

From the Executive Editor

Why do we publish literary magazines? The answers given by writers, readers, and editors reflect our own mission and vision at *Water~Stone Review*: to publish the highest-quality literary work in a beautifully designed and well-produced magazine. Work that matters, that is both deeply personal and says something of value about the larger world. Work in three genres—fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction—as well as hybrid work. Traditional, realistic work as well as nontraditional, genre-bending work. Work long and short. Work strong enough to attract national attention and awards. Work that arises from the mainstream as well as from the margins of our culture.

So why does this matter so personally to me, at this moment? Because this is my last issue as the executive editor of the review. I am in phased retirement from my leadership of our three programs as well as from the magazine. I wish the best of luck to the faculty and Managing Editor to whom I pass the torch.

As I look back on the making of this, our twenty-second volume,

I am also reflecting on the enterprise I have been so bound to for over two decades. Our aim, in addition to the work itself, has always been to provide a hands-on opportunity for our MFA students to participate in the making of a national literary magazine. To learn step-by-step how a magazine works, from the screening and winnowing of submissions through weekly discussions about the quality and craft of each piece to the selection of contents and work with authors.

While there's always luck involved in the success of an enterprise like ours, we believe our passionate adherence to our mission, as well as our deliberate process, have played significant roles in our success. Our graduate students, who serve as volunteer screeners, assistant editors, and editorial board members, work closely with qualified faculty, one in each genre, who oversee the work. While these students are deeply engaged in the enterprise, with each voice playing an active role in decision-making, our use of faculty editors ensures built-in quality control for the contents, and strong artistic and professional guidance for students.

The editors' roles are not easy ones. Being a faculty editor at a university-based magazine, which includes teaching a class, is technically part of a faculty's load, but the work necessary to do the job well goes far beyond the obligations of a typical class. This extra time is not always considered by colleges to be legitimate faculty service. The work I've done as the executive editor, for example, has always been outside of my official faculty and administrative load. The screening and selection of contents are done by graduate students who volunteer, are given a modest amount of tuition remission, or take a course for credit. Our only paid staff member is our amazing managing editor, Meghan Maloney-Vinz, who is assisted by graduate students who help with the promotion of the review, its social media presence, and distribution.

The dozens of MFA students who have served as assistant editors and members of editorial boards have attested to the transformative impact the magazine has had on their understanding of their own work as writers, readers, and potential editors. I am immensely grateful to them. And to our

managing editor and the faculty editors, who have played such major roles in the magazine's success over the years and who, I believe, share my sense of pride and accomplishment.

Following our mission and editorial process for twenty-two years has resulted in numerous awards, among them six poems selected for *Best American Poetry* and the Pushcart Prize, nine special mentions for the Pushcart Prize, and ten notable selections in *Best American Essays* and *Best American Short Stories*. Most recently, *Water~Stone Review* was a finalist in the 2019 CLMP Firecracker Awards for general excellence in literary magazines. This distinguished literary award series recognizes outstanding books and magazines that bring important voices to readers and make a significant contribution to the literary culture. We are very honored to be recognized for the quality of the review.

What will you find in this new issue, volume 22?

The title of this issue, *Tending to Fires*, is also the title of Elizabeth Horneber's essay. In it, the author explores her thorny relationship with her father—preacher and volunteer fireman. His tending of fires, and his relationships with his firefighting brethren, took on a mythic priority in her family.

Tending to Fires, then, is both literal and metaphoric. From Horneber's volunteer fireman to the hundreds of firefighters battling the California wildfires raging across parched grasslands and forests in northern California in Danielle Bylund's lyric essay, "Early Spring," fire is a scourge to be fought with effort and courage. Whether it's started by nature or humans—a lightning strike or the result of devastating climate change—fires can help to nurture or to destroy a healthy ecosystem.

Humans tend metaphorical fires throughout the issue. Xavier Tavera's photograph that graces the cover is part of a series titled "Borderlands" that features landscapes between Mexico and the United States. Born and raised in Mexico City and now living in Minneapolis, Tavera explores the similarities and differences between these two cultures; their collective memory; and the concept—material and ideological—of border itself. Some of his photographs challenge the viewer to question: What would a wall look like here? What

would we do if we encounter a table or a shelter here instead of a wall? Tavera writes: “Topography doesn’t acknowledge borders. The border is a manmade concept.” (“Collective Memory and Borders,” 2019, Latino/Latin American Studies Lectures, 25. https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/llas_lectures/25)

The provocative play of light and dark in the photo captures the surreal beauty of the landscape, the hope it offers, and the dangers it poses, depending on which side—Mexico or the US—is doing the viewing. The advocates fighting for the rights and safety of migrants crossing the border, and the law enforcement officials detaining or deporting them, are tending fires every bit as devastating to human life as those threatening a parched grassland.

For the first time in our history, we hosted a contributing editor this year. I thank contributing poetry editor Sun Yung Shin for the energy and commitment she brought to the task and to her fresh and singular vision in choosing the poetry for this new issue, aided by our assistant editor in poetry, R. Thadhani. The poetry rings with urgency, electricity, surprise, intimacy, and tension. In form, attention to language, and voice—in what is said and what is unsaid—the poetry reflects a range of American voices and speaks to what literature is able to do.

Heid E. Erdrich’s beautiful and haunting opening poem, “Territory Was Not Virgin and Neither Was I (Virgin),” explores the deep connection between land/nature and the human body/spirit that reverberates throughout the contents. Land, like water, has its own identity, uniqueness, and inherent freedom, despite the daily assaults, disrespect, and habitat destruction it is subject to. “If we give ourselves to anything we give ourselves to water,” Erdrich writes.

This theme is echoed in “Questions for My Body” by Kenji C. Liu: “Every night we slip back into / the ocean to refill.” It resounds as well in April Gibson’s prose poem “Coldwater,” in which an aging woman passes on “lessons on land and how not to lose it” to her great-granddaughter.

Immigration—with its accompanying opportunity, joy, suffering, and horror—is another subject on the minds of poets and prose writers. Bao Phi’s

shocking and moving “Run the Jewels” focuses on Dr. Gene Tong, a respected doctor living in LA, who was lynched in 1871 along with seventeen other Chinese men and boys after the death of a police officer: “Already my people hang like hellish ornaments swinging in and out / of the glow of gas lights, / as if their bodies flicker beneath this world and the next.”

Our poets also write of the beauty of one’s native language and their grief over its loss. In “Mi apellido es . . .,” Marion Gómez laments the “tombstone to the language my father buried with his father / to embrace my mother’s English.” Michelle Bonczek Evory’s “Becoming American” honors her grandfather, who spent twelve years in Belgian coal mines and survived Birkenau, and her grandmother, forced to cook in Germans’ kitchens: “She never talked to us of Poland, / only its language, which we were never taught.”

In “Sleeping with Women,” Leigh Anne Couch introduces us to the itinerant workers who find joy in the friendships they share in spite of hard work, poverty, and illness: “In those rooms blessed by an indolent builder / we live the story we were given and others / we make up, floor to ceiling, out of air.”

At the heart of many poems are the hunger, desire, loneliness, and need all humans feel. “i am depleted / & still requesting / to be emptied,” says the speaker in Bernard Ferguson’s “The Weekend.” You’ll also find the reality of time and earthly struggle. Not only the ephemeral nature of “Minutes evaporating as beads of sweat reentering the atmosphere,” but the beauty of individual moments: the short-lived mayflies who “dedicate their momentum to the eternal life upward” (“Imago,” Travis Dolence).

The creative nonfiction in this issue reflects the genre’s diverse range of form and content: meditative, lyric, memoir, travel, flash, collage. Here, too, the timeliness of issues we are facing in the larger world is very present: the complexity and suffering of immigration, the ravages of climate change, sexual harassment and assault, the endless history of slavery across the globe, genocide and cultural/racial erasure, land ownership, imprisonment. We also have joyous and painful personal stories that explore family dynamics, memory, aging, and loss—of identity, of life, of job and livelihood, of home, of love.

A few highlights:

In Cynthia Brandon-Slocum's "Sand," memories of the author's past mingle with a detailed analysis of sand and soil, reflections on history and memory, and the abiding meaning of place. "Is that what it's like to lose a place? You try to preserve everything, sweeping up sand in corners, but it drifts and builds up until there's not even a silhouette of what was there."

"Isle of Refuge" by Cherene Sherrard is a beautifully written and researched essay that recounts the author's trip with her husband and children to Bermuda to follow the African Diaspora Heritage Trail. Traumatic events memorialized on the trail trigger what the author calls "radical empathy," a form of catharsis, a literal altering of one's DNA. The reader, like Sherrard, experiences the collision between Bermuda's "wicked beauty," the horror of slavery, and "colonialism's limitless hunger for profit."

Morgan Grayce Willow's powerful "(Un)Document(ing)" travels back in time into the deep history of her family's Iowa family farm—past her own ancestors past national treaties and wars and on to the Native Plains people who settled the land. The author honors her own family's legacy even as she questions anyone's right to claim land: "I am a beneficiary of land-grabbing genocidal policies and broken treaties. I have benefited from legal definitions of land ownership, from the very concept that land can be owned. My identity has been shaped by being able to say 'our farm.'"

The fiction in this issue—long and short—digs deep into the lives of individuals and families at different phases of their life cycles. People search for home, try to adjust after being released from prison, recover from trauma. Children live in peril, children go missing, a long-married couple searches for meaning, individuals age and take care of each other and remember and forget.

The narrator in Ed Bok Lee's "The Ferryman" is doing his best to adjust to life after his release from prison. Living in a halfway house in his urban neighborhood and working in an assisted-living kitchen, he spends time with an old friend, resolutely refrains from thinking about an old—now gone—girlfriend, and reviews the resolutions he made in prison, ones like "Love the

loveless like they possessed broken wings.”

In Jeremy Griffin’s “Where Strays Might Find Comfort,” an old woman searching for a missing cat, a boy gone missing in the swampy woods, the boy’s bereft single mother, and a private security worker all converge. The narrator in Anca Fodor’s mesmerizing “The Taste of Stones” recalls the moment she met God on the way home from school, a traumatizing incident that changed her life. The narrator of “Jim” by Erica T. Wurth travels in his mind between his Native wife, Cecilia, who left him, and the daughter, Cecilia, he raised, who is now caring for him in his old age.

The narrator of Josie Anne Sigler Sibara’s “The Quiet Rules” is a strong, street-smart girl living with her mother and younger brother in a shelter for abused women. She looks after, and explains the rules of the place—and the rules for staying alive—to other children in the shelter.

This year’s *Meridel Le Sueur Essay*, “Thy Kingdom Come,” by Stephanie Elizondo Griest, braids together the author’s recollections of her cancer diagnosis and post-treatment trip to the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico, her ancestral home; her move to Manhattan in early October, one month after 9/11; and her work as a journalist in Beijing when she was in her early twenties. Cancer, mortality, terrorism, changes in China, and the mythic serpent in Chichen Itza all come together in this haunting essay.

Award-winning author Percival Everett is the subject of our writer’s interview for this issue, done during his visit to The Creative Writing Programs in April 2019. The interview ranges over a multitude of subjects: the role of nonsense in Everett’s work, the genesis of meaning in a work of art, horses, philosophy, painting, revision, the teaching of writing, structure in a novel, the use of parody, the importance of critical theory, place, research, and more.

In curating the folio of photographs, including the cover, for this review, Patrick Sexton, an MFA student in Visual Studies with a focus in graphic design at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, sought work that addressed the issues in the writing in unique and visually striking ways. Key themes he homed in on were “the relationships between humans and their environment,

interpersonal and family relationships, and personal identity as it relates to community and place.” The photographers selected illustrate a variety of practices, focuses, and backgrounds. “Through landscapes, travel, portraiture, documentary, and fine artwork, the photographs are in conversation with each other and with the writing.”

In his fine essay review, Stan Sanvel Rubin considers four new books of poetry whose authors represent “an ongoing wave of voices, native born and immigrant, that provides much of the energy of our poetry and many of its best new poets.” Included in the review are Ilya Kaminsky’s *Deaf Republic*; Morgan Parker’s *Magical Negro*; and two debut books: Heidi Andrea Restrepo Rhodes’s *The Inheritance of Haunting*, winner of the Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize, and *Fieldnotes on Ordinary Love* by Keith S. Wilson.

We are happy to have, Barrie Jean Borich return for a second time with an essay review of three recent books of creative nonfiction, all “research- and archive-based nonfiction works, all books by queer authors, that combine actual or conceptual artifacts as well as memory, and investigation.” Borich explores the role of shape, movement, and change in Ames Hawkins’s *These Are Love(d) Letters*, Julietta Singh’s *No Archive Will Restore You*, and *Amateur: A True Story of What Makes a Man* by Thomas Page McBee.

Like the view from each side of a conflicted border, good writing captures it all: beauty, hope, danger, need, the big picture, and the finite blade of grass. As we have for twenty-two years, we welcome you into our new issue to see for yourself the real, imagined, and metaphoric fires that burn in our inner and outer landscapes—those that belong to each of us alone, and those we share. The work we do as writers and editors exposes the monster in the looking glass from Stephen Eric Berry’s poem, “Monster”: “A world where hummingbirds feast on fireflies / And die by morning in blunt paws of dew.” It also awakens us, in Purvi Shah’s words, to fresh worlds “plaining immensity in this finite night” (“Moving houses, Maya pumps a music that cannot offer”).

Mary François Rockcastle