

The WATERSHED *journal*

Featured Writer Brady Buchanan
Featured Photographer Kelly Harriger
Guest Editor PJ Piccarillo



POETRY | PROSE | PHOTOGRAPHY
thewatershedjournal.org

letter from the *Guest Editor*



Robert Frost did not shy from the inherent lament of the colder seasons. When our hemisphere tilted from the sun, his pen tended toward the darker parts of the soul—or at least the idea of darkness. So, I think of this heartfelt round of contributions to the Watershed Journal as Frosty. (I could say Frost-ian or Frost-esque, but we people of the Wilds would rather not be highbrow.)

This issue mourns hubris and lingering battle scars, porous boundaries and the loss of a beloved dog, unrequited love and torment over the imperfection of one's own words. It fears muted voices and a cow that might die of bloat.

This all recalls Chaucer's wheel of fortune, where "ever the latter end of joy is woe."

But like Robert Frost, our authors do not plunge

into the dark night of the soul for the sake of lament. Night prefigures dawn. It is prologue.

From these laments emerge epiphany and redemption. Black walnuts nourish something inside us by more than their meats. It can take a long time, but you can let go of regret. A handicap, paradoxically, can be a gift. It is liberating to be reminded that we really don't own our spots on this earth; spiders can tell you that.

This is what I love about the Watershed Journal: its writers, through the particulars of our neighborhood, arrive at profound truths, just like Chaucer and Frost did. I know this when I read here about the reverent wonder for the Miracle Worker of one's own existence, or about a cow that returns to her friends, shaking her head at the folly of us humans.

PJ Piccarrillo

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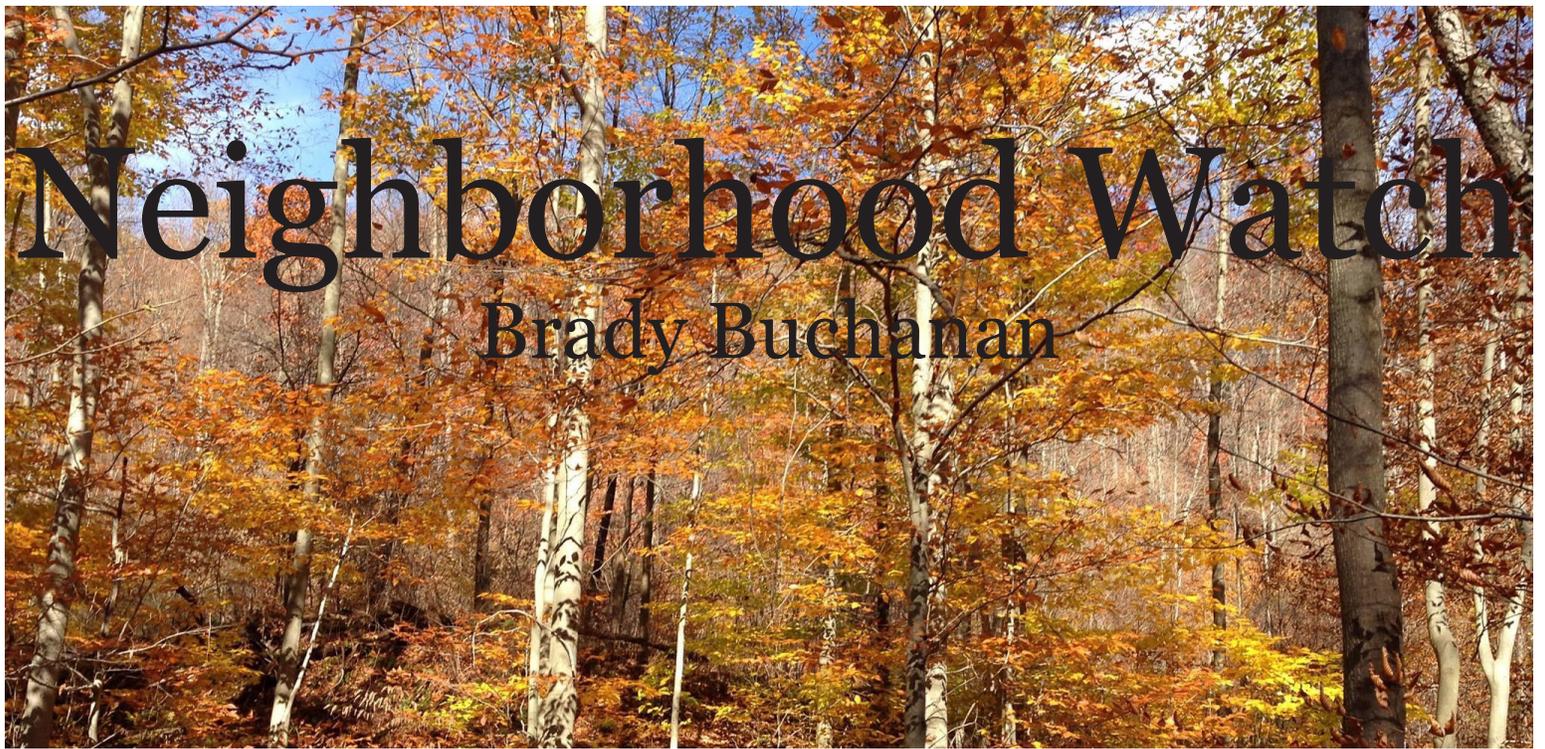
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Photographers & Artists

Scott Campbell
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Lisa Gourley
Kelly Ryan Harriger
Jim Hawkins
Bill Kesterholt
Janet Lawrence
Samantha Marder
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Peggy Zortman



Neighborhood Watch

Brady Buchanan

Scott Campbell

I was going to sit down by myself and try to write this morning about the clump of quaking aspen trees in the pasture, how I miss their leaves most of all in the fall because they're the funniest little waving hands, and when you sit on the deck in the summer and have a few beers they make you think that the universe is waving and laughing with you, not at you, but when I looked out at them from the bathroom window this morning one of the neighbor's cows was down on its side underneath the trees whose waving, laughing leaves have fallen off and are also down, not moving, and the cow's leg was cocked up in the air in a funny way that made me laugh at it, not with it, until I realized that something was wrong, so I put on my coat and climbed over the gate to see if it was still alive and it was, but it had rolled itself into a low spot and was groaning and rolling its eyes, and I felt helpless like the universe was laughing at us, not with us, so I called Harold, the neighbor, and he said he'd be over and I waited with the cow that had just wanted to lie down to rest but now couldn't get back up and then Harold got there, but we had to go get a rope and call John, who actually owns the cows, but then Harold's truck got stuck, so we went to ask our other neighbor Charley to bring his tractor down to pull the cow to its feet before it died of bloat and pull Harold's truck out of the mud, but his tractor's battery had died, so we went back to the laughing trees in time to see that John had shown up and pulled her onto her feet where she wobbled and burped her way across the field to find her friends and tell them how helpless we all are by ourselves.

Ghost Trees

Cheryl Shively



White wraiths
On the river banks,
The ghost trees
Stand watch,
Pale in the weak
Evening light.

In some places
They thicken into a
Smoke of trees
That seems to
Draw me forward.
Follow me, they whisper.

In these old forests
Time seems to
Have stopped.
I think, if I
Am quiet enough,
I will see a man step
Out from the trees
All feathers
And soft moccasins.

It still
Resonates here.
I am reluctant
To leave.



The Fall
Barbara Foulks

The fall reminds me what the Lord did
for you and for me,
what He suffered, endured, and the
great cost paid to be free.

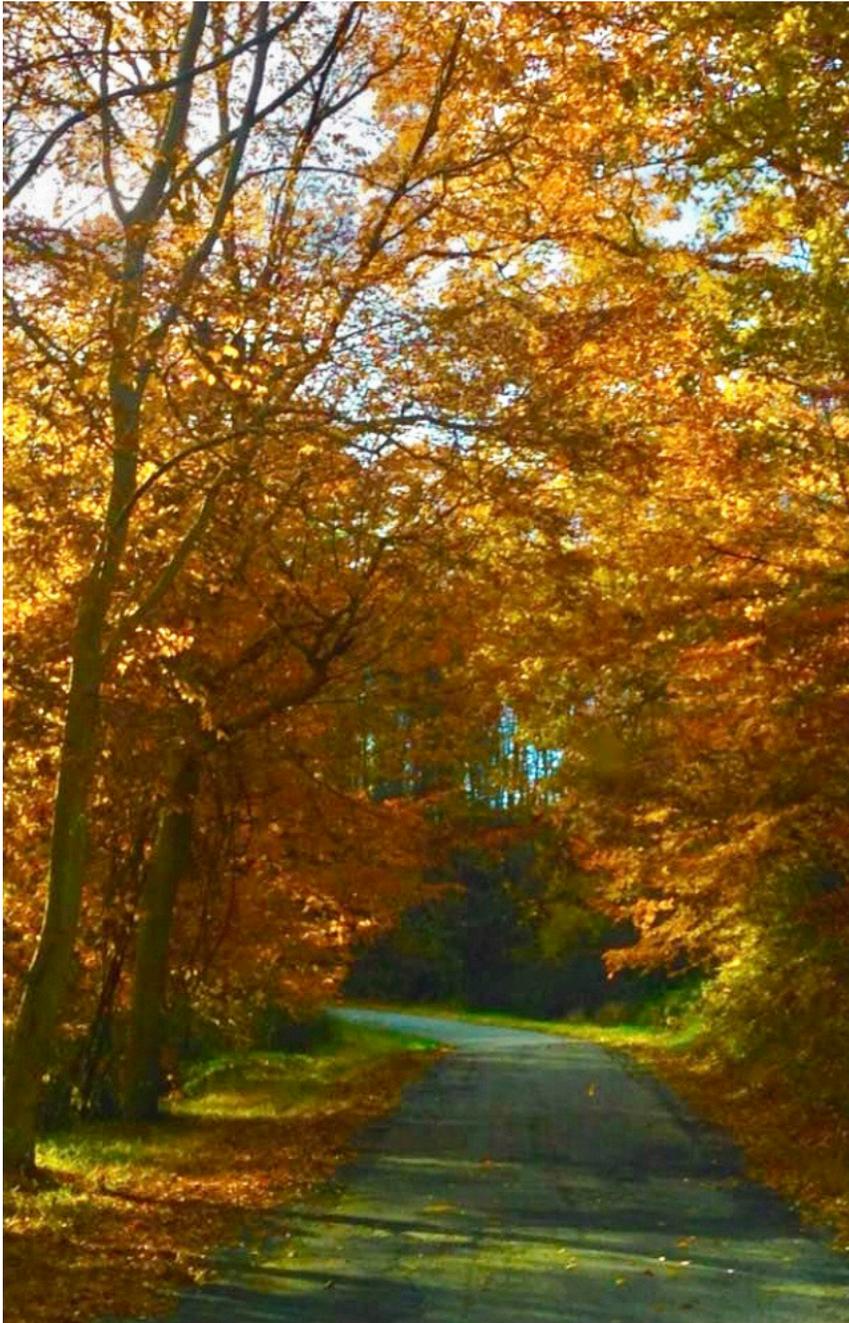
As the leaves change into the colors of a calm rest,
let them remind you of the beauty of harvest.

The fall shares the holy spirit of a peaceful mind,
and red rises into a stillness refined.

As summer dies and shift to a graceful gore,
remember the fall means worthy is the Lord.

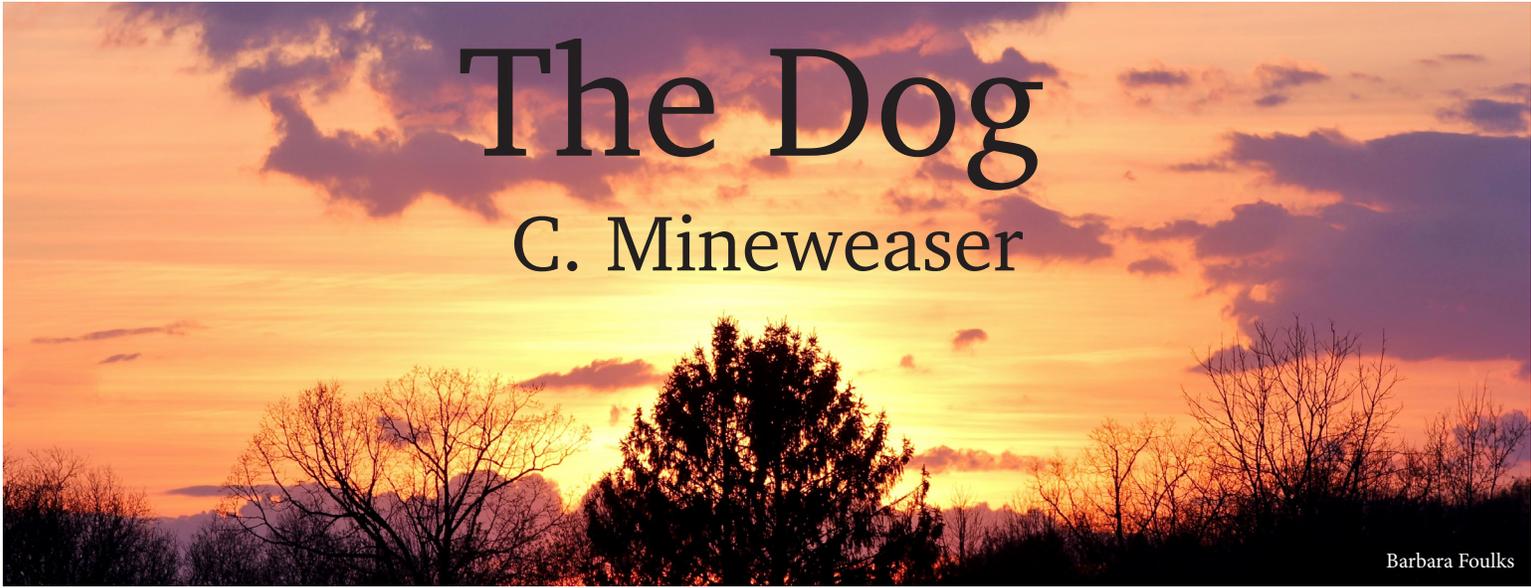
Black Walnut Weather

Susan Elliott-Myers



All through September and October,
I listened to the dull thump
Of black walnuts on the tar-paper roof.
Late October I heard the thunk
Of my father's ball-peen hammer
As he hulled walnuts
On a rock beneath my bedroom window.
November and December he cracked nuts
And ate walnut meats,
A homegrown snack for Sunday afternoons.
In the depth of winter, I heard the nightly roll
Of walnuts on the attic floor,
And the determined gnawing of squirrels
As they fed above my ceiling.
The sound was as soothing as a lullaby.

Snow on the roof,
Bare walnut branches scraping at the window pane,
Squirrels in the attic,
Fire crackling in the wood stove,
Daddy keeping guard downstairs, lightly snoring,
Who knew that I would never again
Feel as safe as that.



The Dog

C. Mineweaser

Barbara Foulks

When he was young, a boy found a dog and he brought it home. The boy told his parents that he had found the dog in the street, all wet and shivering and cold. It was a mutt—brown with some white spots—although the spots did not look so white for all the mud. It was pathetic looking, all skin and bone with big, watery, sagging eyes. Drool streamed from its hanging jowls. It bayed in a low, steady tone. The boy washed the dog with the garden hose, and it bit lazily at the stream.

The boy loved the dog immediately and fiercely, even though it wasn't so well behaved. It ate up shoes and socks and slippers. It messed in the house and tore up the rug. It begged for scraps from the table. For these reasons, the boy's daddy didn't love the dog like the boy did. Daddy would kick the dog and yell and push it around whenever it ate up the shoes. The boy watched in horror—always silent—and when the thrashings were done, he would take the dog to his room and pet its head and ask, "why do you have to be such a bad boy?" The dog never answered, just looked up at him with its big, sagging eyes and sighed.

The years went by in much the same way, except now the boy learned to keep the dog out of daddy's way. The boy was older now, and his parents let him play outside by himself. The days were long, but the boy was never alone. The dog followed him everywhere. Its muzzle was grey now and it limped a little with arthritis, but it always matched the boy step for step.

In the summertime, the boy would take the dog to the creek. The boy threw sticks in the water and watched as the dog jumped in after them. The dog would find a stick and paddle around lazily with it. It never did quite learn to bring them back. In the wintertime, the boy would take the dog outside and watch it eat snow. He would build sculptures and the dog would knock them over. It seemed to the boy as if this would last forever.

But the summers kept coming, and the winters did

too, and soon the boy finished high school. The dog didn't like to play much anymore, but it still loved to follow the boy around. When the boy left for college, he patted the dog on the head and said, "be a good boy, why don't ya?" The dog wandered around the house every day looking for the boy. Its eyes were cloudy now. Daddy had stopped yelling at it when it messed in the house. He knew that the animal couldn't help it anymore. Instead, he just shook his head and looked away.

The boy finished his first year of college and came home ready for summertime. He knew the dog wouldn't be able to swim this time, but he knew that it would love to lay in the sun and nap. The boy lugged his suitcases onto the porch and left them there. He flung the creaky screen door open, waiting for the dog to cover his hands in slobber. But he saw only his parents waiting for him. He called for the dog. It didn't come.

"What is it?" the boy asked.

His mother was wringing her hands. "The dog is in your room," she said.

The boy bounded up the steps two at a time. He threw open his bedroom door. The dog was laying on the rug. It glanced up at him—glanced, but did not move. The boy sat down next to it.

"What is it, boy?" he asked, stroking the dog's head. "What's going on?" The dog sighed in reply.

"He stopped eating a few days ago," the boy's father said, appearing in the doorway. "Drinking, too."

"Did you take him to the vet? I mean, did you—" the boy asked.

"He's sixteen," father said. "He's dying."

The boy looked at his father with big, watery eyes.

"You know what you have to do, son," father said, extending a hand to help him up. "You know what the right thing to do is. The hunting rifle is downstairs. You know where."

"I can't."

"You have to. I'll bring him outside."

The boy moved dizzily through the house and to the back yard. And he felt that way most of the summer. The boy returned to college and finished without thinking about the dog. He wouldn't allow himself to.

More seasons came and went. The boy turned into a man after a while. He found a woman and married her on a sunny day. They had kids. They favored their mother, but they had their daddy's eyes and his smile. They were kind and smart. The man was very proud of them. They played and they danced, and they made good grades. And, as all kids do at some point, they asked for a dog.

"I don't want any dogs in my house," he told them. They cried. His wife scolded him, and they got a dog. But he didn't look at it. He wouldn't allow himself to. One day, the door was left open and the dog ran in front of a car. He buried it. He didn't cry.

The kids grew up and they went off to college. They called when they could. The man lost his mom and then his dad. His kids got married. He retired and spent his days with his wife and watched her hair turn grey. He was old now. He had some grandbabies. They were smart and kind and the man loved them very much. His knees started to hurt. He limped a little with arthritis. The days began to feel very short and the nights felt very long. One day he couldn't remember his social security number. Then he couldn't remember his wife's name.

His kids put him in a home. It scared the man very much. He didn't like the ladies that went in and out of his room all day. They were not very nice, and they didn't like the man. They yelled at him when he messed in the bed. He didn't know the person that looked at him from the mirror; he was pathetic looking, all skin and bone with big, sagging, watery eyes. He stopped looking in the mirror. People kept visiting him and they would cry. He didn't like that. They asked the women that went in and out of his room what's the matter? and one of them said he stopped eating a few days ago. Drinking too.

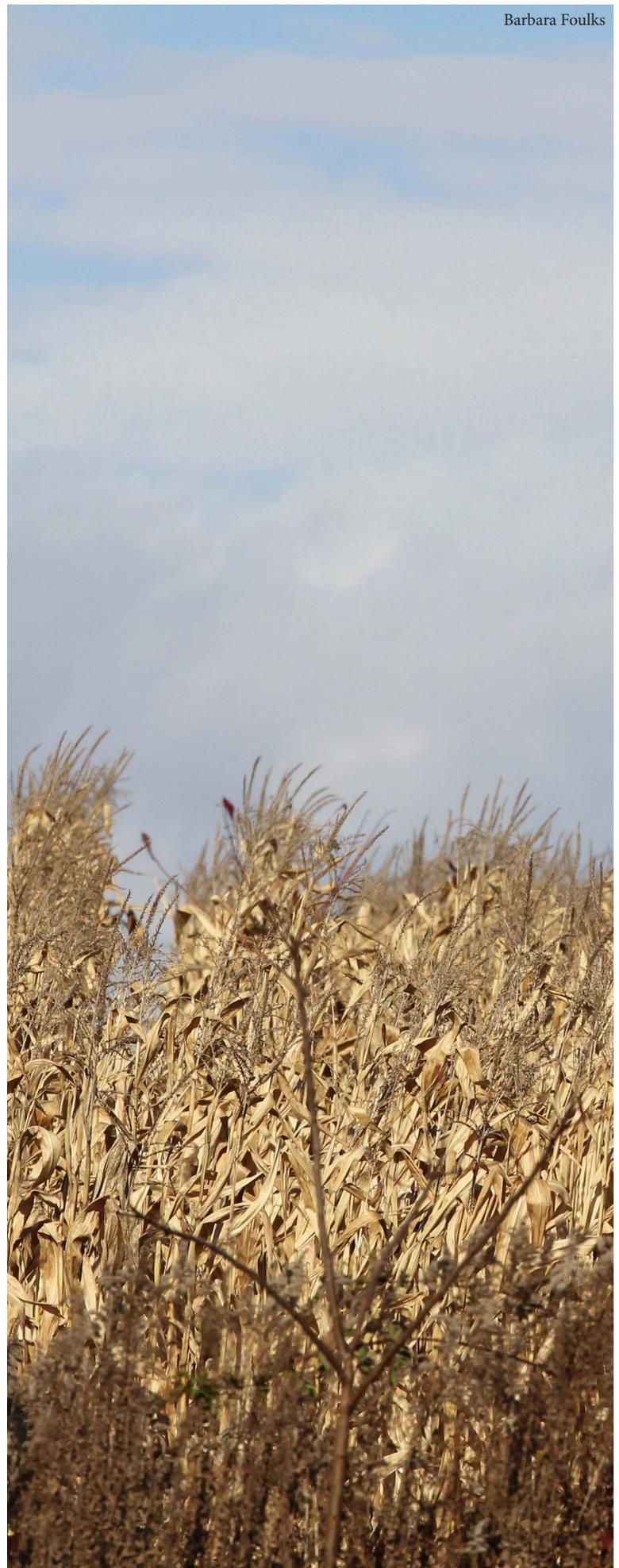
One night, the man woke up. He felt tired, so tired, but he couldn't sleep. He pushed the button that called for one of the women to come to his room. He didn't want to be alone. Not tonight. He sat up, waiting for someone. He saw movement in the doorway.

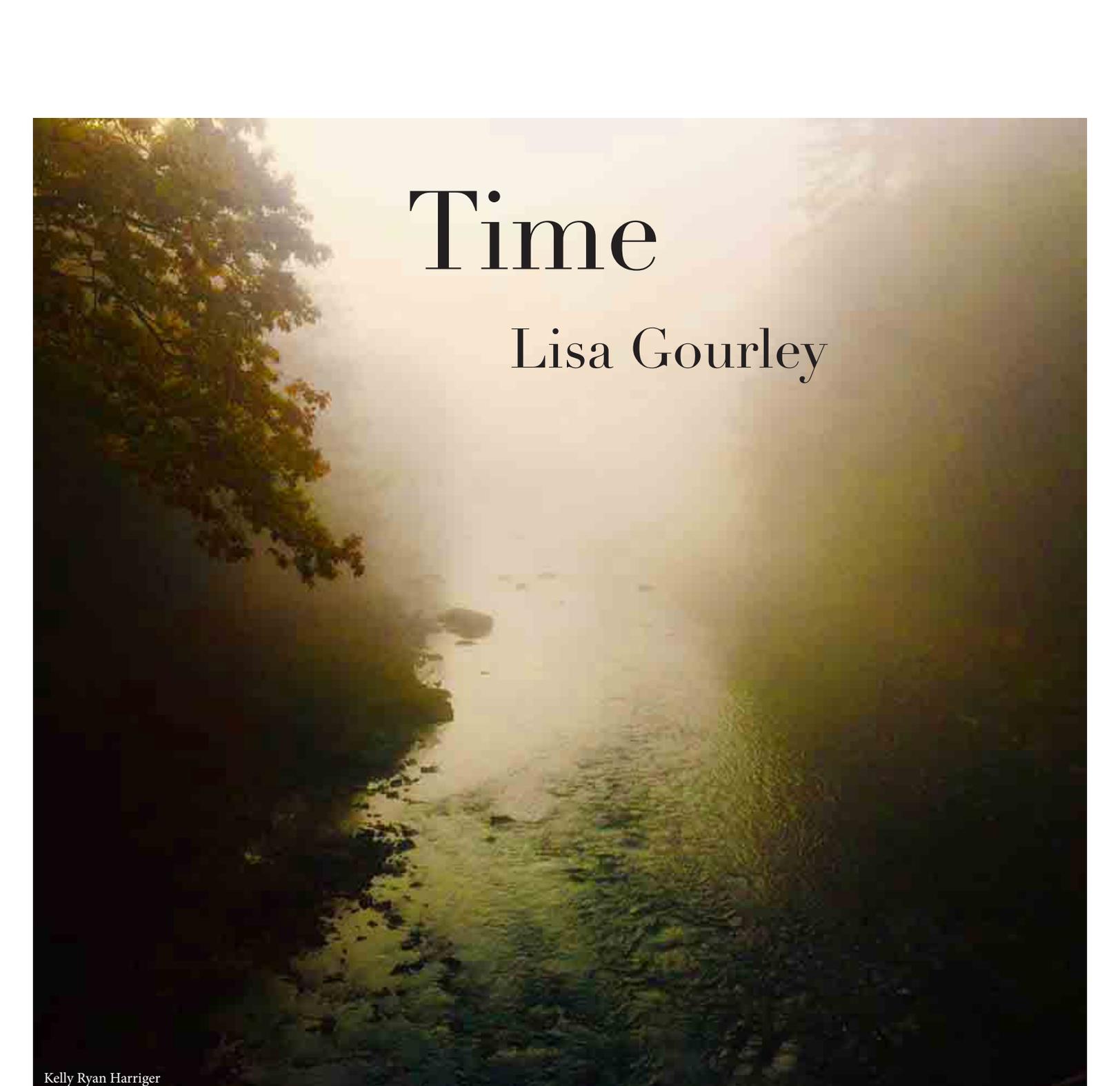
"Come in," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Come in, I can't sleep. I need some company."

No one came.

"Come on in, I said," the man repeated. He looked again at the doorway. It wasn't a woman standing there, but a dog, brown with white spots.

"Oh, it's you," the man said, smiling. "Won't you be a good boy and come on in?"





Time

Lisa Gourley

Kelly Ryan Harriger

I have been here in these woods for all the seasons of the Great Mother
I have watched the young saplings grow to tall trees
Changing their colors from lush green to bold red
My seasons have also moved on
My saplings have grown tall strong independent
Time here in the woods goes softly and silently on
As it does for all
Here now the Great Mother and I welcome the new
Never mourning the old

Silent Keepers

Greg Clary



Jim Hawkins

Our friends are witnesses to our lives,
standing like coat racks at the edge of memory,
holding what we've shed,
reminding us of what we carried,
and whispering when we forget.



What Cannot Fit

Byron Hoot

Shellie Mineweaser

Fewer birds visit the trees
in my yard as fall steps through
approaching winter. I try to make
a calculus of falling leaves
and bird visits, but I'm not good
at that kind of thinking.

I know what I see and how that
makes me feel and have to be
satisfied with what I am given –
a mystery, a beauty, the transitory
nature of both, their refusal to say
more or less than what they will.
Or, perhaps, can; they, like me,
limited by language that cannot
fit reality.

Stillness

Janet Lawrence



Janet Lawrence

This old house sits near the road,
shaded by the large oak tree,
sentinel at the front.

Acorns drop to the ground,
busy squirrels race on the branches
and stuff their cheeks.

At night the stairs creak
as the boards settle for the night,
and the curtains stir from some
invisible hand.

The house was ready,
mostly neat and tidy,
piles hidden behind doors,
dust swished from sight,
clean towels hung to use,
dishes stacked to dry.

Then the creaks were extra footsteps,
the stirrings were words,
laughter broke the stillness,
and the empty seats had company.
Squirrels hesitated, heads tilted
at the sound of voices on the porch swing.

Now the house is still again,
quieter than before.
Memories stir the corners,
dust settles where you sat.
Outside critters feed undisturbed.

Who knew silence would be so loud.

Housekeeping

Barbara Foulks

Deborah Sarbin



fox screams
owl hoots
loon calls

doe wanders, then rests, listens with every muscle
fawns trail their doe roadside
possum, lured by ripening apples, ventures to my back garden

these porous boundaries of our homes--
yards, doorways, thresholds,
fences, assemblies of wood and wire
to keep in, keep out--
flimsy obstacles we forge

we sweep away cobwebs, leaves, twigs
to prevent their rehoming, their sprouting, flourishing

tiny rituals of expulsion to convince
ourselves of their difference

Two Mourning Doves

Philip Terman

On the single branch,
Chests puffed,

Preening each other's feathers—
They stay their place,

These examples of how
To inhabit a spring morning,

As I attempt to transfer
This vision to you,

Wherever you are,
Perhaps listening to our own birdsong.

Isn't that what we wish for ourselves?
Birds on a thin branch for our quick moments?

All around is restlessness—
Blackbird skittering tree

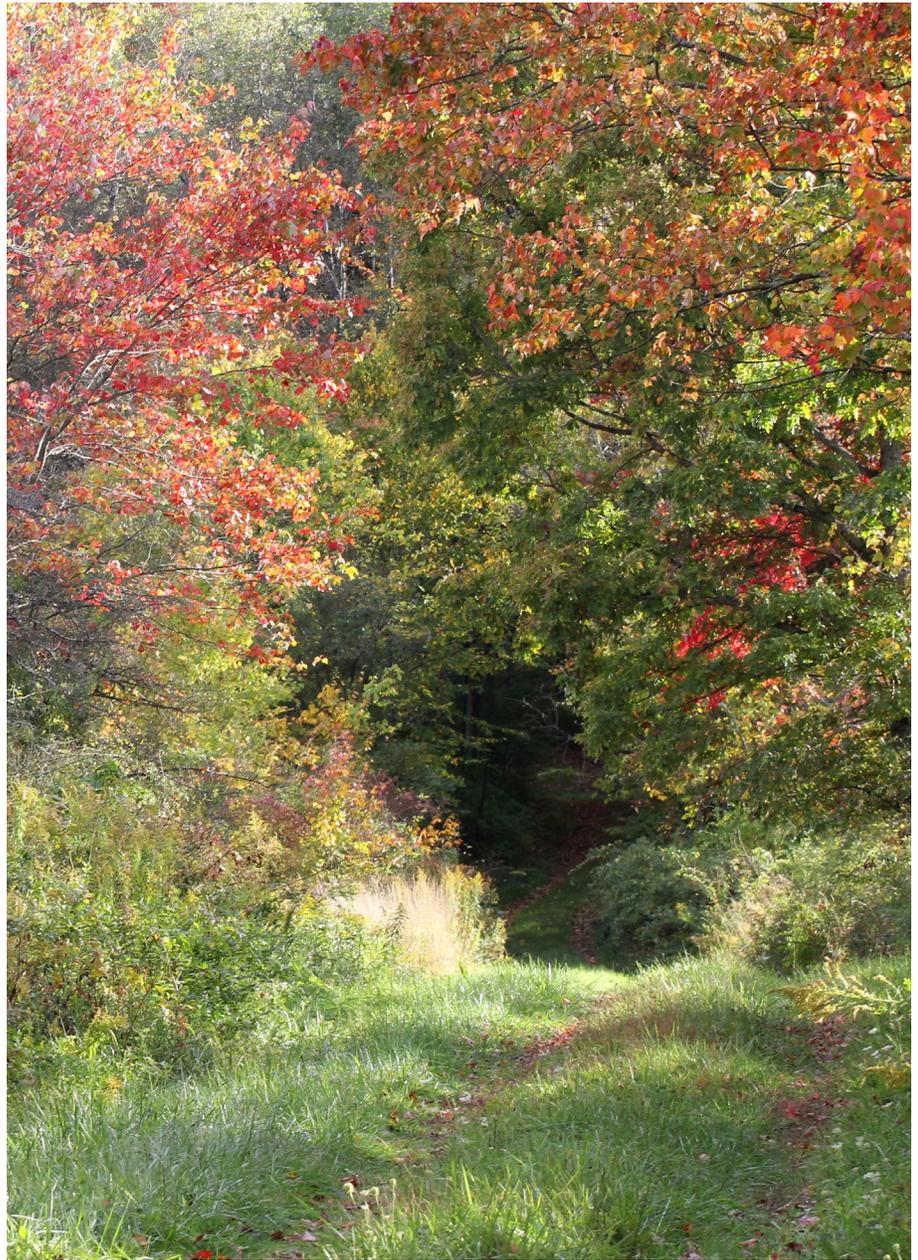
To field, retriever's nose poking
In all directions at once

And me looking up
Then down on this page.

How is it, in this crazy season,
With their capacity of flight,

These two can remain on that thin branch,
Loving each other up?

Don't they have a nest to build?



Barbara Foulks



Sometimes You Need to be Reminded

Dana Hannibal

Janet Lawrence

Sometimes you need to be reminded
To make banana bread when the bananas are ripe,
To sing at the top of your lungs with the windows down,
To read books instead of doom scrolling,
To walk in the rain without an umbrella,
To dance around a campfire in the full moon light,
To walk on the warm grass with your bare feet,
To listen and pause when a friend shares something vulnerable,
To buy the flowers for no one but yourself,
To choose fruit over ice cream (and then still have the ice cream anyway),
And when days are really tough,
To take a breath....and exhale slow.
Sometimes you just need to be reminded,
Of the simple presence in life.

Did you grow up playing Cops and Robbers Cowboys and Indians or School? Did you play Doctor? Did you play House?

After growing up I played Going to the Store a lot and Paying Bills and Playing Chauffeur

Knowing how to Play a Clarinet was beneficial when I blew it as an adult
in the Punxs'y Philharmonyck

We played Tag, played Ball, Hide and Go Seek, Statues. I learned to Kick the Can out in the country, oh, and Spin the Bottle, sometimes in the dark

We played string games
and patty cake, singing
My Jolly Playmate
Come out and play with me
and bring your dollies three
under the apple tree

We jumped rope and even
learned Chinese jump rope

Teddy bear, teddy bear,
Turn around.
Teddy bear, teddy bear,
Touch the ground.
Teddy bear, teddy bear,
Go upstairs.

Teddy bear, teddy bear,
Say your prayers.
Teddy bear, teddy bear,
Turn out the light.
Teddy bear, teddy bear,
Say good night.

Five little monkeys,
Jumping on the bed.
One fell off,
And bumped his head
Mama called the doctor,
And the doctor said: "No more
Monkeys jumping on the bed!"

Bluebells, cockle shells,
Eevie, ivy, over;
I like coffee, I like tea;
I like boys, and the boys like me.

We pretended we were The Partridge Family. We re-created musicals

Most of us lived in town
and walked to school

Our parents worked at the Talon Zipper Factory or Channel Lock Tool and Die or Allegheny College or the Coca Cola Bottling Company

It would have been beneficial to learn to play Farmer or Mechanic; the closest we got

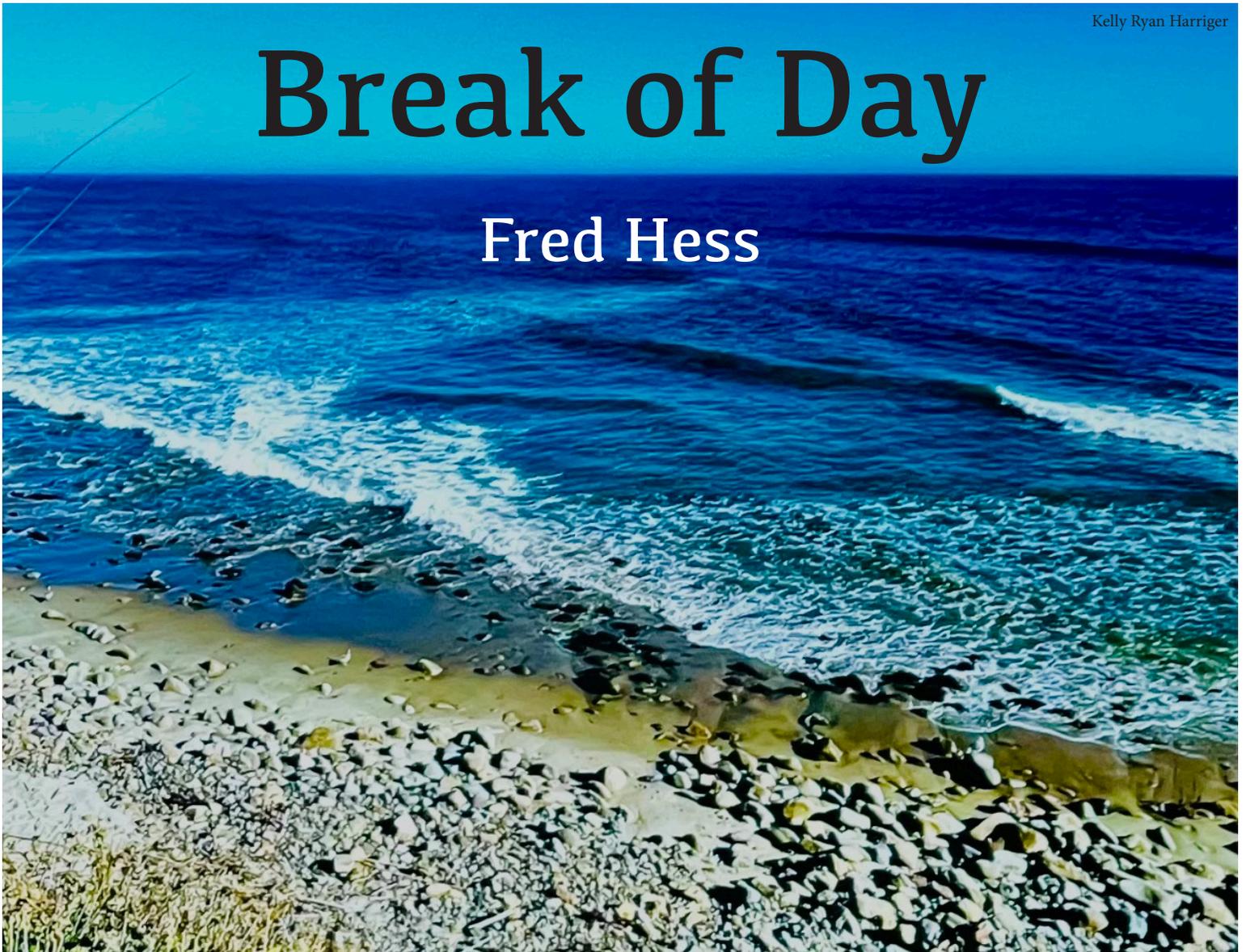
was cruising in to the station on our stingray bikes with streamers out of the handlebars to put air in our tires, then measure it, which was free

Playing

Lynda Bennett Valladares

Break of Day

Fred Hess



The muck had nearly claimed him
when he broke its clutch
and crawled to solid ground,
days waylaid there
before the toehold
gave way to sure footing.

Years later, beyond the jungle,
now on a headless beach,
his toes wiggle,
the sand grains tumble
between slow dancing digits,
through small hourglass gaps.

The sun rises.
Without lapse,
the moon sets,
as he realizes
his freedom
from any forgotten regrets.

A Different Way

Wayne H. Swanger



Scott Campbell

Spread your wings and fly
so cliché, and worse,
A terrible line
To begin a poem
About someone born
With stunted wings
In a world that considers
One's wing span
A measure of potential
and for that matter,
Worth

Gods in white coats
Tried to remake
Her in their image

Wings cut,
Then stretched,
Finally, splinted

Re-formed, nay, malformed

The result?
Her flight more quail
Then eagle-like

After others had their way
She insisted she try hers, so
She climbed,
Doggedly she climbed

Climbing to the top
Of a mountain
Is not as majestic
As flying to the top

She climbed and struggled
Stumbled and bled
Repeatedly she fell

But she did not lie down;
Did not surrender
To expectations of others
Nor self-pity

Those that flew
To the top
Thought their view
From the mountain
Was the same as hers

All Things Beautiful

Kelly Ryan Harriger



As he grew older and more frequently alone, he began to examine his beliefs and curate them into manageable concepts. Much of what he'd held dear for most of his life were fragile, ephemeral ideals, concepts that did not hold up well under scrutiny, but still comforted him. He knew that many things he believed were not true, could not be proven true, but the simple act of belief, the commitment to those beliefs, brought him a quiet, resigned peace and contentment when he needed it the most.

Without hard evidence, but with an overwhelming amount of subjective experience, he believed in some infinite intelligence, a cosmic consciousness that pervaded the universe at the particle level and was present in all things. He sensed that Love, in its truest, purest form, was at the heart of that consciousness. He believed that if there was a center of the Universe, from where all things had come, that he'd find music so powerful, so beautiful, so exquisite, that it would bring him to his knees. He believed that with all his heart and longed to hear it.

He believed in Love because he saw its effect when applied properly without condition. He knew Love was a force, and that matter and energy were its conduit, and the three existed as a whole, a trinity of sorts. He'd watched animals cautiously begin to trust him, and respond to Love until they'd learned it themselves, and he believed a

portion of their consciousness had aligned with the stream of universal consciousness, of Love, a part of the infinite intelligence, and everyone was better for it.

As he sorted his beliefs, he separated the useless from the useful. Those that brought him brief moments of joy, or satisfied his intellect, he kept and held dear. He believed in hope, but as time passed, not for himself. He believed in Love, but as time passed, not for himself. It wasn't about feeling sorry for himself, as that was an indulgence he never allowed, but simply as the growing recognition of his own reality.

He reexamined his dismissal of his own search for love. Every time a relationship had ended badly, he'd sworn it was the last time, and then was surprised that in spite of his oath to never try it again, there was always a grain of hope. It was a tiny grain, but a powerful one. He didn't want to try again, but knew if he ever completely surrendered that grain of hope, there would be no point to life. So he clung to it, and clung to it dearly.

Without the consent of his head, and against the better judgment of his heart, he'd been surprised to find himself falling for someone he'd known for years as a respected friend. When he first realized it, he pushed it away, denying himself of the right to even consider it. There were too many extenuating circumstances, too many good rea-

sons to know it would not be, and could not be, and so he pushed it from his thoughts, and did his best to keep the idea at bay.

He tried to tell himself that to feel that way, to grow into a respectful love for another, would be enough. He told himself that what he felt for her, and what he hoped for her, would have to fulfill his soul and his longing for love. He tried to make himself believe it, to tell himself that unrequited love was the purest love, as it demanded nothing back. If he failed to treat love as a verb, then love would never exist, nor would he.

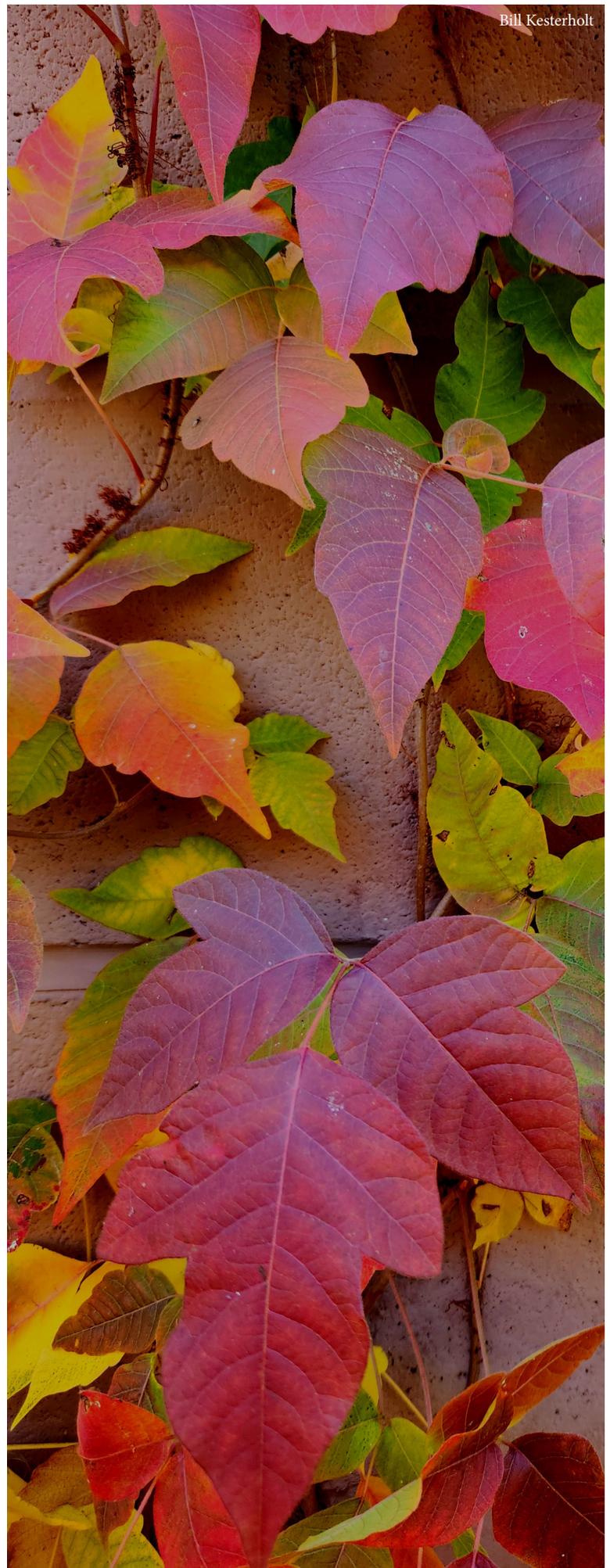
And he tried, mightily, to suppress any other feelings. He even briefly convinced himself that he'd succeeded, but it was all dashed away every time he was in her presence.

It was many things. A finger brushing a stray hair from her forehead, a sideways smile, an alabaster arm twirling above her head, a laugh that could have been a song, eyes so deep he could see the other side of the whole damned world, the crazy swirl of the entire Universe and everything in it that spun around her when she passed near him, and his shock that nobody else seemed to notice this stunning magnificence, this beautiful force of nature, but him. Were they blind? He made his mind still and remained calm, while his heart raced wildly.

But he also knew it wasn't mutual, and that was that. He respected her enough to know he would have to be happy with admiration from afar, and unrequited love would remain the order of the day. To reveal it would create an awkward situation for both, and so he buried it deep in his heart, and would take it to his grave.

Unrequited love by default becomes yet another belief, something unproven because it was untested (and therefore unreal), and something to be filed away with equal parts regret and broken hope. Yet it remained a beautiful thing, something lost but with value, a Vermeer in an attic, a packet of love notes in the bottom of a trunk, a folded poem and a dry flower pressed between the pages of a book, a song unsung until it finds its voice, things to be discovered by another, at a distant place in time, and wondered over.

Even unfulfilled love carries meaning, and he needed all the meaning he could find. He filed it away with his other chosen beliefs, to be mulled and reconsidered forever and beyond. Much of what he knew to be true was of no use to him, and much of what he believed without evidence soothed him when he needed it, and therefore was more valuable than objective truth. In his mind he filed these beliefs away, carefully packing them to prevent breakage, protected forever by the gentle gauze of hope, allowing him to cling to all things beautiful.



Morning Miracles

Peggy Zortman



Peggy Zortman

I was on my way before daylight. My aging dog, Chase, joined me. I navigated the familiar trail easily with the ambient light of the night sky. My best friend and I wanted to be at our favorite spot before the sunrise. I trudged along, head down, watching my footing when a startled rabbit broke his cover only to disappear into the wild rose thicket. It made me stop for a moment and remember with a smile, a childhood story about another rabbit that pleaded, “Please don’t throw me in the briar patch.” Chase never saw Br’er Rabbit.

My steps quickened. The sky was coming alive with color. First the golds announced the arrival of Old Sol, the heavens turned red and then orange. The sky was suddenly on fire.

Just as I exited the trees, three heads popped up from the high grass of the hay field in front of me. I had startled deer from their bed. Chase, my trusty dog, stood transfixed. He did not bark, nor did he move.

I lifted my camera, and started snapping photos. I had to be fast, the trio, one a small buck, stood their ground for only a second, then leaping gracefully, disappeared over the horizon.

The sun was now climbing into a mostly cloudy sky; but I had been blessed with morning miracles – a good dog, a smart rabbit, a fiery sunrise, a deer that stood still just long enough for a photo, and the blessings of life in the country.



Autumn is upon us. We have encountered a new Lair.
The Colors. The Hues. The crispness of the air.
The days grow shorter. The nights are forever.
We again will embrace this season we endeavor.

Fruits of the summer, falling from the sky.
The Oaks, Hickories, and Walnuts in plentiful supply.
Dropping like cannonballs. They carom off the ground.
Nature's most exotic symphony. A most beautiful sound.

The Squirrels are busy catching their treasure.
They gather nuts with ethereal pleasure.
The Hawks soaring high. Ne'er a ruffled feather.
With little concern of the oncoming weather.

In the distance, a Great Horned Owl takes to his plight.
The coming darkness he embraces with the help from the moonlight.
His wings so silent as he soars through the tree canopy.
Seeking his meal with serendipitous equanimity.

The forests fall silent. Like a mystical affair.
With their stripping of leaves. The chilling, dank air.
A kaleidoscope of colors. The leaves dancing to the ground.
Creating a carpet so majestic. Harmony in Nature abound.

Nights descend upon us quickly. It's that time of year.
Anxiously awaiting for that Harvest Moon to appear.
Tranquility sets in with the moon so surreal.
The clouds passing by with a cryptic appeal.

That indelible beacon the Harvest Moon will bestow.
As it lights up the night with a fervent glow.
Just another capricious reminder colder weather is upon us.
Time to greet this fall season with alacrity and fondness.

Just give a little bit of love,
Something that I can see,
And a glimpse of your light,
With some warmth just for me.

Just give it a little chance,
For an ethereal dance,
By the spark of your glance,
For a new romance, perchance.

Just give it a little thought,
Let me weave into your mind.
As the stars swirl around us,
You'll be amazed at what you find.

Just give it a little time,
As you sway to my rhyme,
From daylight until nighttime,
So I can show you the divine.

Just give it a little push,
Stir your reluctant heart,
For when you find true love,
It will never be torn apart.

Just give it a little try,
You won't need an alibi,
Nor more needs to satisfy,
For I promise to electrify.

A Little Bit of Love

Kirke Wise



Scott Campbell

A Whisper Through Water

Octavia Knight

A whisper through water
Dissipating before it reaches shore
I need screams to make a big wave
To be heard
In an ocean bearing
The great weight of all my sorrows
Because I am not brave enough
To shout out

A whisper through water
Carries like a lie told to the wind
No matter how big
The size slips through smoke fingers
Wisps of my past ghosts
The words exhaled from silent lips
Fall upon deaf ears miles off shore
Worlds apart
No one listens
No one hears

A whisper through water
Trapped in the immense pressure of its
Immeasurable mass of endless sea
Down into the dark depths
My secrets will forever lie
Thus, the ocean bears my shame alone
Lost in endless wandering
Forever seeking safe harbor

Anime Amber Rex

Janet Lawrence

To go back to that day,
Where the pain always came with a stab in the face
I finally understand how it's like, left alone out in the dark
Those scars on my arms and legs
Are something I can't erase
But I'm still fighting to glow
All because Aizawa said so
Day after day of just watching
Those fake characters
Them showing me life
Teaching me things I can't replace
Like how villains aren't born, they are made
Play not to win, but to have fun
They are the moon but I have the light
Them helping out more than a knight
Fighting death with my Demon Slayers
Us winning back our souls
Keeping me alive till the day I die
But I think I'll end it here
Because Naruto is running after that deer

Bill's Diner, near the lake

Joe Taylor

Distracted from my fascination with the aerial dogfight being staged above my table by two hefty houseflies, I noticed that my breakfast had arrived. My favorite, Corned Beef Hash, Two Eggs, Home Fries, a dish I take a chance on because it's rarely done right. Most often the hash is just heated up then plopped on a plate, half raw. But here, this morning it was charred, crusted, and hard pressed, repeatedly hard pressed. A process. A time-and-effort-consuming process.

My decision to forego the plastic-chair breakfast buffet at my hotel, to sit my butt in a Naugahyde booth, sliding over the exposed stuffing and slits elongated by the butts of previously satisfied patrons, and eat at Bill's Diner, immediately deemed a wise one. I wanted an eatery away from the tourists, closer to town. I wanted real. Corned beef hash, crusted, hard pressed.

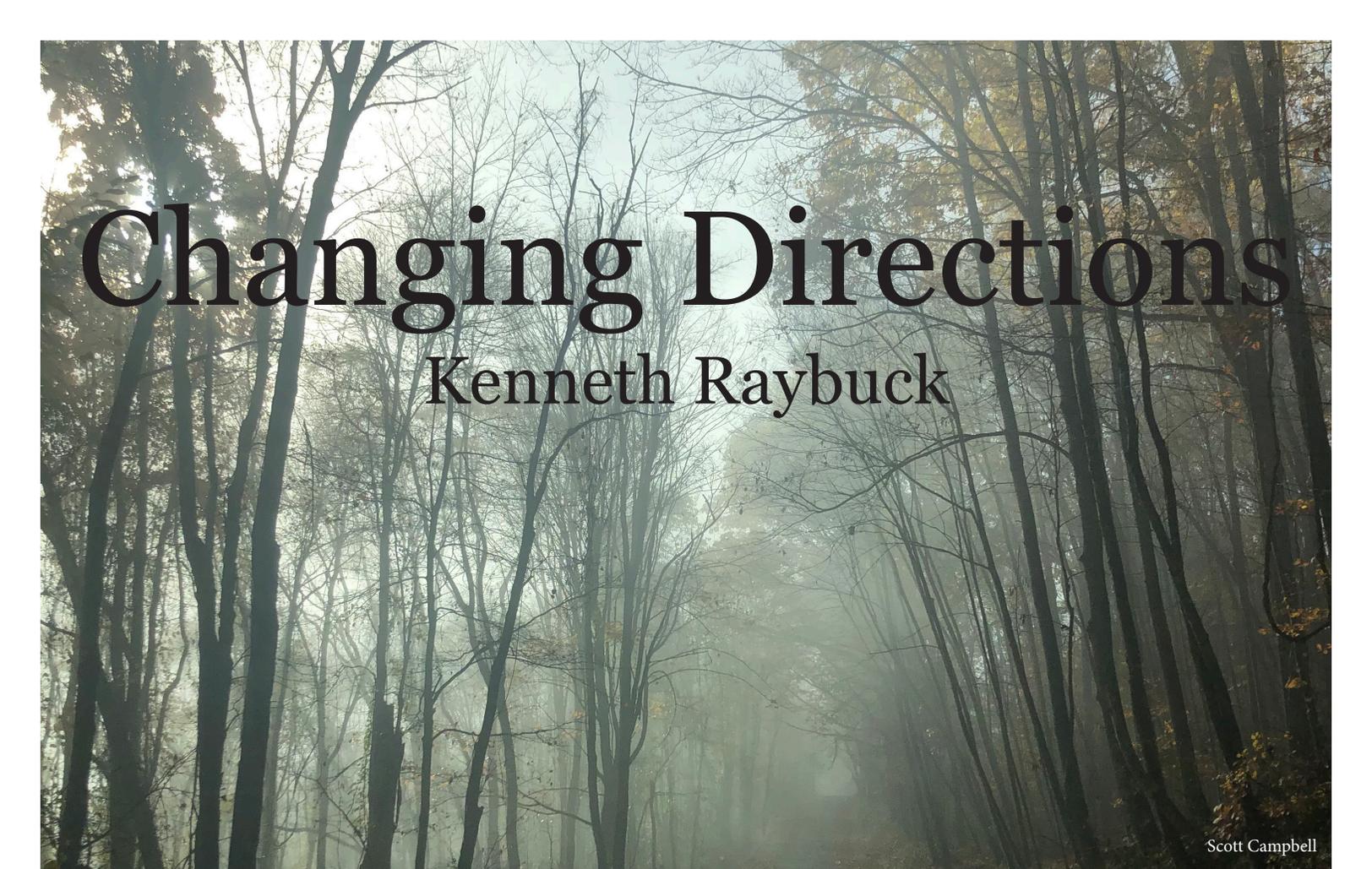
"Here comes trouble," proclaimed in mock horror by the tall, dolled up waitress kibbitzing with the "conclave of old dudes" engaged in their morning beef-and-bull session. Five local guys in gray...hair, ballcaps, bib overalls, work boots...though, work is long in their past. Turning on cue as one hurling tongue in cheek expletives to greet "Trouble." In saunters Denny, Hawaiian shirt open to his belly, cargo pants, flip-flops, scraggly hair, hangover eyes. He answers the prerequisite query to the affirmative: "they" are "hanging well." He wouldn't be Denny if, when the waitress asks what she can get him, he didn't gesture obscenely, or describe it as far as he could push it, this side of explicit. She wouldn't be honest if she didn't admit she liked the attention, a little.

I enjoy my hash, the eggs are over just right, a nice yolk to dip my toast in, the potatoes, crunchy. I take my time, the food is good, the talk around their table interesting, disjointed, hilarious, mundane. They are all fishermen, not professionally, but raised here just off the lake, grew up fishing, like kids near the woods grow up hunting. Three out-of-towners up here to fish for a couple of days sit two booths behind me. They've eaten at Bill's every day, think they have a right to kibbitz with the boys. Good-natured insults are tolerated. The guys let loose on them, laughing

at their "sorry big city asses" when they leave.

Though not formally part of the conclave, the cook and the waitress hang near the table when not otherwise busy. The waitress, hair coiffed beyond her current station in life, is tattooed from the end of her green fingernails to her shoulders, from her wrists to her armpits. Unable to read the daily specials crayoned on the white board, I amuse myself pondering if maybe she could have made a few more bucks by having them written on her plentiful arms. She makes herself useful now while the guys speculate and pontificate on what's biting, the cost of gas, whose woman is the biggest pain. In preparation for the lunch crowd she rolls silverware into napkins. She performs it adeptly, a tuck, a fold, a wrap, with just one hand. She has earned my twenty percent. The cook sits quietly, offering little to the conversation. A humble man. I wonder if he ever expects to be thanked for his cooking.

I let the waitress refresh my coffee. Thankfully she hasn't been trying to dilute "how I like it" every five minutes, and whether through laziness or experience didn't come around to ask me "how ya doing" when I had my mouth full. Finally, I can dally no more. It is time to leave Bill's Diner. My journey along the lake will continue. Thirty miles down the road there will be another diner, and thirty miles or so after that, still another one. Do the "conclave of old dudes" know that they are replicated just about every town over? "Trouble" comes in more names than Denny. Every eatery along the way has one. What a hoot it would be to bring them together for a convention. And Bill's waitress? I never caught her name, but did hear her tell a customer to call her Rose? Said it wasn't her name, but she felt like being called that today. Will the cook ever realize that he could have done what most diner cooks do, just plop a can of Dinty Moore Corned Beef Hash on the griddle, let it warm, and toss it on a plate? That he didn't have to go to the trouble to get it nice and crisp and crusty? That I wish I would have told him how much I appreciated his extra effort. That I'd be hard pressed to find a better diner than Bill's Diner, near the lake.



Changing Directions

Kenneth Raybuck

Scott Campbell

She divined its presence seconds before the wind direction changed and the air itself carried with it the scent of danger arriving. A step fell on the ground, faint - but clearly discernible to her. Then another, a foot landing closer - coming toward her. It was followed by another - crackling brush this time, allowing her to pinpoint the intruder's exact location. This was her very private, safe place, where no one had entered all summer. The foreign noise, (barely noticeable to the intruder himself), was an affront to her senses, so powerful that her instincts moved her to action before the intruder's fourth footstep fell in the dry leaves. Deer, turkeys, and bears did not create sounds like this. It was generated by an awkward, halting motion, making the muscles on the back of her neck quiver.

Quickly moving to an old tree stump, standing on it as tall as she could possibly stretch her legs and entire body, did not help her eyes locate the dangerous intruder in the thick brush beneath the darkness of the shaded forest canopy. Her eyes could not see what her other senses clearly told her brain was an impending peril. Acutely aware that it did not belong near her, in this place, she turned to her son, who had been watching her, frozen in space since the moment his mother first sensed danger. She gave him "the look" causing him to run quickly in the other direction, away from where she had been staring

so intently, something they had practiced together many times. Unsure now, he stopped and looked back.

Not tolerating his failure to do what he was taught, mother rushed to him and slapped him hard on the face. His hesitation could not continue. This was not something he should second guess. It was not training time anymore. There was an immediate threat and action must be taken. Strict obedience was required in her world, not discussion or detailed explanations.

...

It was a great day to be walking in the woods. This was a new area to him, never explored until now because it required descending a steep hill, thickly covered with mountain laurel near the top, and even denser rhododendron as he neared the creek valley below. He was glad he had his walking stick with him because the hill was steep and slippery, the tall trees and thick undergrowth kept the rocks constantly moist and coated with slippery moss. Cell phone coverage disappeared long ago, soon after leaving the truck parked at a turnoff to an old logging road.

He needed to get away so badly. Long walks cleared his head from thoughts of deadlines and controversy. Most of all, he had to get away from phones, computer screens, and scrolling past words that never ended. He needed to hear real sounds of nature, not beeps and bells reminding

him of emails, deadlines, and tasks to perform. This was the outdoors, the world as it should be. Humans belonged here. He knew this, however he realized he had ventured so far from his roots, it took extra effort to plan a day like this to get back to where he belonged. The ever-present singing of birds and the sound of a grouse beating its wings on a log brought peace and calm to his senses. The occasional glimpse of a deer moving through the trees made him feel part of it all. He was in the real world, not a virtual one created by man.

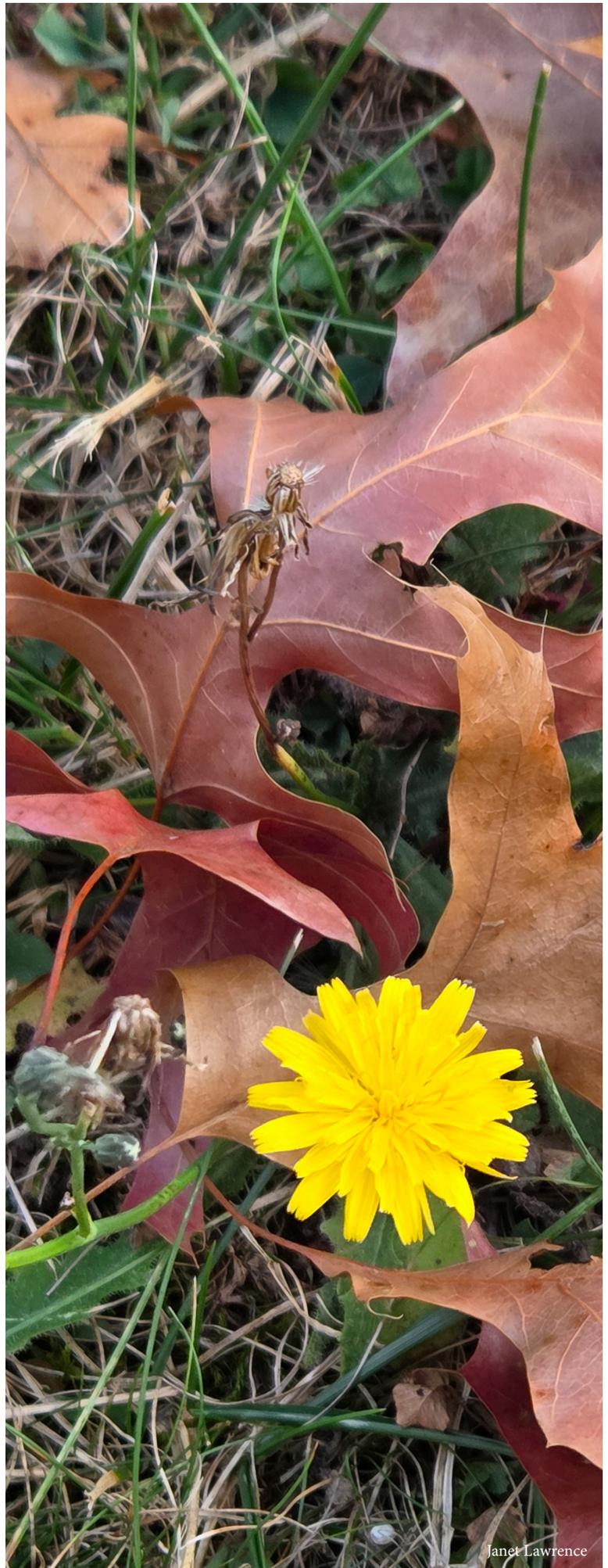
It happened so quickly, with barely a noise, he was not sure that he saw anything. Whatever he saw was blurred motion, a shadow, hidden by impenetrable rhododendron. Moving from his right to left, in a slightly downward direction, the shadow he glimpsed traversed sidewise across the valley below him, quickly popping out of sight.

He felt uncomfortable. No birds were singing now. No grouse were drumming on logs. A cloud had arrived overhead, making the forest floor even darker in the steep valley. He had not seen any deer or other animals for the last ten minutes, until now. Although he did not really see anything recognizable, his eyes were not the only thing telling him there was a presence here. Basic instincts were arising out of somewhere from deep within. Something came over him at that moment. He was not worried about a deadline now. No longer was he concerned about how others may react to his latest speech. Fear overtook him as he turned and his sluggish legs would not go fast enough to take him up the steep hill he just descended. He desperately struggled to return to the safety of his car, civilization, and cell towers doing their job as designed, connecting him to a familiar world.

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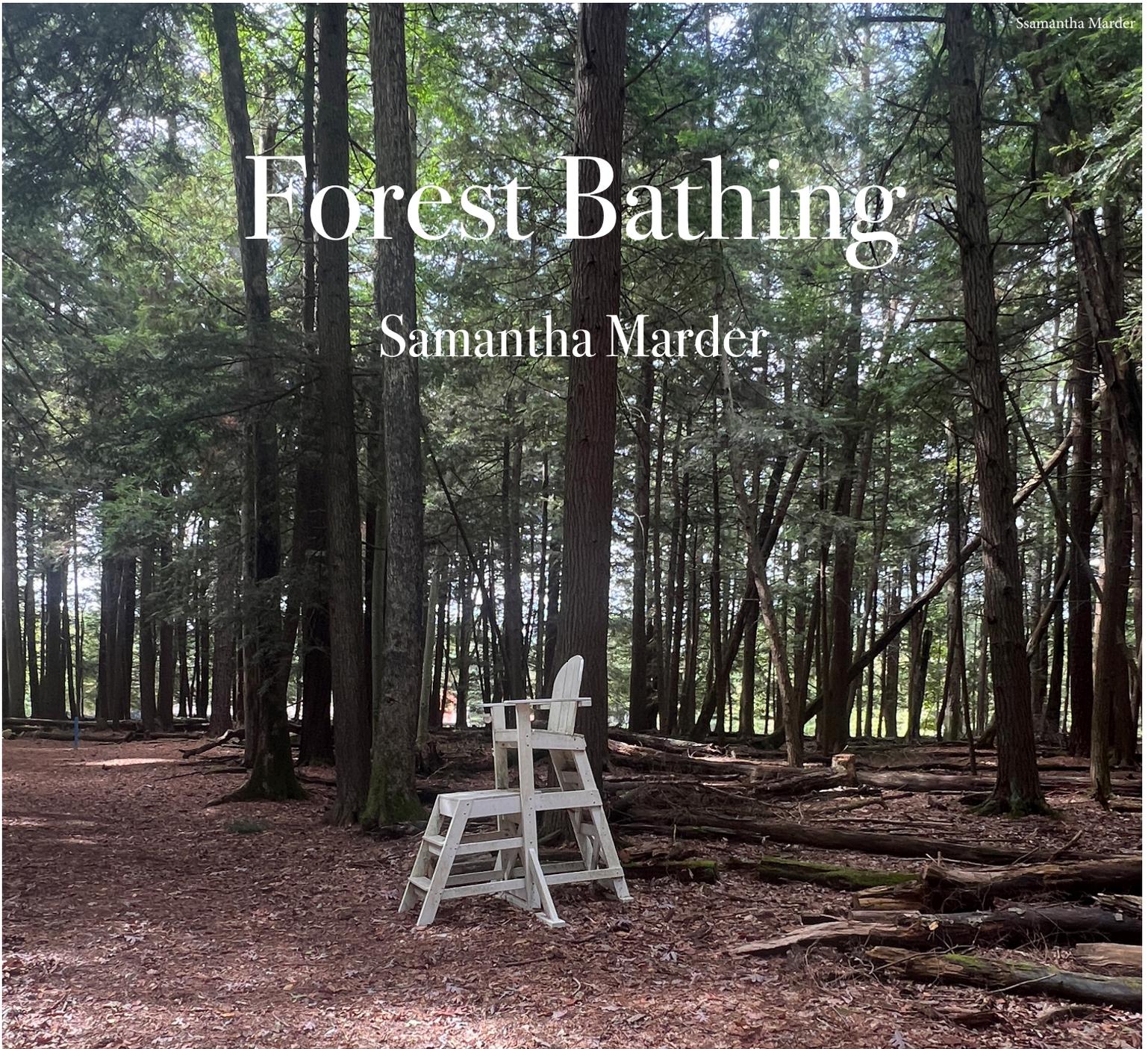
That quick hesitation and the resulting slap in the face disoriented her wayward son. He inadvertently changed directions as he continued running, now running toward the direction of the looming danger. He was moving past the intruder and she realized it must have seen her son. The brush shook and rocks tumbled down the hill as the intruder reacted and moved quickly, creating a sense of urgency for her to act. She made a half circle and crawled along under the thicket of sprawling rhododendron. She was lightning fast, although it was a steep uphill climb. The intruder was there, panting, slipping on the rocks and falling.

Its sweet flesh was unlike deer and other fur-covered animals. The cub had stopped and turned its head around, facing back toward his mother. She was grunting and thrashing wildly in the thick brush as he sat on his haunches, waiting until it was safe to join her.



Forest Bathing

Samantha Marder



I was just out walking, alone in the woods, wandering through the lush of it all. Just me and the trees breathing among ourselves. And then I came upon it – this tall white wooden lifeguard chair standing proud and ridiculous in the middle of the dense forest. No ocean, no lake, not even a puddle to guard - just this big empty sentinel watching over the ferns and moss under a sky dripping green - a lookout post for some tree bound Neptune.

And then I laughed - loud enough to scare off a squirrel- because of course, of course it was perfect! A lifeguard station for Forest Bathers!

The new serenity-seekers, progressive pilgrims paying for guided immersion in the healing essence of trees, led through the forest by a nature integration specialist shaman guide whispering “breathe in, breathe out, become

one with the bark...let the trees validate your trauma, murmur to the moss.”

Yes ! Inhale pine air like it’s a pressed juice cleanse, exhale capitalism. The tonic of the wild commodified, sauntering surcharged.

So there I was staring at that white wooden lifeguard chair like it was the last absurd truth left standing, solemn and comic like an altar above the ferns and fungi, moss carpeting the tree roots like emerald velvet in some cathedral of chlorophyll.

Even Thoreau walked home for lunch. Perhaps we all need to be saved from drowning in our own calm. Then I just kept walking - free, unbaptized, unguided – into the deeper green, chuckling to myself at how we’ve turned the obvious into enlightenment.



A Bittersweet Farewell

Keara Kennedy

Oh, fair Autumn, must you leave?
Must you take these moments, as fleeting as they may already be?
Must the winds grow cold with the freeze of a bleak winter?
I plead with you, do not take your leave yet.

Oh, lovely fall, must this all end?
Must this day be your last?
Even now, your morning sky swirls with colors that delight and soar.
I ask for only a moment more.

Oh, time of warmth, when will you return?
How long will you make me wait?
Even if it is only weeks,
Or even months to wait.

Time will stretch and make seconds feel like years.
You, however, keep moving on again and again.
You urge me to do the same, and yet
Please, I ask that you not become absent once more.

The chill of winter blows, as if to taunt.
It takes all your wondrous colors and claims the Earth like a prized possession to hoard.
I yearn for you, but yet, I must wait
To see your golden light again.



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