

*From the Executive Editor:*

This issue is haunted.

We are haunted.

**W**e are haunted as survivors of a pandemic still raging in counties and countries left unvaccinated by choice or disparity—its grief and loneliness visit this work. We are haunted as witnesses to murder and injustice, in our own state and too many others—names of these victims are etched onto these pages. We are haunted by icebergs melting, earth and seas quaking, crops failing, fires raging, and buildings inexplicably falling—this worry is imprinted onto this discourse. We are haunted by these and the innumerable collective wounds of our times and those inflicted before our days.

We are, as Heather Warren suggests in their beautiful poem “What Wounds Become,” the “ghost(s) still living.” Maybe we are so haunted by this past year, we have become ghosts of ourselves. Or, more likely, our old selves are but shadows residing deep in chambers of our forgotten parts. We work, we breathe, we move forward again, but in a halted manner now, more aware of what we’ve witnessed and survived and more conscious of what we’re still bearing. Nothing is really ever over. Is it?

It is this line, this image of ourselves as ghosts still living, or of ghosts living on inside of us, that offers the lens through which one could read this entire collection. These pages present stories of loss certainly: loss of culture, history, identity, and themes of death, dying, aging, and ending. Maria Zoccola's line "i've lost more things than I know how / to replace," from her poem "self-portrait as god," seems a universal sentiment for this past year.

But Zoccola continues to expound upon that thought in the next line: "the word for this / is excision / also evolution / also affliction." And this truth is also universal. In loss, there is inevitably revelation and evolution on the other side—*discovery* as death and deprivation's antidote, a balm to the restless ghosts within us all. Many pieces in the collection feature a return to the natural world, and a rediscovery of what has always been: the cycles of the planet(s), the birds, the light, the waves, our skin, our teeth, our very cells. Renewal and recovery patterned for us in soil and in the cosmos.

The duality of harboring the past, living with our ghosts, while allowing room in our souls for discovery, is the hardest part of being human. Anne Owen Shea's piece "What Will Not Change," Arleta Little's "Life and Death in the North Star State," James Cihlar's "Lethologica," and so many others explore this dichotomy. Navigating this space in time—honoring our past and (re)imagining our future (see "Home Burial" by Gen Del Raye), breaking what has defined us and building new identities (see "People Here" by David Aloi)—this place between the obligations to our ancestors, elders, and communities, and our promises to ourselves (see "How to Be Careful Enough" by Jennifer Blackman) is the stuff that defines our species.

Between the beginnings and the endings, we find ourselves here, taking measurement of where we are. We are here, in the act of dead reckoning, a phrase presented by our brilliant editorial board that nearly became our title. It seems every writer in this collection is calculating their current position/state while still moving, still breathing. In true navigational sense, this measurement is done by using a previously determined position, or fix, and then incorporating estimations of speed, heading direction, and course over elapsed time. But all of this seems irrevocably changed after this past year. Our speed has slowed, our course is uncharted, our fix is off. Our North Star has shifted. Or, at the very least, our perception of it has.

The photograph gracing this year's cover, by Aaron DeYoe, reflects this reckoning: an empty plane, grounded perhaps, maybe poised for flight, inactive in the moment, at least. It is uncertain if the perspective is that of the first passenger boarding after

a year of stoppage time, the crew deemed essential in maintaining these ghostly vessels, or a last goodbye to a world we once knew. Whatever the narrative behind the photograph, here is a fix—an object we once knew to represent travel and movement, now epitomizing a pandemic vacant of that “truth.” We are haunted by the silence captured here—familiar to all who have survived these past months.

Perhaps Jay Udall says it best in his poem “Saving a Fly”: “Survivors carry secrets / of luck and mercy through quickening air.” We, the survivors, like ghosts still living, rise to do the work of witness and change. Piloting, wayfinding with instruments we invent, signaling to each other along the way. This way. Now, this way. Now, change course. Now, listen. Back up. And proceed.

My deepest gratitude to fiction editor Sheila O’Connor, whose commitment to *Water~Stone Review* has been nothing less than sublime for nearly two decades. She has fostered so many excellent editorial board members and assistant editors, dedicated and careful readers all, including this year’s lovely Victoria McCurdy.

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*Water~Stone Review* simply cannot function without the dedication of the editorial board members and screeners who are instrumental to the process of reading all of the submissions, having critical conversations about the work, and shaping the manuscript’s order and arc. Thank you to all who served in these roles for this issue.

And of course, thank you to the best support and production team ever: Dylan Olson-Cole, who masterfully manages the layout and printing, and curates the folio and cover art; Anne Kelley Conklin, who copyedits and proofs all of my extra commas and everyone else’s place names, French vocabulary, and punctuation; and Robyn Earhart, who broadcasts this work by connecting and establishing real community with our contributors and our readers. Together (along with the tiny Hamline Creative Writing staff, undergraduate student workers, and best university mail carrier ever) this crew is responsible for what you hold in your hands and I am forever grateful.

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