Editor's Note

Welcome to the ninth volume of you are here: the journal of creative geography. What you hold in your hands is actually our tenth 'expedition'—owing to the fact that we published two issues one year—and this is an apt word to describe the journey the publication has taken since our last edition. We set out in the fall to expand our base—wanting to extend our call to explore creative geography to new communities of artists and writers. The response was tremendous with nearly quadruple the number of submissions. As the poems, art, and prose rolled in, the piles on my office floor grew mountainous—leaving me to wonder how we would climb through them all. But even in our marathon reading sessions, our team of explorers found time to delight in the nearly 700 visual, written, and poetic stories about the places people visit, inhabit, and imagine.

One of my own delights in working on the journal for the past two years is seeing the connections between the many pieces we receive, including often quirky coincidences. For example, numerous pieces centered on Lake Michigan last year and we had a recent spate of work dealing with buses and bus stops. Only one piece from this latter category was among our final selections, a painting by Olivia Webster that was inspired by a letter from her cousin describing a bus stop in Israel. This piece serves as a center point on a continuum between two themes that emerged for this issue: navigating through unfamiliar terrain, in this case amidst the chaos of suicide bombings, and finding a deeper understanding of one's self and place through the small, familiar moments of everyday life.

Two poems by Ellen Goldstein bookend the thirteen selections for this issue. The first leads us into the uncharted waters that were once designated by mythical creatures on ancient maps—questioning the boundaries of our hearts and bodies. Patricia Smith's fantastical renderings also draw out psychological divisions, mapping the internal rooms of the psyche on our cover image. The organic, alien feel of Smith's drawings resonate well with the ancient fossils that serve as a touchstone in Celeste O'Dell's vignette, as her young character contemplates the vastness of eastern Oregon and an uncertain world. Walter Bargen's poem also dwells on the unmentionables of our internal and external environments, while the final Goldstein poem and six haikus from Leslie Clark reveal different takes for our familiar pictures of the frontier West and colonial South.

Even when all the coordinates are charted, it is our personal connections to place that make maps meaningful—as Jon Seeman's essay reminds us—and several selections search for these connections in more familiar grounds. Barbara Renaud Gonzalez's poignant portrayal of a family that has lost both land and love sets her on a search to recapture a little of both in the bar where her parents met, while Amy Halloran finds what she'd been looking for in her own hometown. Several pieces give different takes on what we can discover when we step to witness our own stomping grounds—whether it be listening to conversations on top of Snake Hill, finding love—or at least tolerance—for a pesky rooster named Victor, or learning new vocabulary for the local landscape.

All of these works find creative answers to our fundamental question: "Where are you?" As the journal nears its tenth anniversary, we've been asking this same question of ourselves and reflecting on our next decade of publication. Like the selections in this issue, we continue to expand into new areas, while staying rooted in our familiar surroundings. We are charting our future with the guidance of a newly created board of directors that includes several past editors and are considering options for expanding our distribution in print and online. In order to thrive and grow in the next decade the journal requires increased financial support and we are working to broaden our subscription base and fundraising efforts.

We are continually grateful for the support of our readers and we hope you will enjoy this issue of you are here. We also hope you will consider continuing your support in the years to come either through a renewed subscription or financial contribution, and by sharing with us your own visions of creative geography.

-Shoshana Mayden
Tucson, Arizona
32.23N, 110.98W

Here Be Dragons
Ellen Goldstein

What land have I stumbled into?
My lips survey the edge of your jaw,
measuring the coordinates of intent,
the altitudes and angles of your body.

How do we triangulate this:
my hands on the path of your spine,
your breath ranging in my ear,
the woman who waits for you at home?

There are property markers staked
in straight lines, not determined
by the shape of our desire, as if intimacy
is a territory that can be claimed.

What atlas will warn me
when I traverse the lines we plot
between want and obligation;
when I want to see you two days
in a row, show up on your doorstep
unannounced, or wake up
with you in the morning?
What compass will lead me out
when I fall in love with the blackness
of your hair and the light
of our wanderings, when I lose
even the stars in this wilderness?

These are political borders—
the kind partisans and refugees cross
at midnight to enter forbidden countries,
the blank places on the map.
This series of artwork, "Plot Plans," draws inspiration from architectural diagrams, medical illustration, and antique maps to create fantastical structures that are host to imaginary organizations. Each work is begun with a loose gestural sketch, and then a fine point Rapidograph pen is employed to build up the image with thousands of minuscule dots. The drawing is embellished with watercolor and self-designed rubber stamps. Text captions labeling the rooms and spaces make use of puns, double meanings, and dark humor. The result is meticulous, quietly subversive works on paper in ink and watercolor. These miniature worlds articulate slightly unsettling social phenomena and psychological patterns, suggesting a depiction of both the individual mind and the broader culture.
"Deep Connection" Topographical Overview with Recommended Easement Points
Ink, watercolor on paper, 30" x 22"

Portable Flood Management System
Ink, watercolor on paper, 30" x 22"
Overcrying - Flow - Counterflow - Wet Dreams - Absorption
Draining - Boat - Disbursement - Discharge - Stagnant
Late in the Holocene

Celeste O'Dell

Where the highway cuts through gray basalt, my father points to layers of lava flows: Cambrian, Silurian, Devonian. His mysteries. My mother's mysteries are Sorrowful, Joyful, Glorious. I believe both, but I like his best because I can see them. Mother says we may believe in evolution if we still believe there was a Garden of Eden and we all descend from Adam and Eve.

We come late in the Holocene, a little family in a gray 1940 Ford, traveling to the edge of Oregon, past Farewell Bend, the nearest meander of the Snake. It is late November, Thanksgiving, 1944. We are traveling this long road through the barren hills to my Aunt Bridget's house.

We have heard some of my father's story before: how this part of North America was once a sea, with cowries and mollusks washed up on sandy banks, but all that is left is this basalt plateau. Except for the curve at Farewell Bend, I haven't seen much of the Snake. I've never been to the falls or Hells Canyon, with its rim rock cliffs. My father says there are strange pictures on the bluffs, made by tribes of people who vanished long ago. He doesn't know who they were.

Closer to home, he has found remains of ammonites and trilobites and some little creature who looks just like a snail. He found them on a desert hill, where a badger dug them up. The fossils are partially buried in a gray rock, fused grains of ancient sand. We keep them nested in cotton wool in the glass bookcase in our living room.

My parents know the names of all the creeks, rivers, and hills. We learn them like a litany: Quartz Creek, Coyote Peak, Rattlesnake Springs, Gold Hill, Iron Mountain, Chicken Creek. Some creeks are named for families we know: Ebell, Swayze, Sidley. They live in old frame houses hidden in groves of willow and cottonwood along the winding creeks.

My mother always talks of God as if He were our next-door-neighbor, gentle, interested, kind. The distances, the exploding bombs, the gaps and vanishings don't seem to bother her.

Despite the stories and the questions and the lessons, I feed a sadness creeping in. At home in Elkhorn, forty miles away, there are evergreens on the hills, and the mountains are varying shades of blue with snow in the crevices. But here, the brown hills rise up, featureless, dwarfing the narrow road.

I think this must be just the opposite of the Garden of Eden, which Sister Cecelia says was in Mesopotamia, the Fertile Crescent. I'm not sure where Mesopotamia is, but I know it's far away, like the war. I think of the newsreel I saw last week before the weekly episode of The Lone Ranger: planes dropped bombs that fell softly toward the earth and ended in beautiful white explosions in cities and factories and fields.

At dinner, we will have turkey and dressing and mashed potatoes and things we don't ordinarily have, like olives and cranberry sauce and mincemeat pies. Someone will say grace: "Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts." My mother always talks of God as if He were our next-door-neighbor, gentle, interested, kind. The distances, the exploding bombs, the gaps and vanishings don't seem to bother her.

But I can't help thinking of things that frighten me: the shakiness of the bridge we have to cross, its rattles and groans as we drive over, the gaping holes in the middle with the river rushing underneath; the red-haired man who will be sitting at the table, demanding to know my name; the uncle, who will play the violin and cry and kiss me with his awful, watery kiss.

I keep staring at basalt cliffs, the Burnt River, and the lava flows and think of the trilobites, caught in their fossil sand. Inside the car, it's warm and I can feel my sister's breath, but as the moonscape of the hills goes on and on, I feel the weight of everything I do not understand.
Haiku Scenes from the New West
Leslie Clark

1. In the golden field
placid cattle graze next to
a green bulldozer.

2. A plump, sullen teen
rounds up scarlet shopping carts
with her lariat.

3. Cactus, ocotillo,
acres of grass once grew here
now just raw, red earth.

4. In the small-town shop
lots of folks from New Jersey
purchase cowboy hats.

5. A feather of smoke
rises from the parched mountain,
a thoughtless camper.

6. Where once a streambed,
now diapers, water jugs,
a different flow.

Aquí Me Quedo
Bárbara Renaud González

They met at a forgotten kind of a place, a one-room bar hidden on a backroad called Aquí Me Quedo. A cantina sitting on this side of the Rio Grande, unless the river changes its mind.

My Daddy, Lázaro, had just returned from World War II, a hero with commendations, three years in the Philippines killing the dirty Japs. Hijoles, what a pelebrión he was, bragging to Mami and the rest of us around the kitchen table—picking fights with his smile wicked like the farmer's hands that followed. Hell, there was nothing else to do, he had no land left. Six desperate sisters bargain-selling the last of the family acres while he was fighting for their freedom. How were the girls supposed to work the land as hard as him, Daddy, the oldest and strongest brother? The land was just a scrap, really, but in the family over two hundred years, yes, each one of those forty-eight acres a battleground after the U.S.-Mexican War.

They had lost that war, por supuesto, but this one, the war he had just returned from—this one he had won. Sloshing in those tropical jungles, killing slant-eyed men who looked too much like his people back home, his sharpshooter aim was true as an arrow finding the heart.

While he was killing those men, his father died, and the swan-like sisters and widowed mother had to survive. That's why the war never ended for him. Nothing left to do but keep on fighting when he got back. Though he couldn't tell me why only that he needed to fight like he needed to kill Japs in that jungle.

"They took our land, my father's land."

But it's really his mother's land he's talking about, because she comes from those people who were always here, before the wars ever started. He tells me the family's story one more time on the porch steps at night after another long day as a sharecropper in the fields that aren't his, but that he loves just the same.

"What do Mexicans know about a world war? I was born on land that isn't mine anymore, la kineña. You know the King Ranch? You study it in school?"

A war isn't always called a war, he emphasizes, gazing at the harvest-moon. "It depends on who's winning and who's losing."

Daddy recites the names of the families who once had the land. Slowly, deliberately, like a witness on the stand. Balli. Cavazos. Garza. Longoria...

"There is a family cemetery for you when you die. It's near San Perlita, a place named for a little pearl, how do you like that?"

"Like the gift of the Magi?" I tell him about the story I read in school, the one about the husband and wife who sold their prized possessions to give each other a Christmas gift. About how the wife lost her long, lustrous hair for the money to buy him a gold chain for his pocket-watch, while he was giving up that treasured watch for a special comb, imagining those long braids unraveling in the moonlight.

Daddy is trying to find the stars in the sky, squinting, like when his eyes are measuring the highest weeds in the cotton.

"Hmm, don't understand what you're talking about. San Perlita is just a little town, but it's..."
Marni's story is about land, and she's scorching fat tomatoes for the salsa roja. The same tomatoes Daddy grows from the one acre that his boss lets him farm instead of salary. His big hands warm, happy, when he brings them to her.

"My father lost his land too," Mami continues, "you would call it a hacienda — during the Mexican Revolution. I don't remember it, everything happened before I was born."

Mami peels the tomatoes, tasting the soft mush that spills on her fingers. "Your grandfather Moises was the youngest of five boys. Spoiled rotten. But the kind of spoiled that is good too, because he loves everybody else. Doesn't know anything but. Your abuela spoiled to the bone, but the right way. An expert on horses. Never worked a day in his life. He married your abuela, my mother, Maria de la Eulogia, in the calm before the terrible end of that civil war."

My grandmother was a merchant's daughter, she explains. "Neither rich nor poor, which is a terrible thing to be in Mexico, because you can only be one or the other."

"Ay, she was ambitious." Mami doesn't like this about her mother, but she's not that different. "Which is just a pinchful away from greediness," she says with disgust. "I thought she was going to be somebody, because Papi inherited his father's land, which wasn't theirs to begin with anyway, which brought the Revolution, which proves my point about the stupidity of land."

"My mami spooning the just-cooked pinitos and porkkins into the frying pan, mumbling under her breath, 'Your abuela, brown as la tierra, pretending to be of royal blood as if those españolitos who stole our land in the first place were anything but royal... crímenes..., Thought she had won the libeccillo, don't you see? Marrying that light-skinned skinny. Instead, she just got a husband good-for-nothing... who lost his land because he was drunk during all the years of the revolution!"

My mother pushes dough around one last time before the griddle. Pats it down, hard. Sighs. "Here she is, planning her society life, and prostituenda to everyone how she's going to have everything and more, because she is going to become a woman of high society. Shit Society!"

My mother can't resist turning aristocracia into a bathroom word, proud of turning the rich into excrement. She separates the dough into balls, parch-tons each one with both sets of fingers. That's what she'd like to do to some of these high-falutin' people's faces, I think. Mami says it takes years of living to make good tortillas.

"Casa-guia-lo-cielo!"

And then the revolution comes to abuela's house a year after they've married. Knock-knock! Mami raps the table with her boarded knuckles, the soldiers from Villa's army — or Carranza, who knows — tell them to get out, or else. "Your abuelo Moises's father, your great-grandfather, Don Hermenegildo who they say wasn't hated by his workers, you believe that? Who knows. Anyway, so what. He was generous considering he was, what? A slaveowner — ay, excuusse me! In Mexico we don't have slaves, we call them campesinos, who were rebelling and had joined Villa's — or Carranza's army. They didn't kill Don Hermenegildo. They didn't hang him, you know? Though maybe they should have."

My mother smiles to herself. "We know what it's like to be rejected."

More tortillas puff up on the griddle. Turning them over, she pats them down, flattening them. She continues. "Guess that's why he drinks so much."

"The revolutionaries just wanted the land. The horses. So my parents left, with me incubating in her paren... Mami thinking she couldn't get pregnant during war, le imaginas?" Rolls her eyes. The first tortilla, sticky, draping off her up-turned palms, goes on the griddle. "They must have looked like Joseph and Mary on a burro with four daughters instead of a prodigal son. Your grandmother's hands clutching her rosary beads. And the few pesos they had left."

Mami watches the tortillas like Daddy watches the sky. She begins to slice the leftover chicken for a guisado with his just-picked green beans and corn. "Mami never forgave him for losing the land, you understand?"

Mami says that my grandfather didn't care, that the land was for everyone. That it was our destiny to lose it. Because the land was to be shared. "The only thing he missed were the horses. It was much later that he spent his nights in the cantina grieving for her love, which would never come again." Mami sighs dramatically. "Because Mami has never loved him. Naucal. This is why we understand each other. She looks over at the bedroom where Daddy's sleeping."

"We know what it's like to be rejected."

More tortillas puff up on the griddle. Turning them over, she pats them down, flattening them. She continues. "Guess that's why he drinks so much."

Salsa is added to the onions softening in another pan, and I decide that the kitchen must be like my mother and grandfather's heart; all spicy and hot, only nobody is going to sit down to eat this plate.
Your grandmother says Papi doesn't confront the reality of life. Her life has been very hard, you must understand. I know you don't like her, because she never laughs, it's just that her life has been too much hard." Demasiada. She repeats the very hard over and over as she rolls out more tortillas. Demasiada. Reminds me of the word for masa, a mass, a mass of people. Mami's trying to find another word to explain very hard, but it's impossible. How can one word describe the smashing of dreams? There isn't a word big enough for that. In English or Spanish.

"Yeah, old woman."

Daddy jeers at Mami that night at supper when she talks about the revolution again. He's started calling her vieja which is a word for old woman, ugly woman. Used up. But if a man loves his wife, vieja can mean precious, eternal, till-death-do-we-part woman. My woman of many years, mi vieja who has given me children, and who has been with me in good times and bad. But that's not the vieja that my father means.

"Look where your beloved revolution brought you...you had to cross that bridge to eat, didn't you? What would you do without these gringos you hate so much?"

My mother wasn't even eighteen when she crossed the border. She won't tell me how she did it. That's why I know she must have come with a man. No education, but real pretty. Started working in that cantina, where she met my father soon after. All because of the land. And the river that told her this was where she was supposed to be.

That's why I'm trying to find that ghost of a jukebox where my parents met. So that I can trace their footsteps, see their skin flash-hot at the thunder cracking like a new storm from each other's voices over a cold beer that she spills on him with her warm-tortilla fingertips. Watch their eyes toasting into dark brown as they glance, then invite. Didn't know a hija could look like John Wayne and speak Spanish without an accent. Never thought I would meet a woman with legs worth more than a million dollars. I want to hear them bragging to each other about where they come from. Making up stories along the way so that their lies become true, and the truth becomes a lie that their children will have to reclaim, like the land they were supposed to inherit. Following them later that night as they find a home in each other because they have nowhere else to go. They were married in three weeks.

This is why I have to find that place, that broken-down cupboard filled with my past, becoming even as its hand-painted sign fades, almost falling with too many summers, the black letters curling into each other like the waters that flow into the Rio Grande.

Letters tumbling into each other like people searching for a new land. A place called Here I Stay.
My Place on the Map
On Sentimental Cartographies, Experience of Place, and Spatial Biographies
Jörn Seemann

There is something disconcerting about maps. Cartography still maintains its predominant and exclusive image of a cold and objective science that creates a distance between me and these depictions of place. "Mind the gap"—the metallic voice from the landspeaker is not only my most vivid reminiscence of the London Underground, but maybe it was also J.B. Harley’s main concern with cartographic "coldness." When he started to deconstruct the map in the late 1980s, he told us about the normative model of scientific cartography and its objectivity, technological progress and ethic of accuracy, and the personal meaningfulness of the map as a biography. Who said that maps don’t bleed?

Behind the mask of its cold appearance the map hides its authorship. Despite satellite imagery and computer cartography, mapmakers are human—the maps they create are testimonies of human creativity, inventiveness, imagination, or evil. They are not a mirror of reality or a truthful image of space and place. Maps are like the human shadows that the prisoners in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave can see: although they are real, they are only projections of other real things and persons. Reality is always a perceived reality, and the map is not the territory.

Maps sometimes seem like the famous blank sheet of paper that some psychologists still use in order to test the intelligence of their human guinea pigs: What can you see? A polar bear in a snowstorm? A white rabbit (with closed eyes) in a white room? Or simply an empty sheet of paper? The mapmaker’s challenge is to make the map reader believe “that a mosaic of points, lines, and areas on a flat sheet of paper is equivalent to a multidimensional world in space and time,” as we are told by Phillip and Juliana Muehler in an essay on maps in literature. All these abstract symbols mean nothing to us when we fail to relate them to space; be it a map of my hometown or Frodo’s arduous travel to the fires of Mount Doom, documented in more than 1000 pages of Tolkien’s novel and nine hours of film rolls. This means that we must establish a relation with the map. When we can find ourselves in the map, it can be part of our lives, a diary, memory aid, reference to our social life, flocks of nostalgia. The reader is able to read it as a meaningful text because the map brings landscapes, events, and persons of our own past to the mind’s eye and involves our own identity in the representation. Maps are a rich source for personal histories and give us a set of coordinates for the map of our memory.

Take for example this drawing. It shows three simple rectangles, deliberately and irregularly grouped together.

At first glance, it is a cold and meaningless geometry, but for me these conventional symbols are very important. I see them in the context of a map, not any map, but my map, sheet 2424 (Wedel) of the topographic map, scale 1:25 000, published in 1978.

The three supposedly senseless rectangles turn into my parents’ property near Hamburg in northern Germany. They represent three buildings that can be seen in the inset of the map. This group of rectangles, the bottom right (01) is my parents’ home (or more correctly, its representation). It was my grandfather’s two-story carpenter’s workshop that my father converted into our residence when he married my mother in the early 1960s. To the left is my grand mother’s house (02). She was a gentle old lady who tolerated all my childish behavior and died in 1996 when she was 91. The top rectangle (03) is a wooden shack where we kept our lawn-mower, bicycles, tools, etc. The map is from 1978, so you cannot find the garage that we constructed at the entrance of our property. There was enough space for two cars, Daddy’s BMW and Mummy’s green Beetle that was my first car when I got my driver’s license. Separated from our property by a drainage channel is the large Regenbogen house (04). Mr. Regenbogen owned grumpy German shepherd dogs, ran a haphazard business of wood log sales, and peed publicly in his backyard.

I spent my first four years of school at the large black rectangle (07) about 500 meters south of home. It represents the main school building and the smaller pavilion to its right contained the two classrooms for the third and forth grade. The oval (08) “below” the school is the pitch of the local soccer team (ASC Estebriuge) that I played for in later years. My daily trek to school took me along the levee (05) of the Este River (06), a small dike of about fifteen feet to protect the population against a modest twenty-yard wide stream that I had never seen overflowing during my life (although my parents told me about the great 1962 flood that was devastating in our region). The white house on the levee (a reference I forgot to mark) was owned by a small family of three. Their only daughter hung herself because she could not stand the pressure of her exams. The latest (and now late) owner was an evangelical pastor, a friend of our family, who died of cancer several years ago.

"Map me no maps, sir, my head is a map, a map of the whole world"
–Henry Fielding, 1730

Excerpt from a map of Wedel, outside of Hamburg. Source: Landesvermessungsamt Schleswig-Holstein.
Looking at the village center (09), there is a small iron bridge to cross the Estc River. Further to the left is a circular structure with the local Saint Martin church (10) in its center. The pews are uncomfortable wooden benches, some of them ornamented with little angels' heads whose cheeks the Swedes had "levelled" a little bit during the Thirty Years War. There are some majestic trees in the cemetery (11), and somewhere near number 12 is our family grave where my grandmother rests in peace. They wrote my grandfather's name on the tombstone, but I know that his bones are not there, because he died in Yugoslavia during the Second World War. My grandmother had a photo indicating the place of his cross in a cemetery near Belgrade.

There is death and life in the map that turn human events into a "storied place." It does not only create images for me, but it depicts my place to those who have never been there—and probably will never happen to know it. If I scanned through the whole map sheet, I would probably write a complete spatial history of my childhood. Hence, it is true that maps are to be read as personal histories; an affirmation that I still belong.

My aims for tracing my own spatial biography are not sentimental, painting nostalgia on top of black rectangles. Maps are dialogues with space and place. Like all of us, I am in a constant struggle of (re)defining and (re)inventing my places. I severed my physical relations with my home in 1994, guided by hexagram number 56 of the I-Ching: Li, the traveler, sojourner, strangler, fire on mountain. One of the phrases in the descriptive manual was like a slap on my face: You will lose your home... Doesn't the hexagram look like a set of map symbols, like my parents' home on the topographic map?

My migrations took me to Brazil—Belém, Curitiba, Fortaleza and several other cities—and now Baton Rouge, staying at the university residences on Nicholson Drive, some 540 square-feet of living, next to the railway line, the Tiger Stadium, the Tiger Cage, and the main campus.

We can each trace our personal cartographies—be it on a road atlas, Google map, or our own doodling. The sum of my spatial experiences would result in a whole dictionary of my personal biography. Amazing how mere marks on a piece of paper can visually bring to mind a multidimensional world that contains objects and even emotions that are not perceived directly on the sheet. I am on the map— and the map is inside of me.

Letters from Israel

Painting by Olivia Webster

Letters by Lauren Basson

Through a five-year correspondence of lyrical letters from my cousin living in Israel, I was recently inspired to create narrative paintings of her accounts of life in a faraway land. This exploration became my distant interpretation of her personal, political, and cultural reflections—focusing on both her persistent sense of isolation in a metropolitan space, as well as a sense of normalcy in a sea of chaos. The painting is a triptych that depicts the moments of waiting and anticipating the commute, tinged with simultaneous angst and acceptance over what the bus ride might hold.

—Olivia Webster

April 26, 2002

Yesterday, I saw a yellow bulldozer out in the fields where the sheep often graze. This morning, when I went to buy my Friday chicken at the grocery store, I noticed that it had cut a large, square swath in the fields right at the end of the road. The fresh dirt was a deep reddish brown. On my walk with Ezra a couple of weeks ago, I saw that the land surrounding the Bedouin encampment had been surveyed and marked off into little plots with wire and small, white flags. There was a big sign advertising residential building plots for sale. It doesn't seem like there will be much of the fields left soon. I wonder where the Bedouin and their sheep will go.

The chicken cutting woman was working alone this morning, chopping chickens as fast as she could with her metal glove protecting the first few fingers of her left hand. The rest of her hands looked red and raw. There were the usual lines of Sephardic women waiting for their chickens and ground beef. It seemed like they looked more exhausted and stressed in proportion to the number of chickens they were buying. The woman ahead of me bought four chickens. She didn't look too good. I bought one. It's definitely all I can handle right now.

The warplanes were ferocious today, slamming through the skies overhead, pounding in my head for hours, and I started to think: maybe I'm just not cut out for this, maybe I can't handle this as well as I thought I could. I complained about the planes when Benjamin came home from school for lunch. He shrugged and made one of his macho faces. "Yeah? So what? You just get used to it." But do you really? And if so, is that a good thing?

May 8, 2002
So what has happened in the last two days? Another suicide bombing in Rishon LeTzion. This one took place under the awning, near the chess tables in the central park, a place we have visited several times over the past year. It is, of course, Benjamin’s favorite part of the park and each time we have gone there, he runs over to watch the older, Russian men play their games while I take Ayelot to the playground. It is a densely packed, male space. Women rarely go there. I have worried about the crowds that inevitably gather between benches to watch those chess matches and have kept a wary eye on Benjamin when he drifts over that direction—now those worries have been fulfilled. I haven’t told Benjamin about the attack—and he hasn’t mentioned it. I find it hard to believe that he didn’t hear about it from anyone at school or his chess club, but find myself unwilling to be the first to bring it up...
Monday morning, the first day of your new year... Where am I? Sitting on a train, traveling south toward the desert town of Be'er Sheva...

Across from me, a young woman sits, engaged in an elaborate ritual of self-beautification that includes the careful application of lipstick, mascara, and rouge. She wears a chic gray sweater, short skirt, and dark boots decorated with a large silver buckle. She examines her facial features carefully in a pocket mirror and, apparently approving of the image she sees there, zips away her cosmetics and takes out her cell phone. Her pale, serious face grows animated as she launches into conversation in rapid Russian, interspersed with loud giggles and heavily accented Hebrew.

I change trains. The poised, young woman sitting across from me wears a sophisticated scarf over her hair, signaling that she is Arab. She sits quietly, intent on reading the Hebrew newspaper she holds in her hands. I think of those far away in America, reading their newspapers, full of news about this country that obscures the simple complexities I witness on my everyday commute on this train. How do you translate a place so full of the variations of life and death into words that those who have not witnessed it will understand?

I think of you, celebrating Christmas with our family in the suburban living room where your painting of an Israeli bus stop hangs, a lone figure who looks somewhat like me at its center. Alone, together. Worlds apart, yet in the same room. I stare out the window of the speeding train and see a vague outline of my face mediated by the shifting forms of the desert landscape. I reflect on your reflections of this place that for the moment I call home. I wonder who the women who sit across from me see when they look in my direction.

Traveling north. The return portion of the roundtrip. The end of the day. The passing places outside the windows of the train are dark, invisible. The light inside the passenger cars is dim. The Israeli soldier who sits across the aisle from me in his khaki uniform, boots splashed out, carries on a long conversation on his cell phone in enthusiastic Spanish. The middle-aged man who sits across from me, slouched over a burgeoning belly, reads a trashy novel in English and rubs his eyes. His white socks are crumpled around his ankles.

Over the intercom, an anonymous voice announces the upcoming stop in Hebrew. My commute is almost over. Our journey has just begun.

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The Bridge Above Snake Hill

Kristen E. Nelson

Bill's dandelions could be lilies and his lilies have halos. He used to walk with his hands in his pockets, but now he's got old-man eyes that make him get closer to life in order to see it. His two milky cataracts skew his vision into a mostly more beautiful scene. Now he walks hesitantly with open palms and squints in close to plants.

"But not kids cause it makes 'em cry," he points out to me.

Bill hates wearing those big, black glasses, but wears them because the doctor told him they would help protect his eyes from getting worse. Most days, he walks around the neighborhood collecting seeds he will never plant. He intends to, but his garden is only big enough for herbs. Bill digs deep between the petals of flowers, pries open the husks of pinecones with his thick thumbnails, and sticks the seeds in his pockets. He can't watch the plants grow anymore, but he tells anyone who will listen, "It's a shame to leave that new life rotting on the vine."

Bill's hearing is impeccable as well—nature's way of saying, "Sorry for the eyes." He listens for traffic before crossing the street and isn't afraid of going out into the world, or at least not his hazy halved version of it.

I don't worry about Bill, even with his impairment. His son is nearby and visits him once a week, takes him to the doctor, still kisses him on the cheek, changes the batteries in his smoke detectors, and tends to burnout bulbs.

It's the days in between those visits that are interesting. Today, for example, he is determined to conquer Snake Hill one more time before the winter comes and the roads are icy—when he can't navigate even with outstretched arms and shuffling feet and open palms.

"As open as my gnarled knuckles will open anyway," he says flexing his fingers. The movement stretches his liver spots into warped shapes—one looks like an opera house curtain when he makes an almost fist.

"There's one in every neighborhood," Bill says looking up the hill. Bill told me about a Snake Hill in the Bronx where he grew up. He and his friends used to test their courage by skidding down the hill on garbage pail lids, blindfolded. As a teenager, he used to race those same friends to the top. He almost always won. On the first night of his honeymoon, Bill carried his young bride from a taxi up a hill like this in the Hamptons and over the threshold. Happy and breathless, he dropped her on their squelchy marriage bed.

Today he will make it to the top of this hill.

"Thank God for sidewalks. Whoever invented concrete and sidewalks should be given a medal from the Senior Citizens Association of the World," Bill jokes. Lately, he's been making up the names of clubs like that, each one more ridiculous than the one before. He's been inundated with mailings from AARP and the County Department for Senior Citizens with Disabilities and the City Office of Senior Services for Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Town Committee for Elders of Italian Heritage and Jewish Eldercare and on and on and...all stamped, "Join!"

He laughs. It's a dry laugh but not a cough. He isn't a smoker. "I couldn't smoke and walk at the..."
same time," he says. "I never was very good at
cutting my head and rubbing my belly either."

We reach the bottom of Snake Hill, and Bill stops
to take a few deep breaths under a tree. There
are big fleshy spheres on the ground at his feet.
He bends to pick one up. "Yeah, pretty limber
for an old guy, aye?" He likes to paint this cut
to me a couple of times a day. I pretend not to
notice that he's covering up for needing rest.

"You know what's inside of these things? They're
chestnuts," he says. "I never knew until it hit
me one day. Really hit me one day. It fell on my
head. The critter was hard, so I opened
me one day. Really hit me one day. It fell on my
chestnut," he says. "I never knew until it hit
up and there it was. Undeniably a
nut."

He holds his hat above his head
and runs his hands through
raggedy-cut, silver hair. It is
still thick, even at his age, so he
cuts it himself every few weeks.
He wipes his forehead on his
head and looks up.

Snake Hill is a half-mile steep slope. It's
kind of hill that kids long for. The kind of hill
they peer out of windows at from the backseats
of mini-vans, say, "Wow! at, strain against their
seatbelts, and wish for once they could find
a hill like this that didn't empty out into traffic.
But it's really not the hill that attracts Bill; it's
the bridge at the top. Don't get me wrong; he
appreciates walking up the hill. "It's a challenge," he
says standing up a little straighter. But the
bridge is what keeps him coming here day after
day.

When Bill starts walking he can't really talk
anymore, so I listen to his steady breath. My
thoughts race as I look at the canopy above us.
I think that we are covered by leaves on trees
and veins on leaves and small bugs on veins
and sometimes rainwater that pools in the veins
of those leaves. And how about God? I haven't
quite figured out where He is yet in this green
grass picture.

So let's say the wind blows. That gets me to
thinking that maybe the rainwater runs down
the vein, past the bug, past God, too, maybe,
drips on Bill's shoulder. If the fabric there
absorbs the drop, without him ever knowing,
then is he a part of this scene? The instant is real
for the tree, for the water, the bug, God, to his
shirt even. But is it real to him?

"That's the beauty
of it," Bill says
as he reaches the
summit. "People
stop. They have to."

But perhaps his hand will brush
against the dampness in a motion
that has no real reason for happen­ing except serendipity. The
impulse will register wet to his
brain, but depending upon how
open he is able to be at that ex­
cact moment, he will either ig­
nore or analyze that faint sensa­tion. Is it real to him then?

"Woo," Bill grunts. "Slow go in'." He
looks up again. Bill focuses on the light
spaces between the dark leaves in the cano­
py. They are winged creatures composed of
sunlight—those shapes that mostly only children
notice.

If I look up I can see the bridge from here, just
around that last bend. It is narrow. One car
of any size fills the bridge, which sits above a thin
trickle of water and a stand of pine trees. It con­
nects the business district of town with a neigh­
borhood of homes. The guardrails look tired,
slumped with chipping white paint. There's a
large block of stone chiseled with a date, 1898.
That is where Bill likes to stand. On either side
of the bridge is a stop sign and cars have to take
turns crossing.

"That's the beauty of it," Bill says as he reaches
the summit. "People stop. They have to."

It's not so much a matter of courtesy as one of
safety—of necessity—people have to take
a minute. Forty seconds actually. Bill has counted.
Approximately forty seconds of a forced pause.

Even the monster trucks must stop, with
screeching wheels and chrome and cigarette
butts flying out window and rock music blast­ing. Those trucks—those drivers that tailgate
little old ladies on the highway and flash their
high beams—they come to this bridge and they
have to brake. They have to wait until the driver
on the bridge moseys on across before they can
take money on across, holding up the car on the
opposite side. They have to take forty seconds.

Up at the top of the bridge Bill stands awhile
catching his breath, his hand covering the "I"
in 1898. Then he leans his back up against the
stone, and says "made it" to no one in particular.
His attention has already traveled from me
to the cars taking their turns.

Bill can only catch the shapes of the drivers
and passengers, as if he was looking through a
smokey veil of mist rolling in off warm waters.
He doesn't get a clear picture, but he's paying
attention to those human forms, so like his own
that he glimpses in mirrors.

As we stand here, I start to pick up snippets
of conversation from the cars at the stop sign
directly across from us. That is why Bill comes
here and stands for a time, quietly listening.

"Dear God I need some adult company!" the
outburst comes from the driver side window of
a blue mini-van. There is the faint sound of Tom
Chapin singing from the speakers and "Mommy-
MommyMommyMommyMommyMommyMom­
my... floating from somewhere in the backseat.
The song is about the green planet, apes and
beasts, and elephants and kangaroos. The kid
stops his mantra for a minute, takes a breath
and continues as they cross the bridge, "Mom­
myMommyMommyMommy" in tune to the
music this time.

The next car is a beat-up Firebird. As the young
guy behind the wheel stops at the bridge he
says, "Ah, fuck!" and turns up his rock music.
Bill starts laughing when he hears the kid bang­ing
hard on his steering wheel, so hard that his
glove compartment falls open with a recogniz­
able crash—eliciting a louder "Oh fuck!" once
again. He is shoving the papers back in, until
the car behind him beeps. Bill chuckles again.

"Pobrecita, she was in labor for twenty-six hours.
Can you believe it? I know, right? Isabelle. She
is an angel—all pink, cause they had to cut her
out. Not with that funny-shaped head most ba­
bies are born with. Dios Mio, twenty-six hours.
Never ever, ever me. I'm serious. Don't laugh at me
because I'm promising you right this second—never. OK Titi, I'll tell her. I will.
I'll kiss her for you, too. I'll give you a call to­
morrow with the phone number. Ciao."
The young girl driving hangs up the phone saying,
"Ay que chulo, Isabella."

"Time to go home," Bill says. He walks down the
hill slowly smoldering the cold, thinking of
bugs and Gods and humans, beaming the opera
house curtain draped below his knuckle. With
him now are forty seconds of "MommyMommy-
MommyMommy, forty seconds of loud rock music,
fifty seconds of baby talk, and forty more, and
forty more, and forty more. 
Victor Must Die
Bryan Walpert

Every morning, Victor wakes me. If I am lucky, it is winter. Because the mornings are dark, he lets me sleep until six, though even mid-winter — this morning, for example — he has been known to wake me as early as four for no apparent reason. In summer, as it was when my wife and I bought this house in a rural village outside Palmerston North, New Zealand, I can count on being woken by five. For an American city boy, it is like a beak to the brain.

Victor, our rooster, is a beautiful bird who is afraid of me. His charge includes four fat old hens that lay few eggs and those few merely to taunt me. Since I am awake, I walk through the cold house, exchange slippers for boots, scoop out some laying wheat and pellets and carry them beneath the stars across the wet yard. The hens, eager to eat, run to me when I open the wood-and-wire gate to their open-air enclosure, which takes up a back corner of our quarter-acre. Victor runs away and won’t eat until I’ve shut the gate behind me. He pretends to meditate on the back fence, but he has one eye still on me. He knows. He knows that he is the only completely unproductive member of the team and that he wakes me, every morning.

Victor continues to yell for about half an hour. I hear him as I pour and eat my muesli. I struggle to catch the news on National Radio between his calls. Sometimes I reply to him: “You’re the man, Victor.” My wife, Nancy, shakes her head. Then I go to work. I teach creative writing at Massey University, about a fifteen minute drive along a back country road. My specialty is poetry, and lately I have been crafting a course called “Love, Loss, and Looking Around.” It will ask students to place their work in the historical context of the love poem, the elegy, and the ode. Like all of my courses, this one began with a vague idea — good in theory. But as I’ve tried to set my thoughts on paper, I’ve stumbled. The ode has been puzzling me. Defining the ode is akin to putting smoke in a box. Paul Fry, in The Poet’s Calling in the English Ode (1980), warns, “The term ‘ode’ has a checkered history,” adding: “Appealing to usage does not clarify matters as much as one could wish because poets have often seemed to use the word so indiscriminately that most readers pay no attention to its presence in the title.” My favorite comment comes from John Heath-Stubbs, in The Ode (1969). He remarks, with admirable (and not un-Kiwi like) understatement: “The term ‘ode’, as applied to English poems, is, I suspect, a not infrequent source of puzzlement to the student.”

Sometimes, to my relief, Kiwi colleagues stop by my office and interrupt me. As a rule, they seem to enjoy the idea of an American couple owning chickens in semi-rural New Zealand. Prior to moving here in January 2004, we had spent our lives in or near cities. My wife is mainly from Denver. I’m from Baltimore. As some of my relatives there might say, I don’t know from chickens. My Kiwi colleagues are quite aware of this. Are they giving you any eggs? Have you killed Victor yet?

I have been counseled several times, by different people, to kill Victor. I have so far sought alternatives. My hope is that the rooster might quickly die of natural causes was soon dashed. Barring its accidental death, I’m told there are several ways to stop a rooster from crowing. One is to perform an operation on its vocal cords. A second is to cram the bird into a tight space so that it hits its head on the lid, since a rooster must raise its head to crow. The first is expensive; the second strikes me as just plain mean (and might be a joke). The third option is to cut the Gordian knot with a chop to the neck. The wife of a colleague — she’s a vet — offered to lend me her nets to capture the bird; he’d go limp and compliant, she assured me, once I’ve grasped his feet — though I might need help holding him down while I wield the axe.

When we bought this house nearly a year after we arrived in New Zealand, we agreed to take on the chickens and Victor from the former owner, who was moving into town. My wife and I wanted a rural property. The village of Ashhurst has two convenience stores, a pharmacy, a used book store, an auto shop, a couple of artisan shops, one café and a take-out fish and chips/Chinese food storefront. Mail goes through one of the convenience stores, which will also take your dry cleaning. That’s the town, a few thousand people. Our yard backs onto a series of fields, or paddocks as they’re called here, populated by sheep. The police station, usually unstaffed, is a tiny cottage next to a thin paddock, also occupied by sheep. I guess we thought in part that rural meant quiet. We weren't thinking of Victor. And we weren't thinking about the fire station across the street. It calls its volunteers the old-fashioned way: an air raid siren rings through the village. On the odd occasion, we are awakened by the siren at one o'clock and by Victor three hours later.

Bleary-eyed, I continue exploring the ode. In A Glossary of Literary Terms, M.H. Abrams classifies the ode as “a long, lyric poem, serious in subject, elevated in style, and elaborate in its stanzaic structure.” In practice, odes fail to conveniently stick by the rules. Some self-titled odes are not lengthy or elaborate. William Stafford’s “Ode to Garlic” is fifteen lines, nearly as short as a sonnet, and its topic seems a stretch to describe as “serious.” As for elevated diction, “It’s the stink of shit I remember in the monsoon” comes to mind, the opening line of an ode by the New Zealand poet Ian Wedde. The more you look at the ode, the more its definitions fall apart. But, then, most definitions, meant for speed and convenience, fall apart under a lengthy gaze.

If I look long enough at this old house or this rural town, the vision I had for life here falls apart. The definitions, which is to say the borders, of our lives here grow hazy. Why did we come? For my job. But I might have gotten a job in the states if I had waited. For the adventure.
What adventure? It's true we've walked the rim of a volcano, bathed beside the blue of Lake Taupo, bathed in the mineral pools in Rotorua, hiked the striking immensity of Mt. Cook, from which climbers fall to their deaths each year. It sounds exotic when I lump it all together like that. But in truth we snatched these experiences on a long weekend here or there. Mainly we go to the bank. We hang clothes on the line. Is this New Zealand? We make dinner, do dishes, see friends, mow the lawn, go to work, feed the chickens, and contemplate killing Victor.

There are good reasons not to kill Victor. Well, there is one good reason not to kill Victor. According to my chicken sources, which largely include the Internet and my friend John, hens need a rooster to maintain the pecking order. It doesn't matter. The real reason I have not killed Victor is simply that I can't imagine myself doing it. His feathers are a striking deep red and dark blue. He is delicate, in contrast to the plump hens. He seems, to me, to have a personality. It is a funny, anti-social personality, but a personality is a personality. In other words, my reasons for not killing him are wholly sentimental. I think of Victor as a person, and you don't go around killing people just because they annoy you. For similar reasons, I have resisted the urgings of my friends to make a soup of the old hens. They tell me to get some younger ones because the reality of New Zealand does not match the expectation. I thought—without thinking, if you know what I mean—that the real thing would be hiking up majestic mountains to crystal blue lakes. Now, winter having set in, the sentimentality extends the other way, to my thinking about home. Sometimes, it is hard to be in a place stranger for its apparent familiarity and, during these times, it becomes easy to miss Boulder, Colorado, the last place we lived in the States. Some things seem worth missing. I miss easy access to friends and family.

Other things are simply embarrassing to miss. I miss the Costco outside of Boulder. It's common here to pay $500 for a microwave, $30,000 for a new sedan, $15 for pancakes, $12 to see movie, $8 to rent a DVD. We have a dryer (purchased second-hand, thank you) but seldom use it because electrically it costs eighteen cents per kilowatt-hour, is just too expensive. When we rented a condominium in Boulder, with a semi-ardid climate, perfect for drying clothes, we tried hanging out the washing on our deck; the president of the condo association, who happened to live in the building facing ours, left a note reprimanding us. Apparently, laundry made the place look low-class. Full clothing is part of the landscape here, though. Our friends duck good-naturedly under the jeans, shirts, and towels to knock at our back door. I was invited to an afternoon barbecue this summer; our host took sheets and towels off the line as the sun went down, chatting with us all the while.

This tendency I have toward sentimentality might go some way toward explaining why the reality of New Zealand does not match the expectation. I thought—without thinking, if you know what I mean—that the real thing would be hiking up majestic mountains to crystal blue lakes. Now, winter having set in, the sentimentality extends the other way, to my thinking about home. Sometimes, it is hard to be in a place stranger for its apparent familiarity and, during these times, it becomes easy to miss Boulder, Colorado, the last place we lived in the States. Some things seem worth missing. I miss easy access to friends and family.

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The New Zealanders I've met are, as a general rule, less sentimental than I am. Perhaps this is because things are just closer to the bone. Even major highways, for example, are narrow two-lane roads, with stretches where the hills sit to one side, the sea sits to the other, no median between the lanes. If someone slips across the center line, as a result of fatigue or drink or simple inattention, there is nowhere to go. You crash.

If there is less room for sentimentality in a country like this, I think it is also because the Kiwi feels a closer connection to the land than the typical American. I do not mean this in any melodramatic way. This is a small country, only four million people. There is simply, quite literally, less standing between the average New Zealander and his or her food. This is no scientific sample, but a high proportion of the Kiwis I've met either grew up on farms or have relatives who did. Even those who buy their lamb wrapped in plastic at the Pak 'n Sav Supermarket have no illusions about its source. What distinguishes a New Zealander, I think, is that he or she, having grown up on a farm, has a very visceral awareness of the natural world, and is therefore inimical to the omelette. I'm starting to see that the omelette has little to do with form and everything to do with posture. What distinguishes an omelette, I think, is its careful attention to the present. It meditates on what is before us and finds reason to praise it. The omelette's gaze does not waver. It is this, why, perhaps, an omelette is always left even when its subject appears insignificant. In "Ome To Garlic," Stafford looks into the spice for something more than flavor or shape. He sees "a message from the midst of life"—a "memory" that "touches your tongue." The poem concludes:

You walk out generously, giving it back
in a graceful wave, what you've been given.
Like a child again, you breathe on the world,
and it shines.
If looked at long enough, if you stop to breathe, the world shines in its simple existence in the here and now. Odes do not flinch from either the beautiful or the nauseous. Odes are the poetic equivalent of those birds that flew around in Aldous Huxley's novel Island, crying out, "Here and now, boys" to return wandering thoughts to the present.

Some of my students don't want to believe this about poetry. My first year, I began with a lecture on Wodehouse's poems, on truth and beauty. "Not wanting to announce poetry as a kind of lie. One of the adjuncts if looked at long enough, if you stop to breathe, the world shines in its simple existence in the beautiful or the nauseous. Odes are the poems of blue lightning it thrusts among the pads, the things of this world?"

Her description of a specific kind of bird, though, soon moves into an investigation and appreciation of the spiritual in the material:

"Like a pin of blue lightning it thrusts among the pads, the things of this world?"

Oliver extends her meditation, as she puts it, to "the things of this world," which are the objects of an ode's attention. Having published her poem in 1994, she must have known this same phrase from Richard Wilbur's well-known poem, "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," which appeared in his 1956 collection entitled Things of This World. Wilbur's poem, too, praises the spiritual in the material. A man is just waking and, in that state, observes, "The morning air is all awash with angels." His view outside the window is confused by sleep and the early dark; what he mistakes for angels is just the day's wasting, hanging on the line to dry. In that half-asleep state, he sees the angelic in the human, the spiritual in the material. The man seems to shake himself awake towards the end of the poem:

Yet, as the sun acknowledges
With it warm look the world's hands and colors,
The soul descends once more in bitter love
To accept the waking body, saying now
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,
"Bring them down from their ruddy gallows,
Let there be clean linen for the back of thieves;
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,
And the heaviest musk walk in a pure floating
Of dark habits, keeping their difficult balance."

The man acknowledges, as he wakes, that clothes are only clothes. He must let go of his dream and live in the real world. But even awake now, he sees them differently than before. We return to the world each day in "bitter love," a love for the material that can never be spiritually pure because it is always rooted to the body. The final line suggests the line we must all walk between the spiritual and the material. Even nunns have their "dark habits." Even they must keep their "difficult balance" between the material, since they are human beings with desires, and their spiritual calling. Wilbur's poem meditates on the connections and tensions between the spiritual and material; it seeks the one in the other and finds reason to praise, therefore, the most mundane objects of the material world, even sheets and towels.

Looking at things straight on—the rejection of sentimentality—I am starting to think, is also the right approach to living in New Zealand, even in a largely uninsulated house, in a country where gale-force winds are relatively commonplace, and winters are long, chilly and wet—inside. (A Canadian told my friend John that "Kiwis hold their winters indoors.") What an ode tells us, I think, is that every detail in our lives, if truly examined, has a distinct beauty and importance. There is no beauty without the woeful world in it, as Wodehouse puts it. The mountain, what I thought of as the real New Zealand before I arrived, is mere backdrop.

It is in this spirit that I am, on and off, writing my own ode to Victor. Is he a subject serious enough for the ode? Is there reason to praise him, as an ode must? Oddly, Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley comes to mind. Writing in 1820, Shelley heaped Pindaric-style praise in "To a Skylark," a poem that, really, is about the speaker's desire for the eloquence he hears in the bird's song:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow.

I can't imagine a bird experience more directly opposed to my experience with Victor. Victor's music, if it be music, is modernist atonality, cacophony. It jars, makes you jump, drowns out National Radio. Sometimes, awakened at the blurry border between night and day, I think to myself: Victor must die. Still, I do not kill him. Still each morning his persistent call pierces my window, wrenching free my grip on a dream. Here and now. Here and now.
Setting My Compass Home
Amy Halloran

I was a city mouse until I was six, when my parents moved my sisters and I just north of Troy, a vanquished industrial giant along the Hudson River in upstate New York. Melrose was a fairly undeveloped and distant suburb. In the late 1800s, wealthy Trojans had built big homes and boarding houses along the Boston and Maine train line, creating an Avenue A and envisioning a summery retreat that never got past the first letter. By the time we arrived in 1973, the hamlet had its own post office and a few other streets. The last freight train went to Troy that year, but I was too young to sense the whistle cry as lonesome.

Mine was the kind of wild childhood full of outdoor rooms: the clay pit below the tracks, the abandoned turkey pens of an old farm, the hulking shapes made by trees and bushes. Across the street from our house was an overgrown tree and plant nursery that all the neighborhood kids simply called "The Nursery"—and it seems now that it cradled me. But of course I wanted to leave these outdoor spaces, and all the other spots I loved in the country, when I hit my teenage years. I no longer wanted to dig up clay or play house under the arcs of the thin, branchy arms of bushes. I wanted to sit in rooms that had been built, not grown.

My best friend Jim and I wandered through abandoned buildings in downtown Troy—houses and warehouses, factories and forges—fantasizing about the past. The current city was a shame, boarding a dead mall and its spooky parking garage. Bearing flashlights and sometimes a small crowbar, Jim and I entered buildings through loosely boarded-up broken windows. We climbed fire escapes and lifted roof hatches. Sometimes, we just opened doors.

In the dank, dark privacies of long-vacant spaces, we flipped through dusty record books at forgotten desks, searching for wild artifacts. We thumbed through address books and guest logs, read the papers stuffed in walls where the plaster crumbled away from the lath. All teenagers, I suppose, live in their own worlds, but Jim and I often in a ghost town populated by our speculations—spirits who settled with the dust that covered everything we touched.

We stood on rooftops and watched the sunset and thought about leaving Troy to find our lives and ourselves in other places. We were well versed in Troy's feats: inventing the detachable collar, making the ink to print American money, forming the first all-women's labor union; staging the first performance of "Uncle Tom's Cabin." We hoped that Troy could climb to great cultural and economic heights again, but the present city was too small for our big egos. We left as soon as we could.

Although Flannery O'Connor assured would-be writers that anyone who survived childhood had enough material to last a lifetime, I felt that I needed to know more than home—my parents' home in Melrose and the city that felt like home—to write. I went to numerous colleges and cities in the Northeast, seeking places that would feed my writing, I wasn't looking to settle: I was just looking.

When I was twenty-three I moved to Seattle and though I lived there nearly a decade, my restlessness persisted. Five years into my stay I won a "Looking for a New Jesus Christ Poetry Contest" and its grand prize trip to Rome. I loaned out my furniture and sold most everything else I owned, as if I were going to the moon. I spent three months isolating myself in Italy, foolishly thinking that all the great ex-pat writers submerged themselves in solitude.

Eventually, I took my lonely self back to Seattle because I didn't know where else to go.

Getting pregnant solved my indecision about place. When my first son was inside me, I wanted to be home. This shocked me even more than my parents, who were used to my self-imposed exile. I craved the climate of my childhood the way other women crave dill pickles. I wanted the familiar sky-splitting lightning and ear-splitting thunder of summer. I needed the drama of the bitter cold and the surprising release of spring. When I returned to upstate New York, everything looked right. Studying an outcropping of rocks was like seeing an old friend.

I bought a house in Troy and I live here more completely than I did in any of the cities—New Orleans, Boston, Rome—I explored during prolonged adolescence. Perhaps this sudden sense of presence is the result of being a parent, which has thrust me into the immediate moment and away from the imagined ones that busied me all those years. Whatever it is, I am here in a way I have never been elsewhere—and my writing has never been stronger.

I love knowing where I am, on my mental map and the maps I study at the historical society. These maps show the changing building-scape of the city, and I use them to plot the lives of my characters—either real people who lived in Troy or fictional lives that I fashion. Rooting myself in Troy has helped me develop these stories. Tethered in place, my words are no longer balloons floating through the sky. I position characters in old mills or buildings downtown.
Part of this rooting has been interviewing Trojan residents for my writing. I've collected oral histories from city dwellers impacted by urban renewal, members of a community that was destroyed to make way for a bridge, and 'kids' who worked in the garment industry at the turn of the last century. With the help of some illustrator friends, I used the information from this last project to write a children's book about the local history of child labor. Turning real stories into fiction is rewarding; I feel like I'm preserving and creating simultaneously.

Unfortunately, I find that my setting can be perceived as a weakness. A local authority on children's literature advised me to take the child labor book to a vanity press, as the title's only appeal would be local. Other work has been dismissed as too local. Does anybody call William Kennedy or Richard Russo's Pulitzer Prize winning fictions too local?

Perhaps I earned these blows, in a karmic sense, by running from my region. I left Troy thinking that I was not a Trojan at heart, that I was too good for my city. Now that I've chosen it as a setting and subject, my writing has gained a new authority. But it is the authority of an ant because no one can hear me.

Perhaps this is the curse of regionalism. The term when applied to literature is a dismissal of the fact that descriptions of dialect and distinct geographies cackle universal human truths. Kate Chopin's New Orleans has been dubbed "regional" but what of Kafka's Prague? And Faulkner's Mississippi? As Faulkner said of his work, "Beginning with Sartoris I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it."

There is no such thing as writing too close to home, even if home is not as recognizable to the general population as say, New York City. Writers know this, and, if we are lucky enough to get our work into the world, the connection to place can be acknowledged as important. Willa Cather has a whole section of Webster County, Nebraska named after her; in 1965 the state legislature dubbed the area "Catherland."

Before I came home I could turn a phrase, but I couldn't quite create a believable place. Homeless, my words wandered through places and people I didn't know as well as I know poor old Troy. Sure, writers exile themselves and render complete worlds on the page, but often they write of the worlds they left. James Joyce consulted friends for details on his native Dublin while writing from Paris.

I wasn't interested in the streets I'd left until biology set my compass to home. My son needed to know the world that was real to me, the seasons whose scents punctuated my childhood. I had mistaken myself for a wanderer. I am now content to wander from bed to desk, pausing, of course, for many trips to the kitchen, and long stretches by the windows, where I can study the progress of the foliage, from buds to leaves that will cushion and curtain me from the traffic that travels on my street.

My house sits on a hill seven miles south of my parents' place. Our front doors face east and our foundations hug hills. The sunsets here are eye-catching, just like the ones I used to watch from my perch atop the swing set when I was a child. Back then, my attic bedroom faced the overgrown nursery that housed my fantasies; now, my office faces a treed lot. While my neighbor cuts the grass around the trees, the shrubs are big and the rooms they make, cupping their arms over the ground, remind me of the Nursery's sheltered spaces. They say you can't go home again but this native has returned, and the dirt feels good on her feet.

I digress. The general point is that I was too good for my city. Now that I've chosen it as a setting and subject, my writing has gained a new authority. Homeless, my words wandered through places and people I didn't know as well as I know poor old Troy. Sure, writers exile themselves and render complete worlds on the page, but often they write of the worlds they left. James Joyce consulted friends for details on his native Dublin while writing from Paris.

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knob. The debris littering the mountain slope you are hiking along is called talus. Bedrock is the solid rock that lies hidden deep beneath the topsoil of the earth and can be counted on to change its consistency, just like the nature of your very best friend. The diversity of the landscape is waiting for you to discover it, and the first step to experiencing it is within the pages of Home Ground.
Southern Architecture
Ellen Goldstein

The Ragged Mountains wear down after millennia of rising up, subsiding into eroded ridges, crow-harried hills crowned with sycamore peeled white as bone. In the candlelit quiet of his mansion, Jefferson drew plans for a university: pavilions and colonnades facing the library, designed to be a temple of knowledge, at the foot of the mountains.

You can still find rose-head nails in the wash behind the East Range, where half-moon windows open like fans above every doorway, and buildings root into the clay as if they had grown there. Each morning Jefferson rode down to oversee the slaves who dug clay and fired bricks, which they laid in walls and paths, keeping to his plans until bricks flowed red over the land.

The following

PLACES

appear in this issue of you are here

The Ragged Mountains, VA 37.96 N 78.70 W
Ripon, Wisconsin 43.08 N 91.20 W

Pencil drawing by Abbi Holt

Aegean Sea 36.68 N 25.70 E
Ashhurst, New Zealand 40.29 N 175.76 E
Baltimore, MD 39.28 N 76.61 W
Baton Rouge, LA 30.44 N 91.19 W
Be'er sheva, Israel 31.25 N 34.80 E
Belen, Brazil 01.45 N 48.48 W
Boston, MA 42.36 N 71.06 W
Boulder, CO 40.02 N 105.28 W
Brunswick, ME 40.83 N 70.32 W
Burnt River, OR 44.37 N 117.35 W
Catherine, NE 40.09 N 98.52 W
Chicken Creek, OR 44.53 N 117.35 W
CuiPipe, Brazil 23.42 S 49.28 W
Denver, CO 39.74 N 104.99 W
Dublin, Ireland 53.33 N 06.25 W
East Range, University of Virginia, Charlottesville 38.03 N 78.48 W
Elkhorn, OR* 44.54 N 117.39 W
Estes River, Germany 53.92 N 09.73 E
Estebanig, Germany 53.52 N 09.73 E
Farewell Bend, OR 44.31 N 117.22 W
The Fertile Crescent 54.56 N 143.67 E
Fortaleza, Brazil 03.78 S 38.59 W
Garden of Eden* Gold Hill, OR 44.54 N 117.39 W
Hamburg, Germany 53.55 N 09.87 E
The Hamptons, NY 40.97 N 72.18 W
Hells Canyon, OR 45.55 N 116.58 W
Hudson River 42.35 N 73.29 W
Iron Mountain, OR 44.63 N 117.45 W
Jerusalem, Israel 31.78 N 35.22 E
King Ranch, TX 27.68 N 97.98 W
Kitchen Creek, OR 44.65 N 117.58 W
Lake Taupi, New Zealand 38.81 S 175.91 E
Las Vegas, NV 36.17 N 115.14 W
London, England 51.50 N 00.13 W
Massey University, New Zealand 40.38 S 175.62 E
Methrose, NY 42.48 N 73.62 W
Monderees River, Turkey 37.52 N 27.30 E
Mexico 23.58 N 102.58 W
Mesopotamia 33.20 N 43.70 E
Mississippi 32.57 N 89.87 W

* coordinates unknown or imagined

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Contributors

Vallerie Rangen has published ten books of poetry and two chapbooks. Her latest books are The Fear (Eklektik Press, UMKC, 2018), which received the 2005 William Rockhill Nelson Award, and Remedies for Verge (WordTech Communications, 2005).

Lauren Basset, PhD, has lived in Belgium, Israel since 2001. She teaches politics and government at Ben-Gurion University—and is the author of a forthcoming book from the University of North Carolina Press. Originally from Seattle, she enjoys writing to her cousin, Olivia, and other family members about her impressions of Israel as a mother, scholar, and observer of everyday life.

Leslie Clark earned her MA in English through the creative writing program at Old Dominion University. Currently, she is in English faculty at Cochise College in Douglas, Arizona. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in more than twenty years. She is editor/publisher of a quarterly online poetry journal, Voices on the Wind, www.voicesonthewind.net.

Jean Frederick is a photographer, teacher, and historians living in Texas, but was raised in Oklahoma. Her photography centers on the culture of modern Native Americans and occasionally profiles her adopted homeland, the Latin world of San Antonio.

Ellen Goldstein was born and raised in central Virginia. Her poems have appeared in The New Hampshire Review, Measure: The Mid-American Review, and Storypath. She lives north of Boston.

Bharia Jena Gonzalez is a freelance journalist and writer based in San Antonio, Texas. She has published in diverse newspapers, magazines, and journals. Currently, she is finishing a novel, Colombian: A Texas Story, based on how her mother crossed the border in the 1940s.

Amy Hallinan has written for Salon, The Seattle Weekly, and the American Book Review. Her short stories have been published online at McSweeney’s, Saplings, and Entropy, and in McSweeney and Alimentum journals. Currently, she writes opinion pieces for The Times Union and The Daily Gazette, and is working on a novel and a comic book about urban removals in uptown New York, where she lives with her family.

Abbi Holt, was raised in Charlotteville, Virginia. Educated at the University of Virginia and Boston University, she teaches Latin in Arlington, Massachusetts.

Ginger Knowlton, of Boulder, Colorado, is currently living in New Zealand as a visiting artist. Her drawings and oil paintings are held in private collections across the United States and New Zealand.

Melanie Meyers recently graduated from the University of Arizona where she studied geography, creative writing, and Spanish. Her interests include the landscapes of the Southwest, which inspired her honors thesis in creative nonfiction. She will be continuing at the University of Arizona for graduate studies in geography this fall. Additionally, she is a professional mountain bike racer, and enjoys pedaling to places around the world.

Kristen K. Nelson is a writer of short fiction. She was born and raised in New York. Her poems have appeared in The Sun, Poetry Review, and elsewhere. She is the coeditor of the journal The Sun (www.thesun.com), a writing center in Tucson, Arizona.

Celeste O’Dell has published several short stories, including “The Bridgegroom,” which won the Bellingham Review’s Fiction Prize. She is working on a collection of stories set in eastern Oregon, where she grew up.

Jorn Suemmern received his master’s degree in geography at the University of Hamburg (Germany) in 1994. He has been teaching geography and cartography at a small state university in northeastern Brazil since 2002. He will soon be pursuing a PhD in the Geography and Anthropology program at Louisiana State University where he will study cultural and humanistic perspectives in cartography and different ways of thinking, processing, and representing space and place.

Patricia Smith has exhibited her work widely both in the United States and abroad. Her recent exhibitions include a solo show at Front Room Gallery in New York City and group exhibitions at the Seattle Museum in Ashdod, Israel, Ruth Bachotner Gallery in Los Angeles, and Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Her work will be shown in the upcoming Istanbul Biennial. She lives and works in Brooklyn and updates New York. For more information, visit www.frontroom.org.

Bryan Walpert, PhD, is a lecturer in the School of English & Media Studies at Massey University in Palmerston North, New Zealand. His poems have appeared in poetry anthologies and many literary journals, including AGNI, Crab Orchard Review, and Tar River Poetry. His essays on poetry have appeared in scholarly journals, literary journals and encyclopedias of literature.

Olivia Webster, a recent graduate of Western Washington University with a double degree in Studio Arts and Art History, is now a practicing artist in Seattle. Her artistic passions lie in expressive and narrative explorations in oil paints. This recent collaboration with her cousin Lauren and her letters from Israel has been a fascinating journey of intuitive interpretation from a faraway land and is a continuing interest she plans on pursuing further.

What does PLACE mean to you? How do we communicate WHERE we are to those who are distant? How do we experience, imagine, understand, and represent PLACE? We invite you to explore your own ideas and ask your own questions.

You are here is an annual publication that focuses on a variety of perceptions of place and ideas about how place is interpreted, experienced, and created. It has included, but is not limited to: short fiction, essays, memoirs, journals, photoessays, interviews, poetry, paintings, maps, collages, and photography.

We encourage submissions from geographers, historians, anthropologists, philosophers, scientists, writers, artists, and anyone else interested in exploring the concepts of place and space.

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