

EarthSpeak Magazine



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Taken at Home #27 by Eleanore Leonne Bennett

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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. Since retiring from teaching nonverbal children how to communicate, she has been spending more time attempting to communicate through poetry. Her poems have appeared in a number of print and online journals and may also be found online at <http://grassminstrel.blogspot.com/>. She enjoys hiking in the southern Appalachians, making fabric art, and acting as a volunteer docent at the local natural science center, furthering a life-long interest in human relationships with the natural world.

At the Anatomy Exhibit

Inside the glass case
lie the organs of generation,
snipped from their bodily home
and displaying all their secret harmonies
of form. Few people lift their eyes
to the woodcut on the wall above—
the man and the woman turned away
from each other, their naked bodies
beautiful, their eyes downcast in faces
gentled by infinite sorrow.

They do not know the source
of their grief. It does not lie in nakedness—
neither the nakedness of flesh the woman hides
with the modest cup of her hand,
nor the nakedness of the skull the man clasps
outstretched in his. They share this nakedness
with bird and leaf and stone, who do not grieve
as they do. But the man and the woman
believe themselves the hub
of concentric wheels of fire lit for their sake alone,

and when they lie down in moonlight,
in the net of stars that has no hub,
they fail to see their own flesh reflected
in every node and facet—the water's gleam;
half-hidden glimmers in the grass;
green eyeshine at the edge of time.

Inside the next case, a human heart
stands alone, all connections severed
but for the many faces reflected in the glass.

The Neighbor

*“The most we can say is that
the world is lila, God’s play”*

—Huston Smith

The neighbor-lady’s mad.
They say her name is Lila,
but she always speaks in tongues.
Some days it’s beetles
that come flying off her tongue—
that tongue gray-green and curling
like the fiddlehead of a fern.
They put me in mind of Granny’s jewels
I pawned so long ago, them beetles,
the shine of their hard wings
so many colors in the lamplight.
They rattle loud as hail against the windowpane.
Other times she speaks nothing
but starfish and the house smells
of salt. They scuttle over the sandy floor
and under them wide blue skirts she always wears.
I don’t mind the butterflies—some purple,
and some with wings clear as glass—
but other days her tongue’s like pink elastic
and shoots out teeny frogs bright as sunrise,
only louder. I never know
what she’ll be speaking next—
snakes or peacocks or some great beast
with tawny shoulders and a wild green eye.
It ain’t natural. So I says to her,
I’m moving back to town—
I got to get away from the everlasting
clatter of your tongue. She just throws
back her head and laughs

birds.

Zachary Fishel

Zach Fishel, a recent pushcart nominee, is currently working on his M.A. in literature at the Univ. of Toledo. He is the poetry editor of *Literary Lunchbox* and his work has appeared in *The Legendary*, *Mad Swirl*, *The Driftwood Review*, *Yes, Poetry*, *Amphibi*, and several others. He misses the sounds of deer snorting, not bottles breaking outside his urban apartment.

Black Water Seen

The bass sucked the bait under
punching the surface like ears pierced
old school with the corks.
The implosion,
Volcanic below the surface
and a tear of limb as I strained the line,
stretching it like flash forwarding photographs of your child
growing,
and he leaps,
emerald and onyx.
Cradled in my thumb as he shakes
grating the soft fleshy curve connected to the hand,
taking a piece of me with him when he goes back to the waters.
A place I wouldn't otherwise ever know.

North of the Mason Dixon, Heart in Oak Barrels

That's my plan.

Get good at picking a mandolin
and fixing homemade wine.
Rolling cheap cigarettes until I die,
I laugh at sunrise and take shots at sunset.
Overalls and boots
are my only dress attire.
I spent time in the steamed up
over gassed industrious cities of America.
I put in overtime at bottle shops and grenade factories,
thinking about every kid I'll kill post assembly.
Fought gridlocks and traffic
because a superhero was filming his movie in downtown.
I want to go back
to the yowling fiddles in a backwoods dive where only locals go.
Beer comes with a whiskey back no asking needed,

Zachary Fishel

and bikers sit next to farmers
bitching about the weather.
Jukeboxes wheeze tired songs about women,
cocaine, and freighters.
I want to work muscle and bone while listening for the gravel
turning when
my lover gets home.
After all the things I've seen
I miss the taste of dirt in my mouth,
my hands callused,
building like ant hills in August heat.
Take me back to moonshine nights and wagon wheels.
Where I should have always been
all along.

Arlene L. Mandell

Arlene L. Mandell is a retired English professor from NJ who now lives in Santa Rosa, CA. Her work has appeared in more than 350 literary journals and 17 anthologies.

Snoopy's Philosophy

Determined to be productive this damp autumn morning, I turn on the studio heater to dispel the chill, stare through the glass doors into the woods as leaves sift down. My work table is piled with torn tissue paper, ribbons, feathers, string, all layered with abandoned sketches.

In the mix, a vintage Peanuts' cartoon:

Snoopy's being scolded by Lucy: Anyone who would sit and watch leaves fall off a tree must be pretty stupid, she tells him.

I'm happy, he says, smiling.

I spin in my chair, admire the slanting sunlight, mix iridescent gold with magenta into a lustrous burgundy and make the first bold stroke.

Note: The poet lives in Santa Rosa, CA, where the Charles Schulz Museum is located and visits often for inspiration.

Andrew Morris

Andrew Morris lives in the Catskill Mountains of New York where he teaches high school English and history. Recently, two of his short fiction pieces were selected as finalists in NPR's Three-Minute Fiction Contest. His work is forthcoming in *Otis Nebula* and *NAP Literary Magazine*. He's also a member of the Advanced Poetry Workshop at Bright Hill Press in Treadwell, NY.

Desert Tanka

There is great commotion in my bowels.
The poetry was rancid.
This morning, I walked fifteen miles
Through the desert
To shit it out.

The Human Experience

Virga is not
vertical trails of rain
attached to the under surface of accessory clouds
that evaporate before hitting the ground
due to the dry air near the earth's surface,
but cloud blood.
God's long face.
A wet rope the crows use to hang themselves.
The ragged hem of a cloud deity's dress.
A peep show for the parched plants.
A cloud turned agonizingly inward.
My snapped tether.
.....
All afternoon those billows let down their stifled tresses.
We sat desert-throated on the hot stones
backs to one another
mouths open to that spurious rain.
So sweet a love on our tongues,
rotting there
amidst that dry deluge,
in that land of immense grief,
where nothing touches.

Russell Reece

Russell Reece has had stories and essays published in *Memoir(and)*, *Delaware Beach Life*, *Delmarva Quarterly*, *Raving Dove*, *Sliver of Stone* and other on-line and print journals. Russ is a University of Delaware alumnus and a board member of the Delaware Literary Connection. He lives in Bethel, Delaware along the beautiful Broad Creek in rural Sussex County and is currently working on a novella set in that area.

Familiar and Ordinary Things

Last night I dreamed about you again. You were sitting next to me on the bed, leaned forward and brushed back my hair. But then I awoke and you were gone, and my heart flooded bittersweet.

I rolled over and thought of the October day in Canada at the wilderness lake in Algonquin Park. We had been hiking and were resting on a sandstone outcrop covered with moss and lichen. On the far shore autumn yellows, reds and greens dripped down into the lake in dappled puddles tinged with the blue and white of the blustery sky. The sun warmed our faces and a cool Canadian breeze washed over us. We sat there, emotions brimming, our hearts and souls entwined with the perfect beauty of the place. It was always like that when we were together.

And now it's morning and I'm on Broad Creek, a mile from the dock, past the adjacent farms and houses and into a wild, windswept area of cypress and pine. A sweet fragrance floats in the air as the narrow hull of my kayak cuts through scatterings of autumn leaves resting on the glassy surface. They turn slowly in the lingering whirlpools of my paddle strokes.

The great Thomas Edison theorized that irreducible particles of life-charged matter, which he called swarms, subsisted after a person's death and could never be destroyed. I might have once scoffed at the notion, but now, it gives me comfort.

A heron leaps from the shallows and sounds a chorus of prehistoric squawks as he glides upriver and disappears around the bend. Turtles splash into the creek from perches on old logs. I slip into a backwater clogged with spatterdock, arum and wild rice, and head for the opening of a small tributary. Waxy leaves scrape against the hull and dragonflies lift and hover around me as I push through thick vegetation. A minute later I raise a drooping branch and enter an open stream. I can touch each bank with my paddle and outstretched arm, but the water is deep and

meanders another mile through tangled woods and wetlands. It's a wild place, insulated from the noise and incongruities of people; a place I know you would have loved.

Amidst the chatter of red-winged blackbirds and yellow leaves pin-wheeling down I start up stream. The canopy closes overhead and a drip of cool water runs down the paddle and soaks my shirt.

That damp winter day at Bombay Hook when we walked the three-mile loop around the salt-pond, moisture collected on our hooded jackets and streamed off the waterproof fabric in tiny rivulets. The din of squawks and murmurs from a large flock of snow-geese resting on the far side mingled with the sounds of our footsteps on the gravel path. We stopped to take in the view. Through binoculars nondescript white specs became placid couples or individual birds preening and feeding in the muddy water. And then, for no apparent reason, the din grew louder, the white specs trembled and the flock rose from the surface. We hadn't realized how many there were. Geese came up from everywhere, from the far tree-line a quarter-mile across the water, from closer sections of the pond hidden behind mud islands and marsh grass. Thousands floated into the sky filling our field of vision. You grabbed my arm. I was overcome with a sense of soaring elation, as if I'd become a part of something big and powerful. I knew you had been taken as well.

The flock began to gain altitude and slowly move away. I put my arm around your shoulders and you leaned against me. It would be nice to think, in your last moments, you might have closed your eyes and recalled how it was that day. For me, there's not been anything that could match it.

A sudden boil on the surface moves nearby lily pads as a stalking pickerel rockets into deep water. Further on, the shoreline vegetation grows thick and hangs over the stream. I rest the paddle across the gunnels and the boat drifts toward twenty or more small hickories entwined at the waters edge. In the spaces between the trunks are windowed views into the forest, of ferns,

silver branches and fallen logs covered with moss. Columns of sunlight stream through highlighting the area in an ethereal glow.

The scene is mirrored in the still water and I am drawn to the reflection, amazed at how everything is so clear: the rich colors, the glimmering beams of light. And then a snowy egret drifts through the woods, its brilliant white feathers an otherworldly glow as it flies low over the ferns and logs covered with moss. I catch my breath and for a moment, I am trapped somewhere between reality and its reflected image. It's as if I'm with Alice paused before the looking glass. But it's not Alice I'm with ...it's you.

We watch the egret lift its wings and step lightly into a shallow pool. It ruffles then smooths its feathers and begins a graceful stalk. I close my eyes, joyously immersed once again in your infectious sense of wonder. And I thank God for your continued presence in my life and for the magic in these otherwise familiar and ordinary things.

Later, I ease the paddle into the water and the kayak moves forward. Turtles watch from a log. Crows caw in the distance.

Lyme Ticks and Ladybugs

For nine to ten months each year the male bowerbirds of New Guinea work on their bowers. The style of the bower depends on the species. “Maypole” builders place hundreds of sticks around a sapling, winding up with a great mushroom-shaped structure. Other birds create “avenue” bowers, vertical rows of twigs imbedded in the earth between a narrow passageway. After construction, some of the more fastidious males will use their sharp beaks to paint the inside walls with plant juices. Finally, the birds begin to decorate, using whatever strikes their fancy: hunks of moss, red berries, silver snail shells, golden leaves, flowers, feathers, stones. Their whimsy extends even to manmade items: discarded batteries, toothbrushes, coins, nails, rifle shells, pieces of glass, strips of cellophane. Color is important. Some bowerbirds favor blue tones, while others prefer white or orange. Work is never quite finished; the birds spend weeks rearranging their treasures and adding to the plunder—stealing from one another is a common practice.

And the purpose of these sylvan palaces? It’s the same old story: seduction. Year after year these indefatigable birds give everything they’ve got for the chance to spend a few glorious seconds on the back of a female. Rich in suitors, the female bowerbird flies from one endeavor to another, assessing and rejecting, till she finally lands on the threshold of the bower she likes best. Sometimes she obliges the waiting male right away; other times she requires coaxing and the frenzied male will offer her gifts, a blue paperclip, an orange leaf. If these fail him, he will strut back and forth, extending his wings and chattering loudly so that she can see what a superb specimen he is. Many females end up selecting the same male and returning to him the next year, paring the chances for the other males whose efforts are nonetheless worthy.

So what becomes of all the bowers that don’t make the cut? Do they fall into disrepair, victims of time and weather? Or do the

builders themselves do the dismantling, starting from scratch each fall, their bird brains brimming with fresh ideas?

I have no trouble believing that the initial impulse to build a bower is a reproductive imperative. At some point, though—perhaps after the forty-eighth golden leaf, the first dozen blue parrot feathers—I think this primal urge is forgotten and what drives the male after that is his own enthusiasm, craft turned to ecstasy. For what difference would it make to the no-nonsense, time-constrained female that there are thirteen parrot feathers instead of twelve, or that the interior, which she may not even bother to inspect, is freshly painted?

Only to the builder does every leaf and feather matter; each year, from fall through spring, nothing matters more. That his work may be in vain is something he is not prepared to ponder.

People, on the other hand, expect reward. The formulas we are taught—hard work equals success, healthy living ensures longevity, good deeds bring good luck—these ideas die hard and not without bitterness. Our house is blown away; the tumor is malignant; the dog we adopted gets hit by a car. “It’s not fair,” we cry; moreover it doesn’t make sense. Why would God allow such things? Why are we sharing our home with polio and salmonella and brown recluse spiders? Where is the virtue in poisonous toadstools and powdery mildew? Indeed, our madcap inventor seems to have as much interest in the growth of a fungus as he does a fetus.

Whatever your religious views, one thing is certain: a long time ago this ball got rolling and a force we can’t fathom gave it the nudge. From that point on, life never looked back.

Consider the extravagance of species on this planet: one hundred and forty kinds of sparrows, and every one of them changing, each generation bringing better beaks, designer tails, new come-hither stripes. So many versions of a small brown bird, all of them vying for a little more time. Why not, say, a dozen spe-

cies? Wouldn't that be a sufficient sparrow allotment? Why is the earth burdening itself with this colossal balancing act?

Watching children play or dolphins leap or eagles soar, it's easy to conclude that life is fun, that we are put here to enjoy ourselves. Take male lions, which spend their days on grassy plains, dozing in the sun, dining on warm fresh prey, thanks to the prowess of their harems. Then take a look at male emperor penguins, which spend long winters on open ice, huddled together for warmth, risking starvation, a single precious egg balanced on their frigid feet. A tortoise trudges along for well over a century; a mayfly gets less than a day. One bird scores a mate with just a couple songs, while another must build a palace. Not one of these creatures knows the difference. "Why" is a question we might all do without.

To be born is to have worth. Lucky or not, lovely or not, everything on this busy blue orb gets a fighting chance to do its best. Rust and roses. Slugs and swans. Lyme ticks and ladybugs.

Does it feel good to be a ladybug? We can't say. All we can witness is the effort: one tiny being earning its life.

It hurts to be alive, too much and too often for pleasure to be the point; much of the time we manage without it. Now and again we are taken by surprise. In the oddest moments—spreading mulch, washing a plate, buttoning a child's coat—we are suddenly, inexplicably, happy. For the bowerbird, whose life amounts to little more than labor, the joy is built right in.

Cassie Premo Steele

Cassie Premo Steele is the author of eight books, including the recent poetry audio book [This is How Honey Runs](#), available for download at Amazon. Her poetry has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and she works as a writing and creativity coach, teaching individuals and groups how to combine everyday creativity with the natural world to live with greater balance and meaning. Her website is www.cassiepremosteele.com.

The Willow

There was a willow tree in my childhood,
and my sister and I hid under its branches
while our father hit our mother
and we recited the Hail Mary and imagined
that we were children in the Garden
of Eden, and that God and Jesus and Mary,
our trinity, were waiting somewhere nearby.

The willow tree was bare last night,
as I contemplated the complexities
of husbands and lovers and daughters
and mothers, and the chances of how I can be
something other than what I had been.
The willow's branches pointed down, in the dark,
and I thought I'd always miss my mark.

But this morning the tiny green shoots point up,
and I realize we, too, are always coming
and going like this—away from our childhoods
or back to them, hiding from the new selves
we are becoming, or rushing to embrace them,
like magnets flipping through the seasons
around the roots of the willow at the center of the earth.

Julie Stuckey

Julie Stuckey grew up in Pennsylvania, graduated from the University of Delaware in business and currently lives in Pawling, New York. She has had numerous poems published online, in print and in anthologies. She makes sense of her world through reading and writing poetry.

I'll Meet You There

But you remember, don't you, the place where we used to collect tadpoles? Find that. It might mean crawling through the culvert under the road again. They put cables across the middle to keep kids out, but we made ourselves small enough to wiggle under. You know how to make yourself small. The water is musical there, echoing through the metal tube. But don't make a noise – they'll hear you. It's only a short way from there.

Just follow the creek. Confused?
Maybe you went the wrong way. Don't cry – don't cry. Don't go back. Look at the water. If you are at the culvert, is it coming toward you or flowing away? Yes, it is cold. We would yelp in its iciness. Walk into the flow. That way you'll come to our place. You'll see. It'll be just like old times. Crayfish and waterstriders and tadpoles. The squishy mud and skunk cabbage. All of it. We'll find the all of it. I'll meet you there.

About EarthSpeak

EarthSpeak is an 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.

