonville, NC, with her husband and one Abyssinian cat. Recently retired from teaching nonverbal children how to communicate, she is currently spending more time attempting to communicate through her poems, which have appeared in a number of print and on-line journals. She is also a hiker, a quilter, and a volunteer docent at the local natural science center, furthering a life-long interest in human relationships with the natural world.

At the Turtle Hospital

Great maimed beasts swim listing in circles,
weights glued lopsided to shells like rippled sand,
drawing them down toward lost
unreachable depths.

Rescue a turtle drifting at sea
and you earn the right to name it, like Adam,
though its true name be always
unspeakable mystery.

If ever I saved a sea turtle floating,
I'd name it, mother, for you—
and you'd laugh,
you who taught me it's all mystery, all holy,

fish and the leaping, moonlit illusion of fish,
sea wrack and driftweed,
dark tides and the body
bathed in luminescence,
the least, lost creature drifting toward home.

You, who after the stroke swam listing through time
on half-blind limbs, shut out
of the silted sea cave of memory
until at last you dove alone
into the deep welcoming ocean of home.

Donors

The out-breath of trees
rides through seawater
on the beautiful

biconcavity of cells
traveling in their innocent
round back to my heart

until the needle prick
diverts them into the plastic
bag that dangles at my side
and silently fills
until the lever trips
to interrupt the flow—

which will continue
in the veins of someone
whose name I do not know

but who breathes
the same sweet air as I—
gift of anonymous donors,

the narrow veins,
the tiny silent mouths,
the myriad leaves.

Carol Alexander

Carol Alexander is a New York City-based author and editor. A writer for trade and educational publishing, she has authored children's books and other works. Her poetry appears in *Chiron Review*, *Cave Moon Press*, *Numinous*, *OVS* and *The Whistling Fire*.

The Wild Turkeys

It's foolish, perhaps, to persist in planting
when there are only two, and one half-dreaming
watches wrinkled hands mulching the garden,
gray head bent over the final blooms,
shaded from the struggling autumn light.
Hefting leaves more cautiously each year,
a few less trips up the ladder to the blocked gutters,
a few more mornings lazing by the pond,
it's a well-earned rest on these fleeting dahlia days.

Children in their yellow rubber boots pause
by the post fence, taunting the brash wild turkeys
to spread their motley wings and rush the gate.
The hatchlings flutter on the ground, having fought
the fox, the hawk, the advisories of county men
who say don't feed them, as their numbers multiply.
Those children with bright round eyes seize upon
all that is alien or curious in the braggart birds
and in the old ones and their raw and nettled field.

It's foolish, perhaps, to feed the wild turkeys;
if the fox, the hawk, don't get them
the autumn chill might; but the woman,
brown from garden work, deliberately
goes on raking acorns, burdock, drying berries
into crackling copper mounds
while the turkeys, for whom she is familiar,
strut and peck a compost wormy, bloated with rain.

He's lost the thread, forgotten the rhyme,
but his eyes follow this stooping woman,
whose tasks seem oddly right, as if, enchanted,
she labored in some goblin realm where dross
is sorted into piles of gold and gem.

At last, the long day's work being done,

they throw their melting skins into the fire
and strutting with the wild turkeys
hand in dry familiar hand
they dance, they dance, they dance.

Melissa Barnes

Melissa Barnes is a former farm girl of Wisconsin, who now resides in Chicago. She is an up-and-coming writer, having recently achieved an M.A. in English from St. Cloud State University. Melissa has held several editing, teaching, and library positions— anything that will allow her to work with words and books! Melissa enjoys playing piano, flying in planes with her very own pilot, and traipsing through the wilderness armed with nothing but her pen, paper, and old-fashioned camera.

Facts

The universe is expanding
The honeybees are disappearing
The moon is shrinking

The day is now 1.26 microseconds shorter
Betelgeuse's light took 640 years to find me
Barn Swallows migrate 6,800 miles each year

Oaks are still the last to send their letters off to the wind
Moss still grows only on the north side
and still I think of you.

David Chorlton

David Chorlton recently had a poem included in the anthology, BIRDS, from the British Museum, won the Ronald Wardall Poetry Prize for his chapbook The Lost River, from Rain Mountain Press, and the Slipstream Chapbook Contest with From the Age of Miracles.

April Storm in the Desert

The paloverdes shade from yellow to green
to rain and away
into the grey where mountains
used to be, where now
the compass points
toward wet and cold.
Drops of water bend

the green and purple grass
alongside the trail that gives
beneath each spongy step
on the way to the clearing with flowers
still coiled inside the bud.
A raven pulls the silence

from inside a cloud
and the quail
on an ocotillo tip
gives a crest to the chill.

Shadow Trail

A fresh trail runs where the old one
disappeared in a tangle
of seasons through spring
to heat and high water in the stream
whose current marked
its passage with debris pointing west.
Through creosote scent
it winds

from desert into shade
and out
from beneath a heron's empty nest in a cottonwood

to where a lizard peels
from a pockmarked rock
among the smooth and marbled
ones greened by time and runoff.
Back upslope

away from the hawk
flying close to his shadow on stone's dry face,
past the darkness
mummified inside a fallen saguaro,
past yellow broom in patches
where the only shade
is in our pockets,
the trail leads

back to its beginnings
in a stand of burnt mesquite
with new growth straining through
the blackened limbs.

David Cravens

David R. Cravens received his undergraduate degree in philosophy at the University of Missouri and his master's degree in English literature from Southeast Missouri State University. He was the recipient of the 2008 *Saint Petersburg Review* Prize in Poetry, and was a finalist for Ohio State University's *The Journal* William Allen Creative Nonfiction Contest. His work has also appeared in *The Houston Literary Review*, *The Monarch Review*, *Journey*, and *Mension*. He's an adjunct Professor of English Studies for Central Methodist University as well as an English Instructor at Mineral Area College. He lives in Farmington Missouri with his dog Tenzing.

Twelvemile Creek

as the sun sets over the Saint Francis River

I bank my canoe near Rockpile Mountain

at the mouth of Twelvemile Creek;

unload my dog, my tent, my gear

and light a parejo cigar

the air hums with a summer ensemble:

katydids, crickets, cicadas, and toads

and I recall that on a prior August

in eighteen sixty-three

Sam Hildebrand camped at this junction

having just emerged from the swamps

where he and his men sought refuge

after a desperate shootout with Federals

the river was full of otters then

and the air with the drumming of grouse;

the piercing scream of panthers

and bear ambled down from ancient forest

to gorge in bygone mussel beds

some hundred years before that

Antoine du Pratz traversed this river

and everyday saw herds of bison

a hundred head or better

dusting for fleas in the plentiful sandbars;

Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, elk

and countless Carolina parakeets;

their brilliant colors flashing in the sun

in seventeen sixty-four

Jean-Bernard Bossu moored his boat

where this river meets the Mississippi

but he could not sleep

for the clamor of swans, cranes, and geese

and the thunderous din of pigeons

eclipsing the sun in flocks stretching miles

but by eighteen nineteen just a few bison

still roamed the Belleview Valley

from which the Saint Francis draws forth;

as most had been harried south

where the river pooled in the swamps

and by eighteen thirty-eight

scarcely left were even these;

but the hills were yet full of wolves

(a pair of their ears bore a two-dollar bounty)

and turkey flocked in such numbers

that when settlers sowed their seed corn

the birds would often devour the kernels

before they could even be covered

not far from Twelvemile Creek

is the only hollow on the Saint Francis River

so ruggedly inaccessible

as to have remained near-unmolested

by the forty-year railroad lumber boom

that raped these hills of their virgin timber

when I discovered this hidden shadowy gorge

I came upon a flooddriven cabin

and found a tarnished coffee can

filled with old Dowagiacs:

wooden lures with flaking paint

and rusty treble-hooks

and in the depths of the Great Depression

when my friend Todd's father was yet a boy

and deer and turkey in this state

were near as extinct as money

he'd bring a lard can of these plugs

down to this riverbottom

and fill a burlap sack with fish

for it was not at all unlikely then

to catch thirty large bass in a day

wading into the amber river

where it calmly pools at the foot of a bluff;

I hold my cigar above the water

and baptize myself in the mythological symbol

for purification, redemption

and according to Jung—the subconscious

what Thales called the core of the universe

unchanging; underlying all change

but Heraclitus said I could not do this twice

I surface with a crayfish in my free hand

David Cravens

arching its back as it snaps at the air;
sun glinting off its wet armor
it's a species found nowhere else on earth;
struggling with extinction
and I begin to believe Heraclitus right
rivers pump life through these valleys and hills
like blood vortexing the body
and our histories are always united with theirs;
for to trace the past is to follow rivers
and their health is a mirrored reflection
of all that of which they sustain
my great-grandmother Huffman
remembered the swamplands
of thousand year-old cypress
when wolves howled from every direction
in answer to sawmill whistles
and she watched these wetlands bled;
told stories of gar the length of boats;
turtles taking three men to carry

and by nineteen thirty-six the Sikeston Standard

called this desecrated wilderness

a newly realized dream

saying the worthless St. Francis swamps

now blossomed as the proverbial rose

bisected by concrete highways

through former beds of lakes and sloughs

and in nineteen fifty-two

when my friend Jim was still a child

he watched the last wolf in Arcadia Valley

paraded through town in the bed of a truck

Hildebrand hailed from Pennsylvania Dutch

and they had a charming proverb:

“we inherit the land not from our ancestors;

we lease it from our children”

and in the seven score years

since he stood by this stream

we’ve swelled from just over a billion

to nearly seven times that much

by subsisting on fossil carbon

David Cravens

and those Pennsylvanians kept birds in their mines

to warn of toxic defilement

and too, this river's a coalmine canary;

and every creature it's nurturing

is a thread in an intricate tapestry

from which only so many strands can be torn

before it unravels completely

Claire Hermann

Claire Hermann lives in Carrboro, N.C., where she advocates for family farmers, waits for her spouse to finish building The Perfect House, spoils eight cats, and complains about missing the desert. Her poems have been published in *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, and *Earth's Daughters*.

Property Record

Four pink flags on four steel stakes
Mark the corners of these two acres,
The borders of what belongs to us.
A clearing, a ravine, a wet-weather spring.
In the grass, we find a broken teacup,
A doll with one arm, a single shoe.

A woman at the end of the street
Was born on this ground.
She waves from her porch as we drive home.
The man across the road played
In these woods as a boy, running from his yard
To the rotting slave cabins behind the ridge.

When the backhoe we hired cuts into the hillside,
The clay peels back in ancient layers,
Red and orange and black,
Threaded with quartz and amethyst,
Our arrival marked by a gash
Through the work of millennia.

At first, things came and went slowly here.
The deep dark of the ocean,
Its curled shells and crawling creatures,
The slow plodding steps of the dinosaurs,
The woolly mammoth, ferns as tall as houses,
The sharp feet of elk and buffalo, the dark pelts of panthers.

These last centuries, things disappeared with dizzying speed.
The bright wings of parakeets lifting into the sky,
The elks' bellow, wolves' howl,
Bark houses, entire languages,
Saxapahaw and Eno and Cherokee,
Nodding flowers of columbine and blue star.

And then faster, replaced and replaced again,

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Leather-soled boots and West African curses,
Log houses, hand-dug wells, stone walls,
Barbed wire, clotheslines, asbestos, Nehi bottles.
The hills are layers of rotted bones.

In the last decade, the foreign feet
Of stiltgrass and silverbell crawl, strange, across the soil.
Coyote and truck. Concrete and bulldozer.
Four-wheelers, honeysuckle, ivy, beer cans.
Now, this road, this house.
Us.

George Korolog

George Korolog is a Senior Vice President of a Fortune 500 technology company in San Jose, California. He loves the outdoors and was a climber and mountaineer for 20 years. He is associated with The Stanford Writer's Workshop at Stanford University and has a Masters Degree in Psychology. His work has appeared in *Willows Wept Review*, *The Right Eyed Deer*, *Symmetry Pebbles*, *The Earth Comes First* and the *Recusant*, among others. He lives in Woodside, California.

Nights in D Major

Curiously, I find myself standing
beneath the effigy of your great
draped mourning, an atheist, invited
to your Sunday service,
without a dime to contribute or the
daring to look up and make eye contact.
The choir of winds pronounces
mass in the space between your
arching branches, waving leisurely
at the stars, alight with joy,
as if to say, alleluia.

I stand beneath you in my bare feet,
a tattered bathrobe covering my many
naked sins and transgressions,
and in this sermon
I bathe in the knowledge that everything
and nothing defies description.
One has to come out from the dream
and stand alone under
the birch tree at 3:00 in the morning,
half naked and slightly crazy
to merely get a passing glimpse.

Somewhere Near Route 50

You've finally given up and left your heart
somewhere in the woods.
You were so distraught, you can't even remember where,
not that it matters.

Perhaps under a fallen log, or up hanging on a branch.
You may have discarded it in a pile of leaves
where a mole has found it and taken it underground

to keep warm, or to lie quietly with the
rhythm of life's reassuring beat.

It may lie in an open field, exposed and raw,
like some lost and hungry stranger
waiting to be found by
a kind wanderer, who upon seeing it,
would understand where to take it.

The torrent of spring rain has not drowned it,
and the cruel summer heat
has not dried it of hope.
It has endured,
craves more
and wants you to bring it home.

Jacqueline Marcus

Jacqueline Marcus' poems have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Ohio Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Journal*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *The Literary Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poetry International*, *Hotel Amerika*, *The Delta Review*, *The American Poetry Journal*, the *Laurel Review*, and recently, the *North American Review* and eight poems were selected for publication in the *North Dakota Quarterly*. Her book of poems, *Close to the Shore*, was published by Michigan State University Press. She taught philosophy at Cuesta College, San Luis Obispo, California, and is the editor of <http://www.ForPoetry.com>.

Editor's Note: Read Marcus' compelling reflection on modern society and environmental policy [A Return to Modesty: Reaping What We've Sown in the Last 30 Years](#) (Leads to a different site)

Amnesia

I watched you from the other side of the shore
as the fog blew a ring around the harbor,

a gold band in shallow light,

a few blue jays came down from the pines
to drink from the dog's water—

the leaves striking the sky like question marks
as if a story had to be told and retold

because it's hard for us to remember
the tales that end on a moral point.

Go ahead and walk away if you must.
Today, it doesn't matter.

The sirens will come and go,

the fires will eventually consume entire forests
like the metaphor of our time,

and the geese will soar to the astral world
if Plato was not dreaming,

sometimes,
in the quiet moments of evening,

when he wrote down his thoughts in the after light.

Big Sur is Burning from Global Warming

I disagree. The bronze-colored sun is not beautiful.
There is nothing beautiful about smoke,
trees, burning, thousands of acres, burning.
So please don't point at the incandescent sun
and say "it's beautiful" as though this were Africa.
There is nothing beautiful about droughts,
or fleeing birds, fleeing deer, the trees collapsing to ash and
flames
or Jeffers, horrified, through the ghostly smoke.

Global Summer

Summer again with its handful of rain and chilled wine.
The sun sadly turns the leaves chestnut brown
and the fog rolls its dark pearls around the slender shoreline.
What large opportunities for the soul's descent.
What a death-trap for the sea-owl and the bitter oaks.
Nothing exists without consummation, light, spilling through the
pines.
What fills the land or the lake's enormous promise
more than this evening's grass, fire and grass,
the fields neatly ploughed, the crows, rowing their boats
to the sound of lost details.
These questions are settled from where they stand,
a handful of rain, a sip of wine.
They want you to believe it's all fiction:
nature's story—defiled

Ken Sieben

Since 1988, one hundred twelve of Ken Sieben's stories have appeared in a variety of literary magazines, including *Pig Iron*, *Words of Wisdom*, *The Crucible*, *AIM*, *Skylark*, and *Sensations Magazine*. One of his stories was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1997. Ken's first novel, Joanie M, was published in 2007 and is now available as a Kindle book on Amazon.com. His second, Idyll of the Kings, is scheduled for publication as an e-book in the summer of 2011. Ken served as fiction editor of *Northwoods Journal* from 1993 to 2002.

Nesting

I can hear a vehicle coming up the long gravel driveway, but I can't see it because I'm sitting in my rocker by the east window watching a cardinal build a nest. This is my slow season—not enough snow for skiing but the trails are too muddy for hiking and mountain biking. I'm not expecting any hostellers till April. Whatever it is doesn't seem noisy enough to be a delivery truck. Damn, I hope it's not that greedy real estate developer again.

When the bell buzzes, I shout, "It's open, come on in." I can't see the front hall either from this spot, but I hear the weather-stripping drag across the flagstone entry as the door opens and shuts. "I'm in the office," I add.

I guess I'm as surprised to see Trudy Darby, who's never been to my home, as she is to see my unmade bed and me with a bandage around my head, a cane between my knees, and a pair of binoculars in my hands. My surprise suddenly turns to guilt as it dawns on me why she's here.

"Are you okay, Fred?" she asks. "You haven't come for dinner all week, and you didn't answer the phone. We were worried you might have fallen or something." Trudy and her husband Jake run a seafood market/restaurant downtown where I eat dinner four or five times a week. Of course they would worry.

"Sorry about that," I say, motioning toward the straight-backed chair next to the desk. She lifts it with her powerful right hand, swings it opposite me, drapes her coat over the back, and sits down. "I did take a fall, Trudy," I confess. "Fortunately, I landed on my thick head and didn't do much damage. Twisted my knees a little so it's hard to walk, but I'll be on my feet in a few more days." I'm glad she didn't drop by on Monday morning because my head was pretty bloody. So was my pillow.

“You should have called us, Fred. When did it happen?”

“Sunday afternoon, just before sunset.”

“And today’s Thursday. You’ve been all alone here four nights. I want to know exactly what happened.” She hasn’t looked this upset since Junior’s funeral. The creases on her forehead are deeper and her normally pink skin is almost white.

“I was cleaning a gutter,” I tell her. “Remember, it rained all day and one of the downspouts was blocked. Water was pouring over the edge. The temperature was dropping fast, and I knew the run-off would reach the front steps soon and freeze overnight.”

“So you went out in the rain and climbed up a ladder! Fred, don’t you realize you’re too old to be doing stuff like that?”

“Hey, kid, I’ve been climbing ladders all my life, and this was the first time I ever fell.”

“Which proves my point, doesn’t it?”

“No, it proves my mind’s failing, not my body. I forgot to put bricks on the ground and one ladder leg sank into the mud as I was stretching for the last bunch of leaves. Besides,” I add in self-defense, “I waited till the rain stopped.”

“You should have called 911 right away.”

“No bones were broken. I got myself up, put the ladder away, and came inside. I taped an old scarf around my head, tossed my muddy clothes in the washer, and put on this sweat-suit. Then I heated up some of that bottled clam chowder you gave me, drank a glass of brandy, and went to bed. When I woke up in the middle of the night, my knees were so stiff I almost fell again. Lucky I remembered to hang my cane over the headboard. I’m not off the deep end yet.”

“Fred, what are we gonna do with you?” She’s shaking her head at me like my mother used to do when I was a naughty boy, and I can tell she’s really concerned. It was thoughtless of me not to call to at least let her know I wouldn’t be in for a few days.

“Why didn’t you answer the phone?” she asks, refusing to let me be. “I tried three times.”

“I was afraid someone might call for a weekend reservation, and I knew I wouldn’t be up to it. So I turned the sound all the way down and tied two pillows around the phone.”

“Why not just pull the plug?”

“Couldn’t bend down far enough.” I thought I was being logical.

“Have you been eating properly? You look too thin.” Sounds just like my mother after I got married.

“I’ve always been a skinny guy, Trudy, you know that. But thanks to you I’ve had plenty to eat: clam chowder, lobster bisque, and oyster stew. Of course, I’d rather sit at a table with you, but I just couldn’t walk that far. I hope to join you again on Saturday or Sunday.” She and Jake and, of course, Junior are the children Irene—God rest her soul—and I never had. I should have called right after I fell. I’ve lived alone so long that I forget how to treat my loved ones. Maybe I am going senile.”

“And what have you been doing to keep your mind occupied—or are you just feeling sorry for yourself?”

“That’s a tough way to ask a serious question, but you deserve an answer, Trudy. When I woke up Monday morning, I couldn’t help but wonder how long I’ll be able to keep up the hostel. I’ve always taken things one day at a time, so I decided I couldn’t handle any guests this weekend. That’s when I silenced the phone.”

“You should have called us first, Fred,” Trudy interrupts.

“I know, but I wasn’t thinking clearly. I’m sorry I caused you and Jake to worry. But it’s true, I’m getting old. I’ll be seventy-eight next December, and I’ve been laying in bed and sitting in this chair for four days now trying to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. You know I started digging clams with my father when I was twelve. When the state closed down the beds in ’52, I found work as a carpenter and did that till I retired twelve years ago. We had always planned to travel, but then Irene died and I didn’t want to go anywhere by myself. We had read about kids traveling cheap by staying in hostels where they could rent a bed and use of the kitchen, and the idea of opening a youth hostel popped into my mind one day. This place has kept me active. If I sell it, I don’t know what else to do. I mean, I went from being a school kid to digging clams to building houses to running a youth hostel. What’s left?”

“Can’t you just relax and take it easy?”

“Could you sell your business and stop working? I’m sure it’s worth enough to support you for the rest of your life, but what would you do every day?”

“Play with my grandchildren more often. I hardly ever see them because of the long hours I put in. There are days when I’d just like to sell the Mermaid to the highest bidder.”

“Now I’m really gonna sound like I’m feeling sorry for myself. I don’t have any grandchildren to visit. When I die, there’s nobody to leave my things to.” I feel as if I’m going to start sobbing, so I pick up the binoculars and look for the cardinal till I can get my voice under control.

Trudy is gracious enough to understand what’s happening—like my mother again—and waits a few minutes before asking, “Do you see any birds in the woods?”

“Yes,” I answer. “Tuesday morning I spotted a cardinal building a nest. She worked on it all day and again yesterday, and she’s still busy. Here, take a look.” I hand Trudy the binoculars and point toward the nest. “See that big holly tree?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s a stand of mountain laurel just to the left. The nest is near the top of the one closest to the holly.”

Trudy studies the scene for a few moments, then says, “I see a bird flying, but I thought cardinals were red.”

“Only the males. The females are tan with a reddish tinge on their heads and tails. The females build the nests.”

“She’s carrying some little twigs or something in her beak.”

“They’re for the nest. Follow her flight. Sometimes she’ll land on a couple different trees to make sure the one with the nest is still safe.”

“Oh, she just landed in the nest. Now she’s fussing with the twigs. Now she’s off—for more, I guess, You know, the nest is bigger than I thought it would be.”

“Cardinals usually lay three or four eggs at a time. Each one is about an inch long, so she needs room for herself, her mate, and the eggs.”

“Where is he now while she’s doing all the work?”

“If you listen carefully, you can hear three or four males calling, trying to attract her. Since this will be her first brood of the year, she probably hasn’t selected a mate yet. Or, if this is her second season, maybe she’s waiting for last year’s mate to come back. When the nest is ready, and she sees and hears the mate she wants, she’ll call back to him. They’ll do their thing and

wait for the eggs to hatch. She'll sit on them for eleven or twelve days while the male finds food and brings it to the nest to feed her."

"Just like people."

"In some ways, yes. Unlike most birds, cardinals mate for life—at least for a year, which is the normal life span. Once the eggs hatch, the male feeds them all for a few days. Then the female flies off in search of another spot for her next nest while the male continues feeding the fledglings."

"For how long?"

"Usually nine or ten days. The female comes back to check on them from time to time. They'll be ready to fly off on their own in about three weeks."

Trudy passes the binoculars back, gives me a puzzled look, and asks, "How do you know all this, Fred? I can't tell a sparrow from a robin, and you've never mentioned any interest in birds."

"Well, it was a private thing. Irene loved to look for birds, but I never went with her on her bird walks. Years ago she joined the Audubon Society and saved every single issue of their magazine. After she died I guess I couldn't bring myself to toss them out. Instead, I started reading them. Since I've been living here, I've spotted several hundred different species. This is the first time I've been lucky enough to watch a nest under construction. I'm looking forward to seeing the next stages in their life cycle."

Trudy stands up and starts to put her coat on. "Well, I can see you're too stubborn to let me drive you to the hospital, but I'll stop by tonight to make sure you're still okay."

"You don't have to do that, Trudy. I'm fine by myself."

“I won’t be able to sleep if I don’t tuck you in.”

###

True to her word as I knew she’d be, Trudy pulls up the driveway at nine-thirty, opens my front door an inch or two, and announces her presence. This afternoon, I managed to make my bed, air out my room, wash myself, and put on a clean sweatsuit. But I’ve been waiting for her in the common room, seated at the end of the table facing the door. I’m sipping a glass of wine and set two extra glasses out in case Jake came with her. “Evening, Trudy,” I say, glad to see her again.

“Good evening to you, too, Fred.” She examines me up close and adds, “Your face has a little more color.”

“I feel better. I told you, I just need some rest.”

She takes off her coat and sits down next to me as I pour a glass of her favorite Pinot Blanc. She takes a sip, then asks, “How’s lady cardinal’s nest coming along?”

“Looks like she’s finished. I heard her calling her mate late this afternoon. He called back and sounded happy. He’ll join her as soon as he chases away his former rivals.”

“Well, since you made it all the way from your bird-watching rocker to the far end of this huge table, I guess your knees haven’t got any worse.”

“They’re not as stiff as this morning. Much better, in fact.” Well, maybe a little better.

“You know, I’ve never seen a table this long.”

“I’ve got fourteen beds for rent, so I need a table long enough for seven chairs on each side. I built it myself.”

“Are all fourteen seats usually taken?”

“Not so often anymore,” I tell her, “maybe three or four weekends a year. I discontinued my listing in the American Youth Hostel Handbook five years ago because I was having to turn away too many people. Most of my guests are repeaters, you know, scout troops who come back every summer and winter, biking clubs, ski clubs. The membership keeps changing, so I keep meeting new people. There’s one Explorer post that’s been coming twice a year since I opened. One of the kids who was thirteen on his first stay that year plans to take over as Advisor when he finishes his B.A. in June. There was another girl scout leader from north Jersey who had four daughters in her troop and stayed on for at least three years after the last went off to college. She and her husband still come for a week every summer. It’s their vacation at the shore. In the morning, they ride one of the park trails, then head down the hill to Sandy Hook. They picnic on the beach, swim in the ocean, and pedal back up in time for dinner. They love it.”

Trudy takes a sip of wine and smiles. “Aren’t they kind of old to stay in a youth hostel?”

“Sometimes I bend the rules for people I like.”

“You know, Fred,” she says, “I thought about your situation all day and—hope you don’t mind—asked Jake what he thought and, later, Ma Morgan when she stopped by for her daily chat.”

I shake my head and say, “No problem. I respect Jake a lot. He’s a good thinker. And Ma was a second mother to me when I was a kid. She must be in her nineties by now.”

“Ninety-four, and in amazingly good health. She thinks you should sell the hostel and move into a boarding house in town. That’s what she did when she retired. She says she enjoys the company at meals—much better than living by herself in a big house. Doris and Dylan are both nearby, so they bring the kids to visit with her or drive her to their homes.”

“And Jake?”

“Jake says you should sell and move into an assisted-living facility. They’re expensive, but you could afford to live in luxury with the money he claims this property’s worth. He says a developer would give you a quarter million dollars, knock the building down, then put up a megamansion and sell it for twice that.”

I have to laugh, but it’s not funny. In fact, it’s a real sore point with me. Jake’s got the right idea, but his figures are way off. “Tell him I was offered three hundred thousand two years ago, four hundred last year, and a half million a few weeks ago. But it would break my heart to see it bulldozed. Besides, what would I do with a half million bucks? I’ve always intended to leave the house and property to the county to become part of Antler Woods Park. They could use it for special programs or group meetings and link it to their trail system. And I just don’t think I’m feeble enough for assisted living. Maybe someday, but not yet.” Trudy looks up and I can see the wheels in her mind start to spin, so I take another sip of wine. Then she presses her lips together and looks back at me. “What do you think I should do, Trudy?” I ask. I really admire this woman—she’s worked so hard, raised two great kids, and been a fine wife to two husbands.

“Well, I came here agreeing with Ma about the boarding house. She retired as retail manager when she turned seventy-five, but continued working part-time for ten more years. You could do that, too, if you wanted. I could always use an extra person around the middle of the day. Or, I realized on the way over, you’d be a valuable part-time clerk in the hardware store or the bait-and-tackle shop. You’re good with people, you have so much experience, and it would give you something useful to do with your time without having to take responsibility for the whole business like you do here.”

“It sounds pretty logical, Trudy. I think I’d enjoy working behind a counter a few hours every day, but I don’t think I’d be happy living in a boarding house. I doubt I could leave the woods after all these years. I mean, who would feed the birds? I just don’t know.”

“I kind of thought you’d say that, Fred, so I put together a back-up plan. If you want to stay here and keep the hostel going, you’ve got to hire help. You need a full-time housekeeper to take care of laundry, cleaning, and cooking, plus a part-time handyman for maintenance. You just can’t do it all by yourself anymore, and you know it.”

“I don’t know it yet but I’m thinking about it. What I’d like to do is have a plan to put into action on the day I know.”

“Then listen to my next idea. It came to me just now when you were telling me about your repeat hostellers.” She hesitates a few moments to make me pay attention. I hope it’s good. “Maybe one of them would buy the place from you. You could give them a break on the price or offer a big back-mortgage in return for letting you stay here for life. There’s enough space on the first floor to build a separate room for the new owner. What do you think of that?”

“I’m not sure I could find a buyer willing to take on responsibility for a strange old geezer.”

“But you’re not a stranger to these people. You’ve been having conversations and sharing meals with them for years. You said you don’t need that much money and you want to keep the hostel going. At least think about it, Fred. Promise me that?”

“Okay, Trudy, I’ll think about everything you’ve said tonight. I really appreciate your understanding. Please pass that on to Jake and Ma Morgan.”

“If you’re feeling up to it tomorrow, would you go through your files and make a list of all the repeaters who might be

interested. Then, if you want, I'll help you write a letter that proposes an arrangement."

"I'll work on it, but I think it's a long shot."

"At least we can find out if there's any interest. And I have one more request. If you'd rather eat at the Mermaid with me tomorrow, unwrap your phone and give me a call in the afternoon. I'll send someone to pick you up and drive you back."

###

The dishwasher who drove me to the Mermaid told me Trudy said I could eat in the kitchen, but I chose to hobble up the single flight of stairs to my usual table in the dining room. When Trudy joins me a few minutes later, the waitress has already brought my water and bread. "Trying to prove you're still macho, Fred?" she asks. From the tone of her voice, I can't tell if she's angry or impressed. I'm not sure which she should be.

"Trying to exercise my knees," I answer, then tell her the real reason. "I can eat in the kitchen at home. Here I like the view. The sun will drop over the hill behind us in another hour, but look at the beautiful light it reflects off the clouds and the bay. As the sky gets darker, the lights from the boats and buoys and New York City will get brighter. When I was digging clams and framing houses, I used to hate the winter and standard time because quitting earlier meant less income. But since I've had the hostel, I've come to appreciate the seasonal changes more."

"So you won't be moving to Florida."

"Never."

Trudy pours our wine and sits down opposite me. I should mention that the Mermaid doesn't have a liquor license and the waitresses are mostly high school kids, so the wine is a personal favor which I've come to like over the years. When Trudy pours a third glass and says, "Jake's joining us for a few

minutes,” I get the feeling that we’re about to have an important conversation. I’ve never known them to both be out of the kitchen at the same time.

I hear someone coming up the stairs behind us, and I know it’s not the skinny little waitress. “Evening, Fred,” I hear Jake’s booming voice call. “Heard you’ve been under the weather lately.”

“You won’t mind if I don’t get up,” I answer, extending my hand in greeting.

“I won’t even answer that,” he says, shaking my hand and taking his seat. “Glad you could make it in tonight. Trudy depends on your reaction to her daily specials. If you don’t like the way something’s done, she’ll do it different when folks begin showing up for dinner.”

“I don’t remember ever not liking what she cooks.” That’s the truth.

“Well, I guess she just wants your approval, then, Fred.”

Trudy waves her hands and says, “Let’s get right to the point, Jake, because you’re needed back in the kitchen. Fred, we have an offer for you, and I asked Jake to explain it so you don’t think I made it up. Actually, it was Jake’s idea, but once he suggested it, I realized it might be an all-around solution. Tell him, Jake.”

“Fred,” Jake begins, “Trudy told me you’d like to find someone to buy you out and keep running the hostel with you still living there to give advice.”

“It was her idea and it sounded good to me, but I told her I thought it was a long shot. I did what she asked, though, and put together a list of long-term repeaters. Here it is.” I hand Trudy the list I put together today. “It includes the two I mentioned last night, plus fifteen others.”

“Thanks, Fred,” she answers. “If you went to all that trouble, you must think it’s a good idea.”

“I do.”

“Well,” Jake says, raising his wine glass, “I proposed to Trudy that we take over. She’s been running the Mermaid since she was seventeen, and she’s tired. She doesn’t complain much, but I can tell. The hours are getting to her. Me, too, but it has to be her decision. When I get tired of the smelly kitchen, I can always work a day or two with Steve Wellman building docks, or as mate on one of the party boats. Trudy’s here thirteen-fourteen hours a day, six days a week, and spends most Mondays doing paperwork. I suggested she might be ready for a complete change, and she didn’t hesitate to agree. Now we want to know what you think.”

“I’m surprised, maybe flabbergasted. It would be great for me, but I’m not certain it would be a good move for you. Think of all the years you put in building the reputation the Mermaid has.”

Trudy smiles and says, “I’m proud of what Gerry and I did getting the market started, and of what I did by myself—adding the take-out business, and of what Jake and I did by opening the restaurant, but I feel myself starting to burn out. Believe me, Fred, I’m ready to move on to something new.” She gets up and walks to the service counter, presses a button, and returns.

Jake finishes his wine and says, “Back to the kitchen for me, Fred. You and Trudy can work out the details. Whatever you come up with is fine with me.” He stands up to leave just as the waitress arrives with my dinner.

“So, what are your lucky diners eating tonight?” I ask, as a steaming plate is set before me. I see a big mound of yellow rice, peas, and some red bits that might be tomatoes or peppers,

covered by shrimp, clams, mussels, pieces of chicken, and some kind of red sausage slices. “Well, it certainly smells delicious. Does it have a name?”

“Paella. It’s a common Spanish/Portuguese dish with lots of variations. I just hired a cook who used to work in the Iberian restaurant over in Riverton that went out of business last month. I’m hoping to attract some of their regulars. We’ve been trying a different dish every night this week to see what people like.”

Damn, I can be thoughtless. “So you’ve been extra busy this week besides worrying about me.”

Trudy shakes her head and says, “Go ahead and dig in while I keep talking.”

“Everything looks so good, I’m not sure where to begin.” I take a forkful of rice into my mouth. “Mmm, that’s moist and tasty.”

“Saffron gives it a distinctive taste. It permeates the whole dish.”

Next I bite into a slice of sausage. “It’s chewy but has a flavor I’ve never tasted—sharp and hammy.”

“That’s real chorizo, imported from Spain.”

“I like it. I’m not sure I could eat a whole chorizo sandwich, but it tastes great with this combination. How do you keep coming up with new ideas?”

“You know, we always have to keep trying different things out and I have to pay close attention to the reaction. I was busy as hell this past week, but if it hadn’t been you to be concerned about, it would have been something or someone else. Doris and Dylan are struggling more than they let on, and I wish I could help them out more with their kids. That’s the main reason I want out of the business. Running the hostel would give me a lot

more free time, and, of course, I could still cook for the guests who don't want to spend their own time cooking."

I have to finish chewing a shrimp before I can respond. "But you won't make anywhere near as much money. You'd need to go over the finances pretty thoroughly before making a final decision." Now it's time for a clam and then a mussel.

"Do you remember Joyce Hawkins who used to run The Admiral Benbow on the other end of Bay Street?"

"Yes, Irene liked to eat there on our anniversary every year. Joyce always greeted us. Of course, I knew her as little Joyce Benbow when she was a girl helping her father and mother serve fish-and-chips."

"She certainly created a top-notch restaurant."

"I thought it was kind of pricey, but the food was excellent. Not that it was any better than yours."

"But much fancier with a lot more variety, and those side dishes she dreamed up were mind-boggling to me. Anyway, we served different clienteles, so we were friends more than competitors. Five years ago, she got to the point where I am now, and she did a very smart thing."

"What was that?"

"She sold to her four chefs who became partners. None of them could have afforded their own place by themselves, and even buying together would have been too expensive without Joyce's help."

I start to gulp down another clam so I can ask the obvious, but Trudy motions me to slow down and eat properly. I can see that she's sort of putting together a whole bunch of thoughts and trying to explain to herself as much as to me.

“But Joyce offered them a great deal. It was what I was thinking of when I suggested yesterday that you should give a buyer back as big a mortgage as they need. If I did the same thing, I’d have a steady monthly income for fifteen or twenty years.”

I keep eating until she adds, “Or, I might sell the market to my retail manager and the restaurant to my line cooks, keep the building myself, and collect two rents every month.”

The chicken leg has cooled down enough for me to pick it up in my fingers, which is how I like to eat it.

“The Admiral Benbow kept both its quality and reputation because of the partnership of its former employees. They know they can count on each other.”

Another pause before she continues.

“I’ve had a few pretty generous offers recently, but I’d hate to sell to a stranger and watch the place go down the tubes, you know what I mean?”

By the time she’s said all that, I’ve eaten about a third of what’s on the plate. I know I’ll need a doggie-bag for my lunch tomorrow. I wipe my hands and take another sip of wine, then give my answer. “Like I said yesterday, Trudy, I don’t need much money to live on, so you can pay me whatever you can every month. You talk to your staff and see how they feel and what they can afford. Then we can sleep on it over the weekend and on Monday put something in writing and send it to our lawyers.” I eat another shrimp with some of that delicious saffron rice and observe that Trudy looks as relieved as I feel. I guess she really was getting tired. I add, “You know, Trudy, there’s no rush. You take as long as you need to work out a deal with your people. I understand what you said about wanting the Mermaid to keep its reputation. That’s probably why I couldn’t stand to see my place knocked down. I worked too hard to make it what

Ken Sieben

it is. I know I'll sleep happily tonight because it will be in good hands after I'm gone."

"You've got a lot of years ahead of you, Fred, especially since Jake will be climbing the ladders from now on."

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March 19, 2006

Dear hostelers,

I am taking the liberty to send this letter to seventeen people who have stayed at the Antler Woods Youth Hostel at least ten times since it opened in 1997.

I regret to inform you that Fred Wilmont died yesterday, but I am pleased to assure you that he died peacefully. He had no known living relatives. I've known Fred for thirty-six years. He was my late first husband's Godfather, my dearest friend, and a wonderful friend to my present husband, Jake.

When Fred didn't come to our restaurant for dinner three nights in a row, we grew concerned. I tried telephoning him, but there was no answer. Worried sick, I stopped in on Thursday morning and he told me he had fallen off a ladder last Sunday, cutting his head and injuring his knees. Naturally, I wanted to take him to the hospital, but he refused. So we talked and he admitted he couldn't keep the place going much longer and had decided to leave it in his will to the county to become part of the adjacent park, rather than sell it as a tear-down.

On Sunday I found him dead in his rocker, binoculars in his hands. For the last few days, he had been observing a cardinal building her first nest of the season and was probably looking to see if there were any eggs yet.

The official cause of death was heart failure.

EarthSpeak Magazine

If you're ever in the area and want to talk about Fred, feel free to stop at the Mermaid for a meal on the house. I'd love to meet each of you because you brought so much pleasure to Fred's last nine years.

May he rest in peace.

Sincerely,

Gertrude Hogarth Morgan Darby

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March 22, 2006

Dear hostellers,

I feel obligated to keep you informed of an unexpected development. I received a call yesterday from Fred Wilmont's attorney and met with him this afternoon. On the day before he died, Fred wrote up a change in his will, leaving the hostel to Jake and me. He called the Park Headquarters and asked for a ranger to witness his signature, then mailed it. The attorney informed me that it's perfectly legal and promised to expedite probate. We should be officially open by June 1, but we will honor all reservations between now and then.

I thought you'd also like to know that the female cardinal is presently incubating four eggs. According to Fred, four rather than three means she chose a strong mate.

Sincerely,

Trudy Darby

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.

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.