

From the Editor

In this new issue, certain experiences transcend time, culture, and place: the binding power and destructiveness of family; the potency of friendship; the search for wholeness and belonging, whether it's within the self, with others, or with the place we call home. Each year our faculty editors and the MFA students who serve as assistant editors and members of the editorial board grapple—in the work submitted—with the boundless and bottomless complexity of the human condition. To partake of this complexity is the great thrill and privilege we experience as editors.

This issue abounds with the stories of immigrants: individuals like those in the late Elaine Ford's short story, "The Briggait," who come to Scotland from Russia in the early 1900s, make a home, and then try to decide whether or not to immigrate again to America; the mother and daughter in Abdullahi Janno's "Heirloom," who fled war and displacement in Somalia to settle in Minneapolis, where their new lives are periodically interrupted by ongoing tragedy in Somalia and elsewhere; the protagonist in Analía Villagra's "For Ángel, The Ocean," firmly Americanized but still living her Hispanic culture, who cleans up her family's messes in spite of her brother's addictive behavior and her mother's unappreciative demands; the self-sacrificing mother in Su Hwang's poem "The Price of Rice," who survived civil war and is now, in the U.S., teaching her daughter to make the meal that saved her family: "how a fistful of rice boiled down / with extra water satisfied the rumbling bellies amid / rubble mountains, ghost artillery"; the maternal great-grandmother in Alison Hawthorne Deming's "A Portrait in Five Portraits," this year's *Meridel Le Sueur Essay*, who immigrated to America from France in 1870, settled in Greenwich Village, New York, and opened a couture dressmaking studio.

Some of these individuals found happiness and success in America; others did not. Some continued to struggle with the disconnect between cultures, the failure to assimilate, the pain of assimilation, the call of that other homeland. *And yet*—what a stark contrast to the immigration crisis happening today along the southern borders of the United States, where hundreds of immigrants trying to enter the U.S. (some asking for asylum, others entering illegally) have been detained, parents separated from children and put in detention centers, their lives traumatized, their futures and freedoms uncertain.

They, like the majority of the immigrants in our issue, are fleeing their country of origin (due to poverty, war, persecution, abuse, crime, lack of prospects, etc.), hoping for a new and better life in America. The immigrants of today are coming in spite of very tough immigration laws and extremely harsh, many would say heartless, consequences. Why? Is it stupidity, ignorance, sheer desperation? Or does the vision of that other America still hold sway in spite of everything? The vision that led Alison Hawthorne Deming's great-grandmother, albeit over a century ago, to aim to become part of what Deming calls the "maker class," "a striving class that could imagine for itself, if not wealth, then at least respectability and dignity in their work."

This vision was best expressed in the sonnet "The New Colossus," written by Emma Lazarus in 1883—lines whose familiarity takes on new power and urgency when reread in the context of the current crisis: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

I can't help but reflect upon the speaker in this long-ago poem, this "mighty woman with a torch," this "Mother of Exiles," her identity forever conflated with the Statue of Liberty, who spoke out against the "storied pomp" of ancient lands, the conquering giants of Greek fame. She proposed a very different vision from that of her male forebears, offering welcome and hospitality to all—not just the skilled and educated, but the poor and homeless as well.

Her voice is in my ear as I write this essay. Immigration is one of *many* subjects in this volume, but the echo of, and failure to connect with, that (or another) welcoming and nondiscriminating voice haunts so many of these stories, poems, and works of creative nonfiction.

We chose the title *Bodies Worth Defending*, taken from Michael Torres's poem "After the Man Who Found Me Doing Burpees at the Park Said: 'I Can Tell You Learned Those on the Inside,'" because it so aptly captures the content in this issue. Human bodies—those cared and sacrificed for; those hurt and neglected; those traumatized by war, violence, racism, abuse; those having to hide their true selves; those that give birth, grow old, die. Nonhuman bodies—the land itself, water, wildlife. "All things, even atoms, decay," says the speaker in Owen McLeod's poem "Sunrise Village."

The beautiful cover photograph from the series "Guilty" by Kwon Healin depicts the empathic power that one body can offer another. How lovingly a pair of hands can comfort a guilty or sorrowing human. In his poem "Small Treasons," John Sibley

Williams calls out for such comfort, for bodies that move “across another without harm,” for a place “where hands / aren’t cages & cages aren’t gestures / well-intentioned but failing. Where / we love with more than body & hurt / & know when we have hurt.”

In addition to the stories referenced above, the fiction in this issue includes another historical story, “The Man from Lowville,” set in 1940s Ontario. Max, the seventeen-year-old narrator, tries to come to terms with his sexuality as he finds himself alone on an evening outing with friends and the willing Jane, the teenaged girl he’s fantasized about, who’s leaving the next day on a bus to Yonkers to attend Sarah Lawrence College. Max is imprisoned in the closet created by the strictures against his sexual identity so prevalent in his time and place.

We are happy to be publishing a number of short short stories in which language plays a heady role. In “Winning,” Paul Hoffman uses the opaque language of government and the media to create an ironic glimpse into the insanity of war between fictional insurgents and the soldiers of the Empire. Lori Anderson Moseman’s dizzyingly original language in “Double Jack Slip Jig” re-creates the perfectly synchronized bodies of two miners known as double jack champs in their work—one pinning and holding a steel rod as the other pounds it with a heavy hammer—and in the aftermath of a horrific mining disaster. Stephanie Dickinson’s “The Harlow Postcards” blends fact and fiction in a lyric reimagining of the actress Jean Harlow’s last moments before succumbing to kidney failure at the age of twenty-six.

Karleigh Frisbie’s trio of short short creative nonfiction pieces skillfully inhabits the interior lives of preteen and teenaged girls. In one, the narrator hides out from a scary landlady (is that who she is?) in a boy’s bedroom, existing on Pop-Tarts. In another, she is invited back to the summer cabin of a man she considers an uncle, her mother’s friend, where instead of making her a sandwich, he french-kisses her. In the third, she imagines the life of her great-grandmother, who died in a head-on collision and stood for romance, rebellion, danger.

Food makes a colorful appearance in the creative nonfiction in this issue—food as source of nourishment, hope, satire, cultural connection. “Preserves” by Kasey Payette interweaves the narrator’s immersion in the glories of fruits and vegetables—buying, eating, and preserving—with the reality of violence in the larger world. Mass shootings, a father’s memories of fallout drills and assassinations, apocalyptic fears: “I wonder if all this stockpiling is a physiological response to danger, if this level of national anxiety is altering us down to our cells.” In “Weekly Specials,” Maya Beck gives us her unique

take on grocery stores from our collective past and present — riffing humorously on the way advertising slogans “sell” their wares and lure us in.

Men waiting in a holding cell on their way to prison in “*from Etchings*” by Andrew Krosch seek to leave a mark of themselves behind in the inscriptions made on walls and benches.

In her lovely essay “Memory Palace,” Rachel Moritz explores the deep and abiding recesses of memory (“The past is hidden somewhere,” wrote Proust, “beyond the reach of intellect.”) as she recaptures the days when she, a teaching artist and new and sleep-deprived mother, taught poetry to cognitively challenged students, including elders with dementia and Alzheimer’s. For these students, poetry was a creative and therapeutic way in: “Facts may form the backbone of our lives, but poetry has a way of working across whatever memories we’ve lost, the way music does.”

Michael Gracey shares the intricacies of baseball from his perspective as a literate high school English teacher and baseball coach in “The Future Perfect.” Self-deprecating, wise, humorous—with references to Jesus, Greek philosophers, and multiple works of literature—this essay is about how to play baseball and, *really*, how to live fully in the present. The “endless contingencies” of the game are not unlike the endless vicissitudes in baseball: “Strands of baseball wisdom can be just as tangled as the paradoxes of faith.”

Chris Abani’s moving excerpt from the essay, “The Risk of Language,” addressed to an MFA graduating class, is a cry from the heart about the power of choosing the vocation of writer, of claiming language, and story, as one’s calling. While language always has the possibility of failing us, Abani writes, “this is all we have, and we must find the courage to step off the abyss and trust that it will catch us.”

The poetry in our new issue is as provocative and wide ranging as the fiction and creative nonfiction. “It’s the thrill of language that counts,” writes Rachel Moritz in “Memory Palace,” who uses the orality and sensuality of poetry as a therapeutic tool to spark memory in people with memory loss. It’s also the thrill of the bold and sassy “Lisa Simpson, the yellow sister” who “walks in with no posse but her own.” The thrill of youth in Tegan Daly’s “Coulee Kids,” who party, have sleepovers, watch TV, dye their hair, and skinny-dip without fear: “We were not yet cautious of our form, of skin, / of strumming another human’s breath.” It’s the thrill, and weight, of a history not her own for the young girl in the Jewish Museum in “Closing Time” by Michael Pearce: “The Chagall shows a crucifix and people running / and an upside-down face and a house

on fire and / I am cursed to be born without history.” It’s the thrill of the connection Alison Morse makes in “Dream Rematerialized in Bangladesh” between her own ancestors—*“a family / of garment workers”* and a young weaver in Bangladesh, “Khadija, twenty, / factory shirtmaker since fourteen.”

Bodies—defended, taken advantage of, memorialized—are everywhere in the poetry. A boy searches for the imprint of his father’s body, the true self left behind after the father is sent to prison in Michael Torres’s “The Very Short Story of Your Knuckles”: “I memorized every corner / your name covered.” The girl in “Panels from a Celestial Autumn” by Kelly Cressio-Moeller yearns “to be seen, / to be understood,” wants to hold onto and escape from memories of a life-changing friendship that was lost: “repressed recollections / collage into interior fractures, tidal locking of body & memory / cuff together in tethered spin.” The body of the dead palomino horse is given to science for study in “Necropsy” by Jordan Escobar: “When they opened it up, I saw a canyon flooded and filled red.”

This year’s interview is with poet and creative nonfiction writer Aimee Nezhukumatathil, who was a visiting writer to The Creative Writing Programs in February 2018. The interview provides insight into the journey to poetry for a brown-skinned Asian American girl raised by loving parents, both medical doctors, who filled the house not with literature but with natural history guides and books on science. Who taught her how to make time for stillness and contemplation, to find joy and amusement without needing electricity. A girl who couldn’t find a single person who looked like her in the pages she read. The interview touches on a range of subjects, including Nezhukumatathil’s life as a teacher, her writing practice, her love for the physical world, and her decision to depict in her writing “the joy and beauty of nature” as well as “the terror and impending loss we’re facing.”

The photographs and cover image for our issue were chosen by Frankie Castillo Ortega, a recent MFA graduate of the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. After studying the contents of the magazine, Frankie responded to the strong relationship they saw between individuals and their natural surroundings: “The particularity of the environments in which we grow up or relocate defines us in unquantifiable ways.” This premise motivated Frankie “to include photographers from a wide variety of countries and cultures With this multiplicity of views, I allowed each selected artwork to participate in a dialogue about the individual’s ties to their environment, their family, and their culture.” Frankie’s selected images of infants, children, and adults—

surrounded by their natural environments or by altered, artificial landscapes — express the surrender of the body to its own fragility.

Stan Sanvel Rubin is back in style with a pithy essay review, “Ghostly Places,” that covers five new books of poetry by Fady Joudah, Diana Khoi Nguyen, Hieu Minh Nguyen, Jennifer Elise Foerster, and Peggy Shumaker. How we define, inhabit, and value place is the overarching theme in this essay: “Place is losing its traditional stability as a ground of being and a communal bond; rather, it is being refigured as a heterogeneity of places, internal as well as external.” Rubin praises Fady Joudah’s (*Footnotes in the Order of Disappearance*) “almost surrealistic instability of place and identity,” his “rich interior solitude,” and his “knowing, literate mind.” In Diana Khoi Nguyen’s *Ghost Of*, he notes the power of incompleteness: the loss of the family house in Saigon and the spatialized absence left in the family by her brother’s death.

The work of poet and performance artist Hieu Minh Nguyen (*Not Here*) is also “haunted by ghost identities and driven by the need to find his own.” The question at the heart of the book, Rubin writes, “is the relationship of desire to love—the need to be loved and the struggle to give love.” The second book by Jennifer Elise Foerster (*Bright Raft in the Afterweather*) is a haunting journey of fractured identities incorporating natural history, native history, and the mysterious and timeless female figure Hoktvlwv. Peggy Shumaker’s *Cairn: New and Selected* is rooted in place and provides, for Rubin, “a ‘positive’ to the ‘negative’ space of the other books” in his review: “She is at home in any place, enlarged by the places she experiences.”

How do we decide which bodies are worth defending? asks the speaker in Michael Torres’s poem. For the “Mother of Exiles,” probably all of them. For the rest of us, it may depend. Either way, the question is considered—explicitly and indirectly—in this new issue. We welcome you into our pages to explore this question and more, to experience along with us the rich and beguiling complexity of our shared human condition.

Mary François Rockcastle