Anthology

Great Mountain Forest

Nature-Writing Retreat

August 7-9, 2026



Introduction

The pieces in this anthology are by writers who attended the nature-writing workshop hosted by Great Mountain Forest (GMF) at its Yale Camp, August 7-9, 2026. That workshop, originally conceived by Bruce McEver and myself as an homage to nature-writer Hal Borland and his writing principles, became with the involvement of GMF, something more, a general introduction to and embrace of the need for us writers to spend time within the natural surround, and to write about that experience in ways that we hope will prove helpful to our contemporaries.

That the workshop accomplished those objectives was largely due to the skill and sensitivities of our presenters, most of them accomplished writers and fine teachers: Sean Prentiss, co-author of the most widely-used textbook on nature writing; poets and nature-magazine columnists Todd Davis and Kateri Kosek; Evelyn Reilly, one of the founders of the eco-poetics movement; Eiren Caffall, winner of a recent, prestigious Whiting Award; GMF board member Eileen Fielding, a former director of the Audubon protectorate in nearby Sharon, CT; Kevin Godurn, the acknowledged expert on Borland; Bruce McEver, who has published several books of poetry, much of it nature-based, and myself, author of forty books and a former executive of The National Geographic Society who has taught writing at NYU and elsewhere. The retreat was organized and run smoothly by Amy Wynn, an experienced arts administrator. Underwriting was secured from GMF board members and from the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area.

According to post-retreat questionnaire responses and personal conversations, both attendees and presenters alike judged the retreat as instructive, thought-provoking, and enjoyable; and I believe those attributes are reflected in the sensitivity and intensity of the pieces in this anthology. Also reflected is that one of those August days was the hottest and most uncomfortable day and evening of the year.

Contributors were asked to send writing either composed during the workshop or revised because of their experience in the workshop, compositions of up to 1,000 words of prose or three poems. I now think that perhaps the requirement to be terse (or better yet, succinct) has made the contributions read as poetic even when not intended as verse. And that may be as it should be; for as one contributor wrote to me, labels such as 'prose' and 'poetry,' and 'essay' and 'memoir' are arbitrary -- and in the instance of this particular anthology, superfluous.

Similarly, I have hesitated to identify general themes in such a varied assemblage, but some have emerged quite strongly: the sense of all the writers' being alive to existing within nature, to their need to be out of doors and among the flora and fauna in order to feel fully human, and to use those feelings to explore where they came from and where they hope to go.

Tom Shachtman, editor

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Housatonic Heritage

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and generous private donors.



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Simple observations from my time amongst the woodland writers by Mike Zarfos

Sitting in a rocker
With the color and texture of driftwood
On the covered porch
At Yale Camp

I look out over green

Lush lawn
And alder bushes that presage a beaver complex

Clouds of tree swallows hover, and fuss
Over the live foliage of lingering ash
Spared by the borer …

What are they doing?
Foraging?
Dreading?

Their young have fledged
The time to go is soon
And perhaps these will alight
With their brethren
In the reeds of the river marshes
That feed the Sound

For now, their behavior remains a mystery to me and my companion …

Elsewhere,

On McMullen
The most beautiful dragonfly I have ever seen
Turquoise and opal
Mirrored almost perfectly
Amidst puffy white clouds
And a clean blue sky
In the tannic waters
Of the Old Man

What Freedom!

To be given time
To watch and listen and smell
The Great Mountain Forest

And Todd says
I will look young forever…

Amen!

Mike Zarfos is Executive Director of Great Mountain Forest. He grew up in Deep River, Connecticut, and has served on the boards of conservation organizations in his hometown. He has led research on seabird islands in the Gulf of Maine, in Long Island Sound's salt marshes, and in Adirondack forests, co-directed SUNY ESF's Cranberry Lake Biological Station, and conducted policy analysis on ecological security in Washington, D.C. As an educator since 2007, Mike has taught wilderness skills, field ecology, and natural history. A forest ecologist, he holds degrees from Colby College and Syracuse University, and a PhD from SUNY ESF. mike@greatmountainforest.org

Three Poems
by Kathy Douglas

Workshop On the Hottest Day of the Year

Fellowship in conversation about journaling,
though grief insists, circling. Ever
an oaky smell. Fabric stuck

to the back of a chair. Everything
peels away when you lean forward, listening
to goldfinches in the meadow-sweet, past

humming fans. In the sassafras.
Your dead are far, yet near. A stranger
named Michael—your brother's name

—lends a pencil. In front, a man called
Star. Outside, a yellow flash. Writers talk
about journaling, but a body can't mind

its own mind, salty in a room hot
with uncomfortable chairs. But how
comfortable your bed will be

in the pitch-black night. Deep
in the forest. Dreams of a lifetime
of journals filled. The sheer

companionship. How Oscar Wilde
traveled with a few of his own
so he always had something good

to read. Doodles. Daily weight.
Check-boxed lists. Reminder
to leave the porch light on. Call

Michael. Michael is nowhere.
Everywhere. His star stuff travels
earth to stars, galaxies

to pores, swaths of love's fine
silk, cut from atmospheres. You have
sweated this way before.

Life in the Anthropocene

How present the Norwegian maple
grows. Late summer yellow-fringed
leaves protect, still, a squirrel's nest.

Branches float in the neighboring
yard. Host the black morning gathering
of crows, cawing the alarm. Later,

red-tailed hawks nap there. Murder
in the micro-forest is always
possible, though rainbows cross

the understory on mist descending
from micro-climates on the 200-million-
year-old Mount Sanford, too.

A pileated woodpecker,
red-crested survivor of the last mass
extinction, pecks a snack

from the rotting trunk of a white pine.
Pinus strobus. Am I woman enough to carry
the history of time in my plumage?

On scale-covered legs? In hollow
bones? I know pines must crown
the canopy to survive. I want to believe

the world will always sway blue
above them, drawing and trading
minerals and sugars and warnings

with neighbors. That the tangled
mycelium beneath the ground
will have and hold us all.

Camp Uncas, 1988

She has forgotten the layout
of their home among the foxglove
and cedars, past

the abandoned mink farm,
endangered lady slippers. Beyond
gone-wild apple orchards rife

with raspberry-seeded bear
scat. Dirt road to Mohegan Lake.
Otherworldly loon cries

filling pitch-blackness,
the lake's freeze-groan.
Just that it was a second-floor

apartment over an empty
barn, and in the kitchen,
her partner knocked a plate

of food out of her
hands, breaking it
in pieces. Forgets

what was for dinner, if
her daughter stood
near, the color

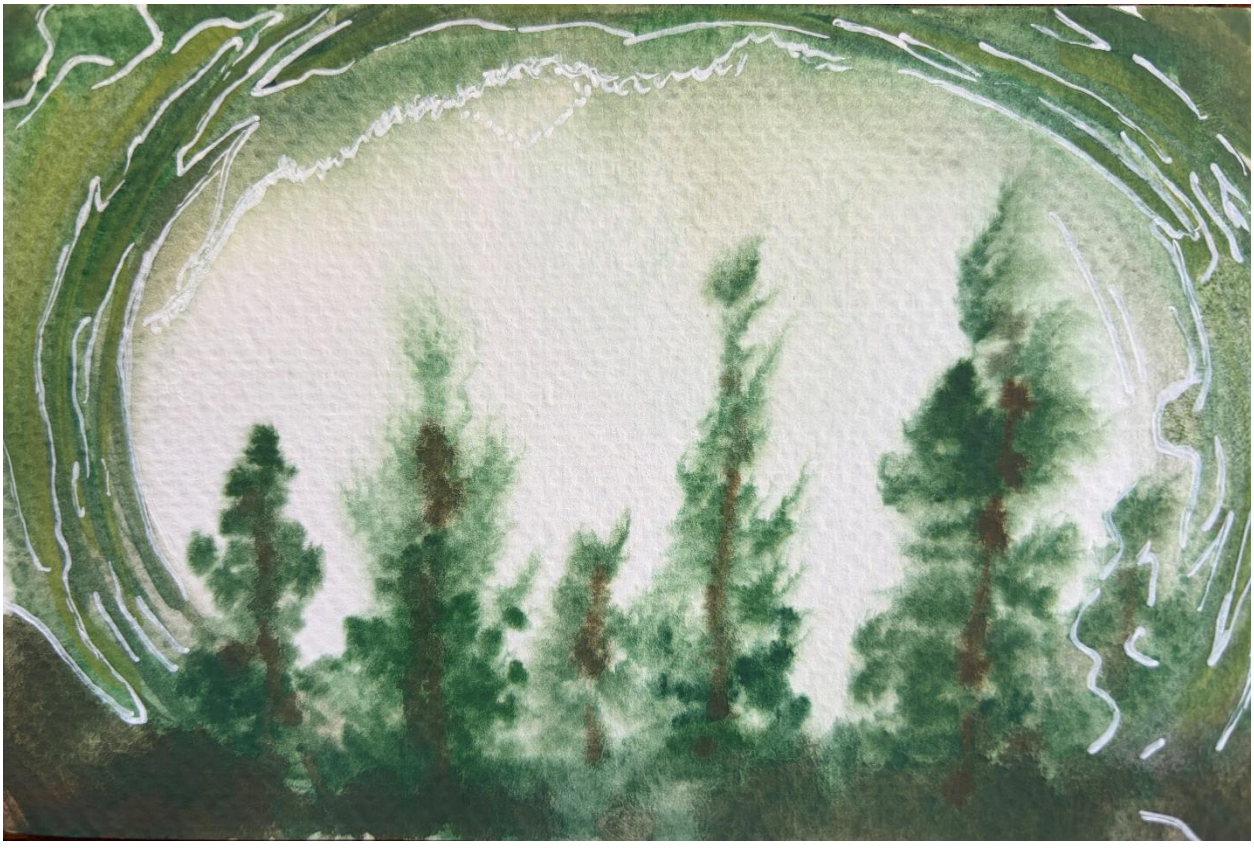
of the kitchen table.
Just the smell
of balsam. The creek

bank, an inadvertent branch
snap startling a great
blue heron into flight—

all of this. But especially the lift
and thrust raising the bird
skyward over the spruce

grove. Just seven powerful feet
of wings, the air clear and wild
above the canopy.

Kathy Douglas is a Connecticut poet, born near Long Island's Great South Bay, raised next to an 80-acre sanctuary for coastal birds and rare local flora. She has traveled widely in the U.S. and Western Europe, privileged to enjoy three of her four immigrant grandparents' homesteads, a wealth of coastal and remote wilderness areas, and the arts, culture, and sustainability practices of dozens of urban spaces. Her poems focus on personal themes, often blended with the healing properties of the natural world. She holds an MFA in poetry from Bennington Writing Seminars. Connect with Kathy on LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/douglaskathy/



Aging in Place
by Craig Berggren

The old man came out of his house, holding his stick to steady himself from the raging wind. The rain had briefly stopped. Closing the weathered door as hard as he could, he proceeded down the narrow path, his slicker tied tight to his frame so it wouldn't become a sail that sent him flying.

It was an especially stormy day for May, the month when the sun usually pierces any lingering winter gloom. Today there was little light and no warmth, only bouts of sideways rain driven by coastal winds. Mikel had no choice but to tackle the trek. He needed provisions. The little village of Groen lay a mile eastward, tucked into a seaside cove. Not much of a town, really, consisting of a handful of houses, a combination petrol station/grocery store, a pub, a tattoo parlor, and the church on the bluff. Most folks went south for their big shopping. For Mikel, Groen provided for all his needs.

He'd walked this ancient path since childhood, knowing every twist and turn as it wound along the top of the rugged cliff. Normally Zumaya, his dog, would be alongside, but like himself the dog was older and couldn't be coaxed outside as easily anymore, especially in bad weather. So, Mikel walked alone. Half-way along, his left leg began to throb from a recent gash from having tripped over a muck rake in the barn and fallen onto the concrete floor. Blessed with an able body that had always done what he needed it to do, this accident was a real blow. He tried to have the gash looked at, but missed the doc's weekly visit to the village, and now had to wait.

The pain caused Mikel to stop at a rocky outcropping where he could sit and rest. He looked down at the churning sea - fierce, noisy, frightening. Stopping like this was something he never did, the path having always been a means of getting somewhere. Without Zumaya at his side he had no distraction, so he sat and stared at the frothy water, allowing his mind to wander. Of times long ago; of his childhood friend Aitor. They had grown up together and were inseparable, being of the same age in a small community, and would get together every chance they could, sometimes before school, always after school, to play or fish or help with chores, often till late in the evening, after which one or the other would venture back home along the craggy cliff by moonlight, with not a care in the world.

To think, all these years later, that they still lived on their same family farmsteads. After serving in the war, both had returned to Groen to assist their parents, and had never left, each remaining unmarried, content with a rural existence, and now the sole inhabitants of their properties.

As the wind picked up, it brought a fresh bout of rain. Mikel needed to get moving and was surprised how difficult it was for him to stand. Once upright, he slowly found his stride and headed toward town. Entering the small store, he bought several pieces of frozen fish, some canned vegetables, detergent, and a few apples. After he put his purchases in his satchel, he lifted it and was surprised by the weight.

He had thought about buying a bottle of whiskey, but that would have tipped the scale. Instead, he went next door to the pub for a pint before returning home.

Inside there were many people milling about, the rain having driven them indoors. He knew most of them, young and old, and extended greetings to a few. Way back in a corner sat Aitor at a table. Mikel had thought Altor'd be there; he ordered a pint and walked over to greet him.

"I see you're drinking alone."

"Well, I happily am, or was, until you showed up." Aitor replied, getting up to give his friend a hug.

Both men chuckled and sat down, Mikel with difficulty.

"What happened to you?"

"Aye, I was careless in the barn and tripped over my own rake!"

"Stupid thing to do," Aitor said.

"Thank you for your kindness," Mikel groused in jest.

Mikel's pint arrived. Cod and chips were ordered, and the old men proceeded to blather away about the weather, town gossip, politics, and olden days -- mostly the olden days.

Later, the barkeep came to ask if they'd like a second round. Mikel, very aware of his painful leg, declined, knowing it would be slow going home and not wanting to outlast the daylight. As he struggled to stand, he could see concern radiate from Aitor's face.

"Are you going to be alright?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You're hurt and you're…"

"I'm what?"

"Well," and after a pause, "you're not as young as you used to be."

Mikel, whose leg was now throbbing, looked at his friend and retorted, "We're the same age, idiot."

This kind of repartee wasn't new, but it stung them both. He knew Aitor was not being unkind; rather he was feeling worn out, frail, vulnerable.

"I'm going to get help," Aitor said, as he got up from the table, also with difficulty. He started to grab Mikel's satchel and, too, was surprised by its weight.

"What do you have in there -- rocks?"

"None of your business." Mikel protested kiddingly.

Before either of them went any further, Pieta, the bar owner, came over, "Brothers, what's the fuss?"

Both replied in unison, "No fuss!"

"Well, gents, I overheard your conversation. Mikel, you're lame. Just look at you. Here's what's going to happen: I'm going to get my truck and drive you back to the farm. The path from your barn to your house is a lot shorter than the cliff pass, don't you think? You come too, Aitor. And while I'm there, let's see if I can get that ancient truck of yours to turn over. You might be needing it, going forward. Then Aitor, I'm driving you home."

Before either of them could argue, Pieta handed his apron to the young barkeep, and out the door he went, Mikel and Aitor following.

Aitor asked Mikel if he'd like him to stay awhile, help get him settled. Mikel, declined, telling Aitor, "You heard Pieta, the path is no place for old men on a day like this. Or perhaps any other. You'll be needing that ride back as much as me."

While waiting for Pieta to drive up, both men stood in silence.

Craig Berggren is a retired NYC business-person. In 1991 he founded a writing group, "The Inkpots," that still meets today, its seven members reading their short stories, poetry, or essays monthly. Craig resides both in NYC and in the Hudson Valley outside of Millerton, NY. His email is: c.berggren@me.com

This story originated from a hiking trip earlier in 2026 to the Basque region of Spain. The scenery was breathtaking, but what stood out for me was the sight of so many remote farms, hanging on by a thread and tended to by aging farmers. I started writing an essay on the subject, but was moved by an idea coming out of the Nature Writing Retreat, to convey the matter through two elderly fictional characters.

What I Need
by Renae Edge

I need to live in mountains and forests
and fields with gravel roads beside streams
and a pond near a lake;

Where the mist rises across the meadow and
goldfinches bounce along the wildflowers;

Where I drink my tea and do qi gong
and stand with my toes and heels on the earth
and remove my glasses
so I can see
me.

Renae Edge is an artist, storyteller, poet, and professor, currently living in Connecticut. Her work focuses on her spiritual connection with the natural world and ancient ancestors. She has published two books of sacred poetry, The Infinite Heart *and* The Golden Pomegranate, *(Polydactyl Publishing, 2013 and 2018). She has told stories for The Moth, Speak Up, and We Rise Storytelling Collective, and exhibited photographs across the United States. This poem comes directly from her experience at the nature-writing retreat at Great Mountain Forest.* edge_renae@yahoo.com

The Things We See
by Rosemarie Day

I am surrounded by fog, the gentle blanket of an early morning mist upon Bantam Lake as I row. Early August has brought Canadian Geese flying across the water, their reflection barely visible as they cackle and cluck amidst the fog; their natural earth-tones of black, navy blue, graphite, and limestone shimmering and reflecting on the little water that can be seen as they sweep directly above my rowing shell. It is humid; the sticky air breezes along my skin as each stroke pushes me further away from shore, further into the nothingness of the fog. Lake water is not like the ocean. There is no clear smell of salt with lake water, no lingering whiff of the sand as you push past the beaches. Instead, there's a musty smell upon the waters in summer's early morning hours as algae blooms take over. These excessive blooms, driven by phosphorus and nitrogen runoff from the surrounding watershed, can cover the underside of a shell in a light coating of muck and tinge the oars green as they come up from the water.

In a slow and meditative way, I move up to the catch. The oars drop as my hands rise up, and I can feel the oars grab hold of the water in their scoops. The water tries to push back, and as I push off with my legs from the foot plate, a rush of energy goes through my legs, into my core, and down my arms into the oars and through the water as I continue to move. The exhale as my breath comes out is the only other distinct sound on this quiet lake. "Again," I say, and continue, another stroke to move across it. The water rushes against the boat in a swooshing sound and in the lake behind me puddles are created, repetitive ripples in sync with the pace of my rowing.

Out of the corner of my eye I see an American Black Duck wade in the waters. He occasionally bobs his head up and down, searching for pondweeds. He seems undisturbed by my presence, riding the small ripples in the pond alongside me. Another stroke, and we move past one another. To my left, the sun begins to barely peek-a-boo through the fog, like a child at play, half seen and half unseen. The sun's reflection on the water showcases the shell's ripples as I move past, making the ripples glisten and glitter with every stroke, and leaving a sparkled path behind me in the shape of a widening V. I watch that sparkle begin to fade as my next stroke pushes the boat further and creates another ripple. This is a continuous cycle of calm and rushed energy, similar to the cycle of fog on the lake, one moment masking the world around it and the next, burning off as it ascends into the sky.

There is no wind on the lake today that would move the water from one shore toward the other. Thus, I am the only force causing the movements of water. As I begin to focus on the water, looking for a clear point in the fog, I pause… The world around me begins to tilt, although the boat does not, and I catch myself at the finish, just before I lean too far. The strange thing about dizziness is that nothing around you has to move. The water is flat, the boat is steady, and yet, my head spins as if everything is rocking. In such a spin the fog is disorientating to row in, especially

when you can no longer see a reference point. I pause for a moment to check my heart rate, to take a sip of water now warmed by the growing sun, and then I continue. “Again…” the water remains as calm as the moment that I set the boat upon it. Glancing back, I see that the distant dock, once masked by the fog, is being greeted warmly by the rising sun. The town of Litchfield slowly rises and a fishing boat begins to appear to my right. I am no longer alone on this lake.

As the fisherman comes into view, part of me misses the hush of the fog, when it was only me, the oars, and my own unsteady heartbeat on the water. But the company reminds me why I keep coming out here in the mornings. Minutes ago, I was fighting to stay upright from the dizziness. Now, with the sun on the dock and a neighbor on the water, I find my balance again, not only in my body, but in my life and in the world around me, one that I can’t always find on land and that has room for both the quiet calmness of nature and the world just waking up around me.

Rose Day is a Generative AI Security Architect in life sciences, working at the intersection of emerging technologies, data security, and AI governance. She is currently pursuing a doctorate in law and policy at Northeastern University. Two years ago, Rose took up rowing to help manage POTS and EDS. Now an avid member of the Litchfield Hills Rowing Club (LHRC), she has rowed across the United States and internationally. Her writing explores where movement, chronic illness, and the natural world meet. Contact her at: https://www.linkedin.com/in/rosejcday/

Understory
by Jackie Frederick-Berner

Twenty-year old seedlings
barely shin high
sit patiently at the feet of beech trees
waiting for the sky to open,
their green leaves lifting
toward enlightenment,
while tiny mushrooms
dance across the dirt
twirling their saffron skirts like monks
on their way to prayer.
Here is a temple
that can take lifetimes to know.
To catch the quiet catechism
of boughs creaking
as leaves whisper psalms
to one another and tree frogs
trill commandments
through the mossy air,
we walk through fire, singe our flesh
on hot coals
yet the forest waits for us
to one day, slip into a glimmering pond
and reach our feet down
into the cool mud bottom.

To feel the water lift our arms
to shoulder height
like Christ on the cross
our bodies glowing, held
in a rusty luminescence
that heals all wounds.

Jackie Frederick-Berner lives in Rye, New York, and is a contributing writer for The Rye Record. *Her articles have received awards from The New York Press Association. She is co-author of a book on childbirth,* The Birth That's Right for You (*McGraw-Hill*) *and writes personal essays and poetry which reflect her love of language, nature and lived experience. Additionally, she is a trained meditation instructor in the Shambala Buddhist tradition, which combines a contemporary, secular approach with the philosophies of Tibetan Buddhism. She teaches mindfulness meditation classes in her community and online.* jackiefberner@gmail.com



Succession
by Eileen Fielding

Every morning before breakfast, our old dog Jasper prances and barks as his harness goes on. His younger self returns and propels him out the door, down the steps, and straight into the woods with me in tow at the end of his rope. I follow him through his sensory wonderland as he loops and zigzags along the pond's edge, plows through ferns, scrambles over fallen trees, tracks back and forth along the rocky stream to the top of the trail, and then circles back on higher ground and ends with the steep drop down toward the house.

For him, it is a joyous olfactory romp. He follows his nose. For me, it is a daily test in avoiding a catastrophic stumble among rocks and roots. Pulled along at just a little faster than a safe pace, I rarely can look anywhere but at my feet.

That's how, one day, I noticed the pine cones.

I like everything about white pines, especially a perfect pine cone. You know the kind: dry and light, spiraled scales reaching out like the eaves of pagodas, resin-scented. I'd rather nudge one aside with my toe than trample it. Racing with Jasper, I've become adept at the flying toe-flick.

However, this summer I encountered a stretch of trail where aesthetics collided with reality: so many cones underfoot that flicking was futile. As my progress became crunchy, I shifted from treating cones as woodsy sculptures to wondering about their function as producers of pine seeds. The huge number of cones seemed to be an insanely extravagant outlay by the pines. For what purpose? Surely, the abundance would be an enormous food resource for the forest's animals. But what would it do for the pines?

The textbook answer suggests that last fall had to have been a mast year, one of superabundant seed production that far exceeds the total consumption of all seed eaters, in order to ensure seed survival and perpetuate the pine species.

That is a neat explanation for the surfeit of cones.

The trouble with neat explanations, though, is that they cannot compete with the sensation of holding a pine cone in your hand in the woods, feeling the scales prickling against your palm and smelling the pine pitch stuck on your fingers.

Back at my house, I realized that by having taken a mental shortcut – by simply accepting the textbook explanation -- I cheated myself. I had not seen superabundant seeds, nor any hordes of seed eaters, nor even any evidence that the over-production strategy worked.

Needing to go back and poke around, I left Jasper to an afternoon snooze, returned to the trail, and hunkered down at a pine cone patch to scrabble in the duff for evidence of seed abundance. The logic went thusly: The cones had been aloft in the pines when, one dry day, their scales lifted and the two winged seeds tucked under each one had fluttered down and away. Only after the seeds were gone did the

empty cones detach and drop to the ground. Therefore, the seeds must lie separately from the cones, hidden by the thousands in the litter of pine needles.

It would help me to know what the seeds looked like. Most of the cones on the ground were intact and empty, but some were partly stripped from the top down, and lay on piles of detached scales. Squirrels must have extracted seeds from these. Had they missed any? Prying up the remaining scales in half-processed cones did reveal a few untouched seeds, but only under scales immediately below the stripped section. One more spiral down, there were no seeds under the scales. Why did a cone fall while it still held seeds? Did squirrels climb up and cut them down just before full seed release? Could I find the seeds on the ground? I pocketed a few seeds for reference and started sifting through pine needles.

After several minutes, I did find a couple of seeds. Later, though, the idiocy of my seed quest was brought home to me when I began to notice the pine seedlings. Knowing that white pine seeds do not last for years in the ground, as other tree seeds do, I realized that the previous autumn's rain of seeds would have had plenty of time by now --- late July -- to germinate. They had. And I found them. The first of these seedlings under my nose was impossibly small and fragile, a single whorl of short, curved, threadlike green needles topping a stem about an inch high. Recognizing one seedling seemed to make them all appear, as if by magic. I now saw whole constellations of little green stars close to the ground -- clumped, drifted, and scattered, each marking a seed's touchdown. To be sure that they were pine, and not a lookalike hairy-cap moss, I confirmed with Jasper's method: the sniff test.

Looking at these hopefuls, I realized that they could disappear as quickly as they had become visible. Most would be gone in a year or two, especially those in unlucky spots -- where they are crowded, where other plants will choke off their light, where the soil on which they sprouted will dry out or wash away, or where people will step. A mast year is no guarantee of success. To produce offspring, a pine needs luck In addition to overwhelming the borers and the nibblers.

I wandered further into the forest. These days, the woods are a mix: white pine, oaks, hickories, hemlock, maples, and birches. Pines are plentiful too, but most are giants who were lucky to have grown up and survived a long time ago, when the site must have been open and sunny -- perfect for pine growth. Today, under a closed forest roof, sunlight is hard for a pine to come by. I found a place where a big hemlock had tipped over into the pond, and saw that young pines had seized their chance and popped up in the opening. Their annual tiers of branches revealed that their fortunate moment happened four or five years ago—perhaps during a previous mast year. But they were not alone. Black birches had also leaped up in that sunny gap, and some were taller than the pines. A few other pine saplings stood in shade near the head of the pond. Their fate looked iffy, though: about ten years old, and no taller than me, they sported mere topknots of green over dead lower branches. Elsewhere on the trail, every young pine appeared to be less than five years old. No fifteen- or twenty-year olds in sight. Perhaps those gigantic pines, despite their big bounty, were not replacing themselves after all.

Take that, textbook explanation!

Seeking a gap big enough and permanent enough to give a pine a chance, I headed off-trail toward an open bright spot that I knew about, where a few years ago a chunk of woods had been bulldozed for a dream home, but was then left alone. That location might reveal whether a bigger sunny spot enables a white pine's mast-year strategy to succeed.

My route would have delighted Jasper: up, down, and up in deep duff over fallen logs and sniffable animal trails, stepping gingerly among more and more tiny green stars. At the edge of the clearing, I pushed through a wall of moose maple and blackcaps to emerge into a bright half-acre, not exactly a field so much as the sort of garden that grows after you scrape a forest down to subsoil -- sweetfern from who-knows-where, birch, milkweeds, vervain, common mullein, spurges, clover ... and no pines. Nature was reclaiming a scar, but what was not reappearing was the sort of farmland that had nurtured the big pines when they were young.

I had found no assurance that the pines in these woods could replace themselves. But my poking around did turn up one more mystery. The clearing's fallen cones included many that were small, purplish, and tightly shut. White pine cones take two years to develop. These were a year away from maturity. Why were they on the ground, seemingly wasted? Thinking like an ecologist, I suspected a trade-off of some kind. But unable to think like a pine, I had to go home and look up the explanation. It is that wind pollination is a gamble that some lose. Though every June, clouds of pine pollen fill the air and lay greenish residue on everything in sight, the pollen does not reach every female cone. An unfertilized cone produces no seeds. For the tree, there's no point in spending resources to finish that cone. *Plunk.*

Also, a tree stressed by weather or disease may resort to a big investment in reproduction, sensing that it is the only remaining option for doing so. That makes sense, but overproduction of "stress cones" can be followed by dumping the excess from the trees before the cones are fully developed. How do trees make such decisions and carry them out? A mystery for another day.

This day's sleuthing suggests that the great pines where Jasper and I roam are destined to fade from the scene. A generation from now, the trail may crunch only with acorns and hickory nuts. I may be wrong about that, of course, but Jasper is certainly correct: to learn, to enjoy, go out and follow your nose around.

Dr. Eileen Fielding's academic and professional training is in ecology, conservation, and the administration of non-profit environmental organizations. Her career has included fieldwork with birds, fishes, and marine mammals; teaching ecology at the University of Chicago and conservation biology at Trinity College; and leadership positions at nature centers, wildlife sanctuaries, and other conservation organizations. She recently retired as Director of the National Audubon Society's Center in Sharon, CT, where she worked with foresters and landowners on restoring habitat for forest birds. She is currently a Trustee of Great Mountain Forest. fielding.eileen5@gmail.com

Poem and Essay
by Kirk D. Sinclair

Pine Needle Bed

The sun is going down, and I hike on with dread.
Will I finally find a soft pine needle bed?

Meadows give cushioning, but what with all the dew,
My sleeping bag by morn manages to soak through.

I love lakeshore scenery, but too much gritty sand
Spurs me to hike further, when possibly I can.

Woods of oak or maple, with crunchy, noisy leaves
Provide restless slumber that causes me to grieve.

You might think small needles of spruce and fir work fine
The messiness they cause instead makes me opine.

Long needles, white or red, are really quite the best,
Allowing me to have a night of proper rest.

Should you find me by the trail, less alive than dead,
Scoop me up and bring me to a soft pine needle bed.

The Hike to Campbell Falls

Lyla stood next to my leg as we waited under weaving branches of oak and pine. The awning sheltered us from sheets of rain shrouding the trailhead as my daughter Charissa unloaded Lyla's two younger siblings from the minivan. This would be the first opportunity to hike with my grandkids. Considering that their mother and I, two fanatical long-distance backpackers, had raised their Mom, this hike to Campbell Falls was destined to happen.

The spectacle and soft drone of droplets pelting the lawn at the trailhead for Campbell Falls reminded me of long- distance backpacking. While most people enjoy good weather whether or not they are hiking, fondly squeezing nostalgia out of steady rain comes from a backpacking lifestyle that cannot avoid being outdoors in bad weather.

Grandma Cindy would have delighted in this moment even more but, now in the final stage of early onset Alzheimer's, she remained at home in her hospital bed. Sixteen years had passed since cognitive decline had derailed her career as a visiting nurse. We had responded by hiking the 5,000-mile American Discovery Trail to reboot her life and brain health. During the year-long journey, Cindy felt herself getting better, and gushed about having grandkids someday.

After we finished the ADT, Cindy regressed again. Twelve years ago we hiked much of the Pacific Crest Trail with Charissa, but this time Cindy did not improve. That would be our last long-distance journey. Once known as the accomplished "Expedition Woman" by her backpacking peers, as of ten years ago, Cindy was not able to walk more than a few hundred yards. Seven years ago she entered what every existing dementia scale considers the final stage of the disease.

Charissa had originally texted me with the intention for us to swim at Tobey Pond. I countered that we should instead visit local waterfalls, now swollen from 24 hours of rain. My daughter welcomed the change in plans. She had spent the summer peak-bagging the 4,000 footers in New York, saving the easiest mountain for last. She viewed the short hike to the waterfalls as training for Lyla, Marabelle and Carwyn to join her on that last climb. An ambitious plan perhaps. Then again, at Lyla's age Charissa had climbed Mount Katahdin, joined back then by her two siblings and her fanatical parents.

We headed out from the parking lot, with me serving as guide. The grandkids followed in chronological order with instructions to stay behind "Pop." Charissa brought up the rear, holding 2-year-old Carwyn's hand. On her back she bore a carrier for him, but Carwyn preferred to hike wearing his own pack, which featured floppy tiger ears protruding from the sides. All the grandkids were eager to hike, being as undeterred by rain as long-distance backpackers -- or perhaps it is long-distance backpackers who are as undeterred by nature as kids.

The trail started as a grassy path that the rain had turned into a puddle. I informed the clan, with the authority of an official guide, that we needed to cross "Grass Lake." We splashed through the lake in single file, me wearing sandals with Vibram soles, the grandkids in their little hiking shoes. Nobody wore raingear.

Right after "Grass Lake," the trail sloped down into the forest and crossed our first wooden bridge. Though by grown-up standards it was a small bridge over a shallow gully, the railing did exceed the height of the grandkids. I turned and cautioned them about wet wood being slippery, even though I believed it likely they would learn the hard way, some day. When I had been a more hurried and less brittle backpacker, I slipped on wet roots many times. Experience surpasses the knowledge of elders as a teacher.

We continued on into the forest. The tall, overarching canopy would have reduced the feel of rain to intermittent drops anyways, yet I could tell from the sounds of the forest that the rain had stopped indeed. When there is a sparse understory of lichen, moss and damp forest litter, the appearance of a rainy forest persists beyond the sounds of one.

We came to a mossy rock, or what 4-year-old Marabelle would call a boulder. To kids of that age, rocks of that size beg to be climbed on. Wet metamorphic rocks can be almost as slippery as roots, though -- something that I had also learned the hard way. Still, since a thick bed of moss mitigated the hazard, I told Marabelle she could climb, and I both enjoyed and envied her delight in doing so. What fantasy did her young mind conjure for this covering of thick, green moss in an enchanted wood?

Campbell Falls did not disappoint us, though with generational differences. The first- and second- generation adventurers admired the swollen fifty-foot falls, roaring down in two vertical drops. The third generation turned their attention to the pools churning brown foams at the edges, beckoning them to toss in stones to splash and sticks to eddy.

I led the way again on the hike back to the trailhead, with Charissa bringing up the rear. This time, she placed Carwyn in the carrier on her back. Lyla and Marabelle voiced tiredness, but not in protest.

Cindy would have loved this little adventure with her grandkids. That thought brought something else to mind that turned this first hike with our grandkids bittersweet: Campbell Falls was also the last trail hike I had with Cindy. I remember joining her best friend in Norfolk on it – Cindy and Kim had wanted to have one last outing together by themselves, but by this point in her illness, my company was needed, just in case.

These days, I join Cindy on an outdoor "adventure" by pushing her in a red, adult stroller when weather permits. No more rainy-day outings, though; they will need to be continued by a third generation of adventurers. Maybe someday this trail to Campbell Falls will mark my own last hike, perhaps accompanied by a young woman who will caution me about slippery bridges and call me "Pop."

Kirk D. Sinclair has led the life of a modern nomad, through many long-distance hikes of up to a year. He shared these experiences with others through expeditions he organized and interdisciplinary courses he taught. His wife Cindy, noted by peers as the "Expedition Woman," accompanied him for over ten thousand miles … and still agreed to marry him! Early-onset Alzheimer's cut short her long-distance hiking. Kirk has spent the past sixteen years as her full-time home-care partner. You can read about their inspiring life together on the Humanity Hiker blog: www.humanityhiker.com

Histories of the Debris
by Carrie Jaurès Noland

1.

A foggy morning in my backyard, the sky an opaline grey.

The marine layer used to burn off by June. Now, with warmer waters and a hotter sun, the fog stretches on for months, blurring August and even part of September until the Santa Ana winds come whipping through.

Sitting on my beach chair, I am impatient for the clouds to break. Neighbors pass, remarking on the weather--*So grey!*--their dogs sniffing at the grass the Housing Association irrigates with "reclaimed water," relentlessly, at night.

I sniff, too. Can I smell the sea? Perhaps, a little. I breathe in deeply to pick up jasmine. A hint of chlorine. Coyote poop.

A breeze, barely.

On my mother's first visit from New York, she glanced around and said, frowning, "Everything looks dead."

2.

But no! There are ants and snakes, mourning doves and hummingbirds, squirrels and lizards. In the spring, snails that slide along the paths leading from one phase of tract housing to the next. Rats, too, of course. And out beyond The Development, where hills slope downward toward the sea, a roadrunner running along the desert's scat-lined trails.

3.

In fact, the wonder, for me, is the abundance.

When we first moved to California in 1992, the tractor-flattened crests were bare. To make a yard, we had to add a meter's-depth of soil. The contractors left nothing but a moonscape of crumbly concrete and human trash.

"Half of what you plant will die," a neighbor told us. But what grew was strong, and clung: a fig tree, a lemon, some roses and scattered thyme.

The miracle was their taking, the way their roots eventually ruptured the sidewalk and toppled the fence.

4.

"Phase Six"--they call our tract. Each phase comes with three models: one painted a color they call "salmon"; another with the color they call "sand"; and another with the color they call "earth."

The year we moved in, our house was the same age as my daughter: five months old.

The tract was so new that some homes didn't have their drywall yet. All day long, I'd hear the hammering and drilling and the voices of men shouting in Spanish across the open framing. At noon, a food truck rolled up and parked on the pavement. "*Que linda*!" the workers exclaimed, queueing up with me for tacos as I jiggled my daughter in her sling.

5.

We thought our house was special because it faced what the Housing Association called "The Grassy Knoll." A local chemistry teacher gained a permit to plant the knoll exclusively with native plants. So, not so "grassy" anymore!

A few years later, his wife committed suicide, leaving him to raise their three teenage sons alone.

Sometimes, while walking, I'd spot a son skateboarding down the sidewalk or swinging, abjectly, in the park.

6.

The chemistry teacher held a memorial in honor of his wife in a patch of desert between housing tracts that we called "The Secret Garden." Beneath a sunburnt sky, we marched single file through clumps of prickly pear and agave to reach a spot where he leaned down to plant a succulent beside a commemorative plaque. Members of his son's Boy Scout troupe formed a circle around him. The troupe leader played a trumpet dirge beneath the droning of a plane.

7.

Other histories of the debris--

In the 1760s, Spanish colonizers claimed the land from the Gabrielino-Tongvina People, who had fished and hunted there for over two thousand years.

In 1831, Mexico gained its independence from Spain and sectioned off the land for Mexican ranchers.

By 1848, the US had won the Mexican American War and annexed the land to California, which became a state in 1850.

In 1876, James Irvine became the sole owner of the 23 miles where his family grazed sheep, then ventured into the cultivation of olives and citrus groves.

In 1960, the Irvine family sold one thousand acres, a small parcel of their land, to the Regents of the University of California for $1.00.

The campus would bear their name.

8.

For years, I searched for the downtown I thought a city ought to have.

But Irvine is a planned city, the largest in the US.

City planners, alarmed by the Watts riots of 1965, gridded the boulevards wide enough to prevent "freedom of assembly" and discourage walking.

The University planned its campus, in contrast, as a set of concentric circles, the buildings pivoting out like spokes from a park of exotic trees.

Those buildings were so futuristic, they served soon after as a set for *Planet of the Apes*.

9.

Eventually, all the farmland vanished, the hillsides lost their grade.

An eight-lane freeway opened in 1993 and suddenly, on land once claimed by the Tongva Nation as their sacred burial ground, construction for a Marriot Resort began. Beside the Marriot Resort, with an unobstructed view of the sea, there appeared a Trader Joe's, a Blue Bottle Coffee, a Gap.

10.

Perhaps my mom was right: everything there looks dead.

We finally left in 2025. Living now in Vermont, I am grateful for my well, for the rain that feeds my well, for the life of rivers, lakes, and streams.

But to own what others owned is not to own. You cannot own.

Still, I mourn what I once thought was mine: my tiny Irvine garden, that sacred site rewilded by my family and our history: the pets we buried there, the birthdays celebrated beneath the fig, the chorus line of roses commemorating a mother's death along the fence.

"Choose a place to start your journey," the shaman said to me one morning. I closed my eyes and chose that patch of former rubble as the launch pad for my flights, sensing the haunting presence of ancient mysteries, of herds of bison, of earlier habitations among the ruins.

Carrie Jaurès Noland is a translator of Annie Ernaux and the Martinican novelist Patrick Chamoiseau, as well as the author of several academic books on experimental poetry and avant-garde movements. Since publishing a monograph on the choreographer Merce Cunningham, which garnered her a Guggenheim in 2015, she has turned her energies to creative writing, developing a voice in literary fiction and short non-fiction works. Her reflective essays have appeared in Mantis: A Journal of Poetry, Criticism, and Translation; Arcade: The Humanities in the World; *and* The Idea of the Avant-Garde (*Intellect Books*). *She has pursued a Do-It-Yourself MFA through zoom workshops offered by* Granta Magazine *and in-person residencies at Bread Loaf and Lighthouse.* cjnoland@uci.edu

“We set off for the woods”
by Michael VanZandt Collins

One morning early August, as the city’s commotion quickened on a Friday around eight o’clock, my wife and I tarried behind a rented car. My son in his car-seat, arching his head any which way, searched for what was afoot more than a car’s length away. As I hurled a once-forgotten sleeping bag into that rented trunk, he called out my name. I bounded upon the curb, beyond the rental, to meet my son’s eyes through his open window. My wife came to the opposite window and, for a moment, with our son in between, we stared at one another across the disheveled back seat.

“Where you going?” he demanded.

I didn’t really know I told him; and no, I could not answer the question of why we should part. “Don’t worry, you’ll have fun in Maine,” I said, making a half-hearted attempt to shoulder my knapsack, lightly packed with toothbrush, change of clothes, unfinished chapters, and a library book.

Driving into the woods, I could have answered him – three hours on the road – where I was to meet a camp full of strangers. I’d driven there by way of my hometown in the Berkshires, where a mother’s kiss began to temper the worries and excitement of my son’s morning’s drive. What I could not have known was that by the time my son and his mother reached Sebago Lake I would enjoy the lovely afternoon, even under the heavy August sky, and the company of other writers, the warm scent of old pine planks, the silence of swallows as a young falcon hovered overhead.

Once day turned to darkness, a small, convivial group circled around a campfire, while in the distance storms thundered on the horizon. As the skies opened up, I retreated to my bunk, where I noticed that library book, waiting at my bedside. There on those pages, in the still of night, were one writer’s remembrances of these very same woods.

“When father came back,” he writes, “we set off for the woods.” This, we are told, is part of James Mars’ memoir of a childhood enslaved in Connecticut. In it he recounts his family’s flight from the man he simply names “the parson,” and the parson’s “hunters.” I would only later learn that the author was Deacon James Mars, and that he had penned these words from his writing desk in nearby Norfolk in 1864, and that man whom he and his family were fleeing was the Reverend Amos Thompson of Canaan, who was eager to bring his “property” to a “southern market.”

As Deacon Mars recollects his family’s fugitive days in the woods, lying in that bunk, I find myself excited, definitely overjoyed, to read how they pressed on, putting the last of the farms and open fields behind them; climbing until “we ascended the ridge … and we could see the road that led from Canaan to Norfolk”; they could understand the path of their escape and how the trail ran “past the burying-ground.”

Fourteen men on horseback, Mars then tells us, startled him and made them stay out of sight.

How long he and his family remained in the woods Mars could not say for certain. Perhaps it was the "fore part of the week," he wrote, but surely it fell over the Sabbath. He remembered well a man named Bishop, whose shop was closed. Bishop stood there peering out past the edge of the woods. "I felt afraid [that] he would see us."

As I lay alert ln that bunk, something palpitated inside me, as it does whenever I return to these memories. I imagine a small boy, at the impressionable age of eight, hiding behind logs, pressed against a bed of pine needles, hiding not as a game, but because "they were men we know."

In the next morning's calm light, while staggering barefoot across gravel, I stopped to peer at what rustled in the brush. Something likewise disturbs the forested landscape I wander, the cheerful chatter after workshops, the inviting air about the camp. It is that nowhere in Deacon Mars's story does he delight in the towering chestnut trees, June's bounty of berries, or fond memories of ripened beech nuts as autumn beckons. Which raises the question: Who, after all, has the luxury to wander, forage, and explore here?

It will not be until days later, when my own childhood memories of the woods stir, that I dare ask not only how these woods have changed, but how they changed Deacon Mars.

And yet in the weeks afterwards I did catch myself hunting for just those details that Deacon Mars had judged not relevant in his remembrance of his family's dire attempt to escape slavery. In what way, and by which paths, were they able to reach the easternmost slopes of Burr Mountain? How could those children have kept in this humidity? Why would the Deacon, widowed and elderly, return to these woods after a lifetime away? Unable to answer those questions I can dwell on some of his memories, such as when he reminisces about the "starlight" in the woods, and the solace he found in the company of his mother and father; "that," he writes, "was a comfort to us children."

Between the minute when I packed up my knapsack and the hour when my wife and son arrived to retrieve me from the retreat, I invited the voice of this gentle apparition to accompany me for a while. I came across a photograph of the Deacon as an elder, dressed in a ruffled shirt, holding a rounded walking cane. Later, after an uncertain journey to Pittsfield, I stood upon the steps of the old First Congregational church to which he once ministered. Grave markers in a family plot. I clutch a handful of pine needles. Dig up charcoal from a mossy pit.

These woods, although far apart in time and different in character, hold many hidden stories yet to be uncovered.

A note for readers: Sources for this essay include New England Nature: Centuries of Writing on the Wonder and Beauty of the Land, *edited by David K. Leff and Eric D. Lehman (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2021), and James Mars,* Life of James Mars, a Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut *(Hartford: Case, Lockwood & Co., 1866), available online via the Library of Congress.*

Michael VanZandt Collins is a veteran teacher, scholar, master urban gardener, and native of Berkshire County. Now living in Boston with his wife and son. He earned his Master's in Islamic Studies at Harvard University and his doctorate in comparative theology at Boston College. he teaches subjects that range from interreligious dialogue to the challenge of justice, and is currently writing his first book, an introduction to the field of climate ethics. He can be reached at vanzandt@gmail.com and https://www.mvzcollins.com.

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Frank Egler, Aton Forest Fellowship Irrevocable Trust as Amended November 27, 1992. Courtesy of the Aton Forest.

Mad River and Spaulding Pond
An essay by May Joseph

Mad River

A raging torrent ten feet deep running down Main Street in Winsted, Connecticut in 1955. People standing aghast amidst demolished businesses. Frothing, foaming, the Mad River furiously courses, cutting its swollen path through the heart of the industrial town, then washing away the entire south side of the downtown. These catastrophic images caught my attention over the years.

I began probing the enigmatic history of the Mad River because my home sits adjacent to the Aton Forest's Spaulding Pond Mini-Wilderness Preserve in Norfolk, Connecticut. A mesmeric Kelly Swamp lies languorously at the bottom of the hill, and to my astonishment, is a source of the Mad River.[i]

Mad River. What a name for a tiny spindly body of water that today one can barely glimpse along Main Street in Winsted. It is hard to believe that this innocuous-looking river ever surged over fifteen feet. Today, it is a bucolic stream bubbling its way through Norfolk, down through Winsted and eventually into the Connecticut River, without a hint of its prior turbulent history except for the gigantic river dams that crisscross the region from Spaulding Pond Preserve through Winchester to Winsted. These aggressively contain the once incredibly volatile river. Yet its violent past evokes a culture of fear in the once deluged town.



Title: Main Street in Winsted, Connecticut, during the Flood of 1955
Photo Credit: NARA and DVIDS Public Domain Archives

Today, sitting at the Tributary restaurant in Winsted, in a window seat near the river, one experiences that melancholic memory. Instead of a vibrant riverfront with a sweeping view of this charming river, the restaurant barricades the viewer from the river with windows drawn shut against the unsightly, tightly controlled brook flowing dejectedly by. It is as though the river is so hideous that the city of Winsted must shield its residents from the memory of the flood. I have always been startled by the deliberate negation of the river in downtown Winsted, as though it is an unwanted relative who lives nearby. If you don't look for it, you miss the centrality of the river's course through the heart of the wounded town.

Yet in this era of climate change and volatile water bodies around the world, the Mad River remains an incredible water source, fueling the Beckley Bog, a boreal bog with its acidic ecology of sphagnum-heath-Black-Spruce wetlands,[ii] feeding the beavers and creating the dynamic ecosystems of Kelly Swamp and Grant Swamp in the watershed around the towns of Norfolk and Winchester. It is that elaborate and intricate system of swamps, wetlands and small streams, splendiferous with goldenrod, water lilies, oriental bittersweets and the invasive phragmites, that makes the northwest corner of Connecticut the uniquely dynamic biome it is, despite the ongoing threat of species dying out.

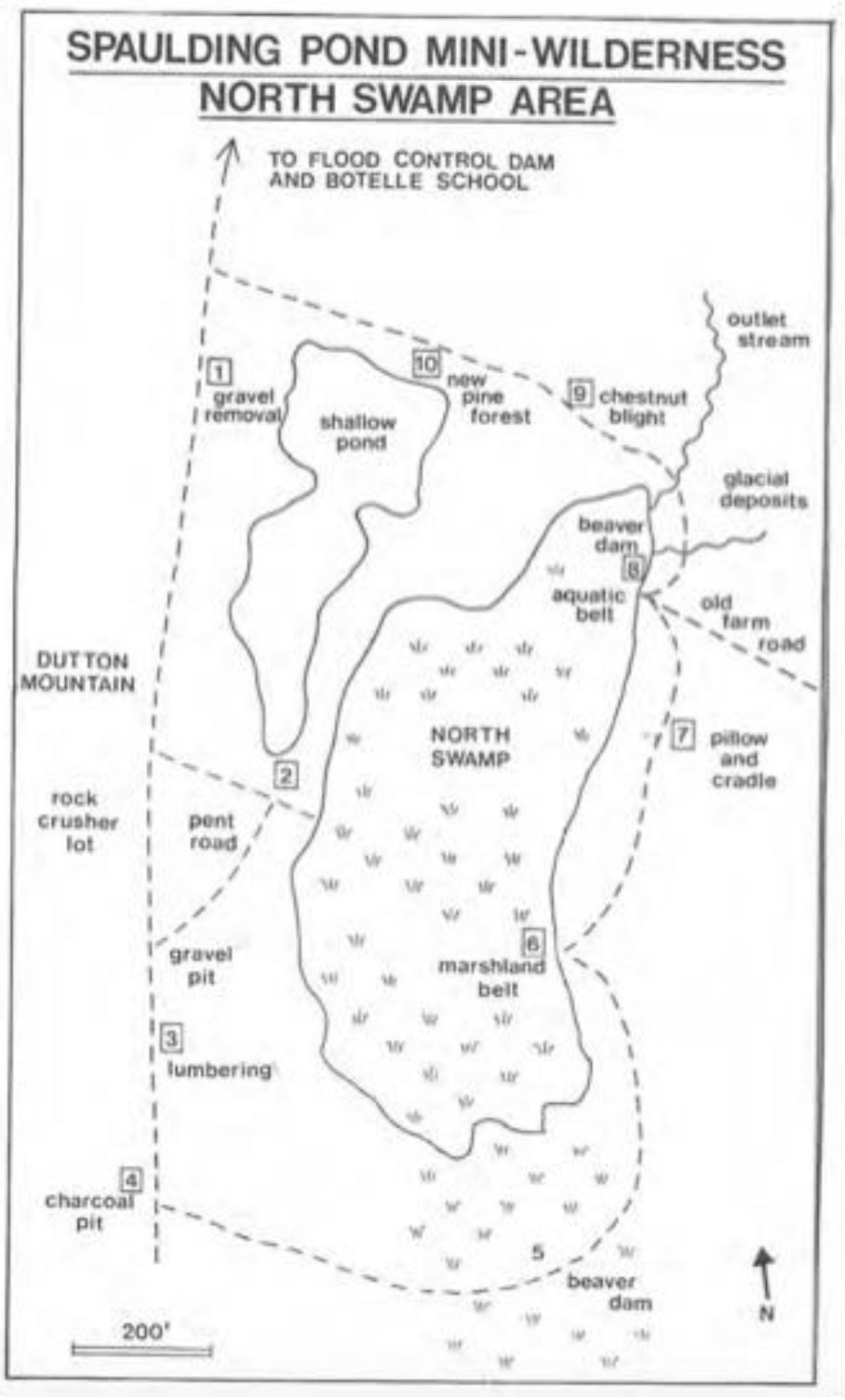
Spaulding Pond

Nestled in one of the highest points of Norfolk, along the ridge of the Connecticut river watershed, lies a mini-wilderness preserve, the twenty-acre Spaulding Pond.[iii] Resplendent with changing ecological neighborhoods, the terrain around the secluded pond includes dead ash trees, a graveyard of dead American chestnut trees, marshland, new pine forests, beaver lodges, heron rookeries, hemlock, charcoal pits, red maple swamps. and glacial deposits from the late-Pleistocene period, including gravel hillsides.[iv]

Here, amidst the bountiful yet vulnerable water source, begins the twisted journey of the Mad River. Its waters course towards the Mad River watershed, which in turn feeds into the Farmington River watershed, which is part of the larger Connecticut River watershed. Up in Norfolk, the river pools into the Kelley Swamp, and then begins its constricted journey through the Mad River Dam until it appears as a buried rivulet at Winsted, bearing nothing but a memory of Spaulding Pond's glorious biodiversity. By the time it has reached Winsted, the river's rambling beauty, so apparent in its origins and in the wetlands of Norfolk, has been shorn of its glow.

SPAULDING POND MINI-WILDERNESS PRESERVE
NORTH SWAMP AREA MAP & GUIDE
PRIVATE, SELF-GUIDED INTERPRETIVE NATURE TRAIL

Managed & Stewarded by Aton Forest, Inc., 2026.



Water Ecologies and Forest Philosophies

The Northeastern Highlands ecoregion is a rare canopy of contiguous forests including the Great Mountain Forest and Aton Forest, an area where a variety of water ecologies and forest philosophies intersect. Here in the northwestern corner of Connecticut, one is immersed in the histories of ecosystem dynamics and the contemporary discussions of woodlands in the grips of climate change. The Great Mountain Forest prides itself as a working forest that is also an immersive teaching forest. Aton forest follows the land use guidelines laid down by Frank Egler to preserve its wooded environs as a research forest biome.[v] Egler was specific that Aton Forest be preserved for "long-term low-key low-cost complex of ecological research …which is inspirationally directed toward broad socio-ecologic values."[vi] Into this dynamic conversation, the Mad River forces a rare inter-relationality between green and blue thinking. It spans a region where the fury of the river contrasts with the serenity of its feeder source in the Tobey Bog, where the ecology of the Pleistocene age commingles with the rewilding environment of post-industrial riverine regions. The Mad River forces debate around the notion of whether there is such a thing as wilderness. It threads conversations about highly managed green and blue infrastructure alongside the legacy of Frank Egler's call to sequester portions of the last remaining natural areas as "open space scientific laborator[ies]," closed to the public and preserved for research and conservation for world heritage.

Footnotes can be found on the last page of the Anthology.

May Joseph is a resident of Norfolk and Founder of Harmattan Theater, an environmental theater company focusing on global water issues. She is Professor of Social Science at Pratt Institute and the author or editor of eight books including Aquatopia (*Routledge*, 2022); Sealog (*Routledge*, 2019) *and* Fluid New York (*Duke University Press*, 2013). *Joseph has directed site-specific performances along Dutch and Portuguese maritime routes, and currently serves on the board of the Aton Forest.* www.mayjoseph.com *Email:* mjoseph@pratt.edu

Essay and Poem
by Genevieve Kubica

This Old Farmhouse

It's morning on the farm. The hills of Litchfield surround us in every direction, with a line of trees creating a natural barrier. A mix of conifers and deciduous dancing together. The sun can barely show herself through the heavy fog curtain. Glimmers of light peek through every so often, but the fog won't fully burn off until about 9, or 10 at the latest. The grass tickled by dew droplets won't dry off until about noon when the sun fully uncovers herself —a spectacular show for those who are patient.

It's late summer, so the heat is high even at dawn, but it's the heavy humidity that gives the impression that I am back in South Georgia. I swiftly dismiss that thought, breathing comfortably now that I am in the safety of my home state. I wonder how the birds do it—travel back and forth on their yearly migration. I've done it myself sporadically throughout my life, but now the comforts of family and home keep me here.

The birds are always the first to awaken of all the creatures, aside from maybe the bugs who never seem to be quiet and are quite a nuisance in August, though I try to ignore them so as not to give them the attention they seem to desire. Right now, the Red Wing Blackbirds are the most active, aside from the crows who watch us hauntingly from the dead trees that line the eastern side of the property line. It's interesting to me how the Crows, with their feathers of oil-slick black and their beady eyes, are always watching no matter what time of year it is. I appreciate the security they provide but often wonder why and how our land earned their protection for free.

The southern and northern sides of the property line are filled with intertwined grape vines, waltzing with elderberry, cattails, goldenrod, and an array of wetland and field grasses. It's a tangled mess that mom hates. She would prefer a tidy rock wall, but for my taste that seems too austere and patriarchal. I love the chaotic, artsy beauty of plants and colors. We also have patches of wild blackberries and raspberries. I read somewhere that blackberry brambles are symbols of protection, but either way, us and the dogs love nature's free snacks as we walk the one-acre lot during the summer months. Sumac trees are tucked away in one corner; they may or may not be the poisonous variety. I secretly hope for the poisonous kind—another nod to symbols of protection.

Abutting the back of our property is a land preserve and bird sanctuary that has also become our own sanctuary. Those birds enjoying this meadow oasis include the Red Winged Black Bird, American Gold Finch and House Finch, and the Bluebird. Bobolink also calls this land trust its home and is the very reason why no one is allowed to build behind our home. This protected sanctuary is

where the Bobolink nest in the spring and raise their offspring throughout the summer. My favorite sight is seeing the fledging Bobolink jumping up and out of the tall grasses as they try to fly for the first time.

This old farmhouse, now over 200 years of age, has a charm that speaks to my soul. The aged wooden beams, darkened from years of lived-in breath and bodies, hold memories from owners' past. It's remarkable how our homes live on, many years beyond our short lives, but while we are here they bring us much rejuvenation and personal change. Even in the short time I've lived on this beautiful land, I've been through many dark nights of the soul, and being here has healed me in a way that no therapy or drug could.

That is what nature can do for us: Mend us and create unparalleled peace.

Nature's Battle

Nature is layers of earthen memory
a pattern of concentric spirals and shapes
growing outward and inwards upon itself.
The Fibonacci rules all.

This perfection of layered experiences
once untouched by decaying hands
and messy minds of humans,
now disturbed.

War on the trees is ever growing.
Forests now data centers.
Riverbeds drained for the next species
of sapiens evolution—the machine.

How forgiving the woods are
to provide us a peaceful place of rest
only to be thanked by our lethal rampage
fueled by its own woody flesh.

How nurturing earth can be
amid the poisons poured over her body
sickening the land of her children.
Motherhood encounters much sacrifice.

Nature persists and resists
remembering its golden ratio
that controls all things.
The pattern always course corrects.

Once humans reach their end,
with bodies cradled in nature's embrace,
another layer of memory forms
as we return to her once again.

Genevieve Kubica is a hobbyist writer, avid knitter and crocheter, and hiker in her downtime. She is currently working towards her Masters in English and Creative Writing while she works remotely full time in the financial sector. Writing has been a lifelong passion that she eventually intends to pursue full time. She lives in Litchfield, CT with her mom and three French Bulldogs. genevievekubica@outlook.com

A Girl
by E J Conn

In the waking grey, before April's light reached the window, a nine-year-old girl slipped from beneath her quilt, fully dressed except for her shoes. Winter had been terribly long and bone-cold, its icy temperament gripping the household so pervasively that she feared never being warm again. The river outside the bedroom windows had frozen solid. Her family home, once a working grist mill, had survived plenty of hardships and strange weather, but to have its rushing waters frozen solid — such a thing had never happened in her short lifetime.

Nothing to worry about, Father assured her. Such things did happen, like the change of seasons. Just not every year.

Upstream, the river waters, slowed by a lazy bend, ran deep. Exposed roots of ancient oaks and maples held the banks. The resulting expanse: a swimming hole many time wider than the downstream headrace which once powered the fallen water wheel. Though Mother often cautioned her regarding the dangers of thin ice, the girl's curiosity got the better of her. One morning in January, she snuck from the house alone. She looked forward to winter's silence, a respite from the din of the household. After pulling on her winter layers, she headed upstream to explore the frozen landscape. Foamy clouds crowded the sky, the rising sun subtly providing back light. Leafless branches from trees graced either side of the riverbank, casting long shadows. Although she knew this neck of the river like the back of her hand, the blanket of snow made it difficult to distinguish the meandering water's edge. No Crow, nor Jay, nor Red-Tailed Hawk, no running water, nor tractor, nor cow lowing broke the silence. She felt a great wonder at the space, familiar yet new. She did not stop or turn back. Just waded slowly onward.

Upon reaching the swimming hole and discovering that the ice was thick under the snow, she moved along its surface on hands and knees. Over the deepest part of the pool, she lay down. While it was fun, the way she'd shimmied, babylike, along the surface, fear trembled within, a cold stone between chest and stomach. She lay still. Face down. An angel sweeping away snow; cupping mittened hands aside her eyes; peering through milky ice layers fascinated by their frozen refractions.

Were they alive down there, she suddenly wondered, the thought never having occurred to her in her previous nine years. Those little brown trout that they caught on early summer mornings and ate for breakfast - where did they go in the winter? She glanced to her right, searching for the shadow of a boulder which served as a jump off in the summer. Was that a movement? Could brown trout live through the freeze? Mother often scolded her for dreaming too much, asking too many questions instead of doing as she was told. But her curiosity was effervescent; now that the thought had risen, she could not help wondering how fish survived. Perhaps they were like frogs in the mud, emerging when winter passed.

Muffled, scarfed, hooded. Her mouth, ears and forehead, arms, legs, hands, feet warm enough in protective layers, she focused on this conundrum. Took no notice as the winds quickened above; clouds now swifted past. Until a *crack* pierced the silence.

Fear twisted her. She scuttled frantically, like some four-legged ice spider towards shore. Scrambling up twisted roots to solid ground, she landed on the wrong side of the river. Crouched in flight mode until spotting a falling branch. The limb, farther inland, continued to drop as the other long reaching limbs slowed or joined the descent. Breakage dragging others along the way until all finally disappeared into the snow.

The icy river hadn't opened up and swallowed her whole! The branch hadn't broken her in two! No chance she was crossing back now. Contemplating the long walk home, she heard a litany of ghostly warnings in Mother's scolding voice about the fickleness of ice, the foolishness of not telling anyone where she was going, about downright disobedience. These reminded her that her troubles weren't yet over. Two possibilities presented: either they hadn't missed her at all, and she had time to get back before they did; or Father was off to work and Mother was up and waiting for her because she needed help with the other children.

Without hesitation, she followed the trees to well-worn cow- and deer-paths along the Schmitt Family's side of the river. It took forever to reach the one-lane tractor bridge crossing from the hayfields to Northfeld Lane. Turning onto the unplowed road, she followed wooden guardrails with twisted wire until they opened along her horseshoe driveway. Her boots grew heavier with each step. She was tired. All she wanted to do was lie down, curl back into her quilt. Dear Lord, she prayed before opening the kitchen door. Father's back was to her.

"Stop now." Mother's voice was queer. She shut the door, confused. A tension unnamable but real as wind or a falling branch.

Father slowly turned as Mother pushed past him, and said, "I thought you were upstairs."

Mother, head low, was tugging at her snow crusted mittens. "Let's get you out of these clothes; the children are waiting for you."

She wasn't in trouble? No one cared where she'd been?

"Best get back upstairs now. Take care to keep the children quiet. I need to speak to your mother."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll wait in the other room," he said to the back of her Mother's head before disappearing down the dark hallway. The Great Room door slammed behind him. The girl jumped at that angry sound, held her breath, hoping the baby wouldn't cry, but there was no scolding or sharp reprimand.

"Get your boots off, now. I'll take these. Jimbo's bottle is warming by the stove. Everyone stays upstairs until I call," Mother said.

She was cold, tired, and thankful for the reprieve. Without any more thought or fuss, she did as she was told. What else could a girl do?

E J Conn lives in Connecticut's Northwest Corner, near an old church and graveyard, in a historic Victorian home built in 1890. I am a stoic at heart. The art of writing the natural world as a reflection on humanity fascinates me. Regardless of era, age, language, religion or class, a human being's singularity arises from their particular landscape. Our roots are our nature; the rest is variations and adaptation. A Girl is an excerpt from a coming-of-age short story, still in progress, based on American culture in the 1960s, early 70s. The tale is not one of Peace and Love or Politics and Vietnam, but of a familial paradox, reflecting on the expectations and suppressions that women faced at the time. *ej_conn@yahoo.com*.



Three Poems by Ron Yaple

From Where & What

From stardust and Pennsylvania grit I come.
From Muncy Creek and Picture Rocks,
from the West Branch and Barnesborough,
from Petersburg and Warriors Mark,
Shavers Creek and the Little Juniata,
from Allenport coal, black as a cloudy night,
to New Columbus corn, sweet as sunshine,
from Aunt Cheerful who married a Kidd
to Aunt Barb who married a Bill,
from across the broad, bumpy, belly of the Alleghanies we drifted,
seven snotty-nosed kids of Wayne and Darlene,
from the seeds and germs of life we sprouted,
from church and farm,
bouncing around one another, a circus of acts,
one ring to the next, all within the Methodist tent,
a journey made of and from overabundance, chaos and security,
days of floods and still water, turmoil and tears,
all the spit and gum of life and death,
Mom, Dad, Karen, Dave, and Terry gone now
before me,
we who remain are ever more grateful
for the rich nature of it all,
the heap of blessings piled upon us.

A Journey – Warrior's Mark

I came off the 4-lane,
passing the State College exits
and dove down off my high speed
to the narrow 2-lane with guardrails of corn.

Through Half Moon Valley I wound,
back and forth, up and down,
past farms, little churches, and cemeteries
squared out of the maize.

A sharp left carried me down into the valley floor
where two brooks merged into one,
where brother Greg and I once ran a trap line,
checked each morning before school,
on past Conrad Farms
and up over the small ridge
dotted with homes new.

I slowed to a crawl –
the old decrepit schoolhouse of boyhood lore & legend,
our dark, dirty, dusty clubhouse,
now fully restored as
the Historical Society headquarters.

I rolled on down the hill into the Methodist church driveway,
beyond our old, now handsome, parsonage home.
I drifted by the field stone sanctuary and the new extension,
now housing, a social hall and day care center.

Under my tires in the back parking lot,
black asphalt,
a sure sign of a prosperous congregation.

Under that tar and stone
lay the land's memory of my 4-H project,
the field that bore sweet corn
that in '68 & '69 earned me 1st place blue ribbons
at the Huntingdon County Fair…

Now Joni Mitchell in her 'Big Yellow Taxi'
drives through my mind.

Sean

Grandson Sean
has seen me enter our woods
with full intent, in complete camouflage,
bow in hand.

At age six, upon seeing our orchard doe,
a regular,
Sean commences to drop to his belly,
crawling with his plastic bow and suction cup arrow
through 6-inch gout weed,
in broad, open view of the doe.

It is early August. Peaches are ripe.
The bucks are yet to show,
kept clear of the mothers and new fawns
through unspoken language.

Watching intently, the doe stomps playfully,
sensing no threat, rather,
innocence playing with pretend.

A native of Pennsylvania, Ron Yaple moved to the Berkshires in 1975. Following a two-year stint at New England Log Homes, and with a forestry background, he established a forestry consulting business, managing private and state lands. A gradual, personal shift led him to transition to arboriculture in the mid-1980's, offering tree care to homeowners. He has since worked with trees in a preservation mode for forty years as owner of Race Mountain Tree Services. Now semi-retired, he has been paying attention to his long-delayed interest in personal and nature writing. Ron and his wife Veronica have five grown children and live in Sheffield, MA.
ronyaple1@gmail.com

Nature Poems
by Claudia Parsons

The leaf at my feet

For just a few moments a leaf holds onto the rain drops,
suspended like shimmering beads of glass.
At just the right moment I walk past with my dog and notice.
How many times have I been too busy to go out and walk,
too focused on the path ahead to look down,
too rushed to pause and bend to see the leaf at my feet?

Cosmos

The vibrant colors fade,
the lines deepen,
the edges arch and curl,
uneven, the symmetry of youth
overtaken by the wind and the sun.
A dusting of pollen here and there
left behind by the bees that fed here.

Claudia Parsons is an editor at Reuters and a writer and artist who lives in Montclair, NJ, with her son Dylan, nine. She hails from Scotland, and grew up surrounded by thousands of books of every genre, overflowing from bookshelves in every room of the house. Her most prized possession is a leather-bound set of early edition Jane Austen novels, inherited from her grandmother. She recently started writing poetry as part of a creative pilgrimage inspired by artist Carrie Schmitt's book, Awakening Creativity. *She says she has a lot to learn, and looks forward to doing so.* claudiapars@gmail.com

Hungry Hill
by Margot Clark-Junkins

When I moved to Connecticut in 2021, I bought a house three miles from the shoreline, up on Hungry Hill. I found this name wonderfully evocative. How charming, I thought, to be living on the very same land that some long-ago farmer struggled—and apparently failed—to cultivate. Less charming was what happened when I tried to plant a few shrubs: The holes could not be dug.

Beneath the grass I found impoverished soil and a pile of rocks. When I complained to an acquaintance —a landscape architect—he told me, "You live on rubble." I blinked, slightly insulted. "It's glacial till," he explained, looking sad for me.

So, yes, Hungry Hill is well-named. Planting here is unrewarding. But I found a consolation prize: the wilderness out back.

My personal forest sits just behind the house and occupies less than half of our two-acre lot. It is deliciously dark and inviting, especially when the trees are fully leafed out and the land is still a bit muddy after spring rains. There is lovely cool air inside of that shade.

The shade is cast by oak trees, maples, black walnut, tulip, hickory, some white pine and cedar. The ash trees are all dead or dying. The undergrowth is over six feet high.

My forest comes with wildlife. Deer crunch past at all hours, and rabbits emerge each evening to nibble clover. An owl hoots outside my bedroom window. There is the occasional fox who keep his distance and a bobcat who does not. He strolls by as if he didn't have a care in the world, and maybe he doesn't. Once, we spotted him sitting beneath our apple tree in the dark. Some old-timers tell me there are fisher cats, but I have not seen or heard them.

This year, on the Fourth of July, hundreds of fireflies pulsed in the treetops of my forest like a miniature fireworks display. In August, a stoat teased my dog from inside the rock wall. The late-night symphony of tree frogs is spectacular. Coyotes bicker and yip at midnight.

Birds abound. We've got all the usual suspects, plus random bluebirds, woodpeckers, hawks, hummingbirds, finches and flickers. Our hyper-local "murder of crows" act like we are on their turf, which I suppose we are. At sunset, a sound like a wooden ratchet grinds twice -- a woodcock, I think, setting off the dog once again.

Over time, and upon closer examination, I have come to realize that my Garden of Eden harbors its share of invasive plants. For a few days in June, my forest trees are hung with curtains of multiflora rose. Their flowers fill the air with a scent so heavenly that I have yet to rip down these invasive vines. Yet my husband risked his neck to free a stately black walnut tree from a voracious kudzu-like vine.

In some places the forest floor is worryingly naked, which leads me to believe that the unwanted Russian Olive trees that we removed continue to pollute the soil

through their root system. In other places, the forest floor is buried beneath piles of slash comprised of mounds of leaf-blown leaves, brambles, broken limbs, dead shrubs, bark from chopped wood, and even old Christmas trees.

I suspect that my forest owes its very existence to wetland-protection laws. When this cul-de-sac was laid out in the 1990's, the developer left a narrow swath of low-lying land untouched. It runs behind all the houses on one side of the street, from the main road to the top of the hill. On my property map, this section is marked "Wetland." We were told by the real estate agent that building on it was strictly forbidden.

I respect the importance of wetlands, having spent my childhood playing in a protected salt-water marsh on Long Island Sound in New York. I am honored to be a steward of an inland wetland. But one day I realized something awful. Wastewater from our septic system, which is situated directly beneath the gracefully sloping lawn, has the potential to seep *into* the wetland. This pairing of septic and wetland in such close proximity strikes me as terribly cynical, a half-hearted attempt at environmental protection.

I have many questions. Where does my wetland begin and end? What is my role in protecting it? I found one little cement property marker near my neighbor's driveway, but the rest are hard to locate. I called the town once and got transferred a few times, left a message, and never heard back. Lately, the subjects of my not-so-light reading include "Inland Wetlands and Watercourses" and "Wetland Mitigation."

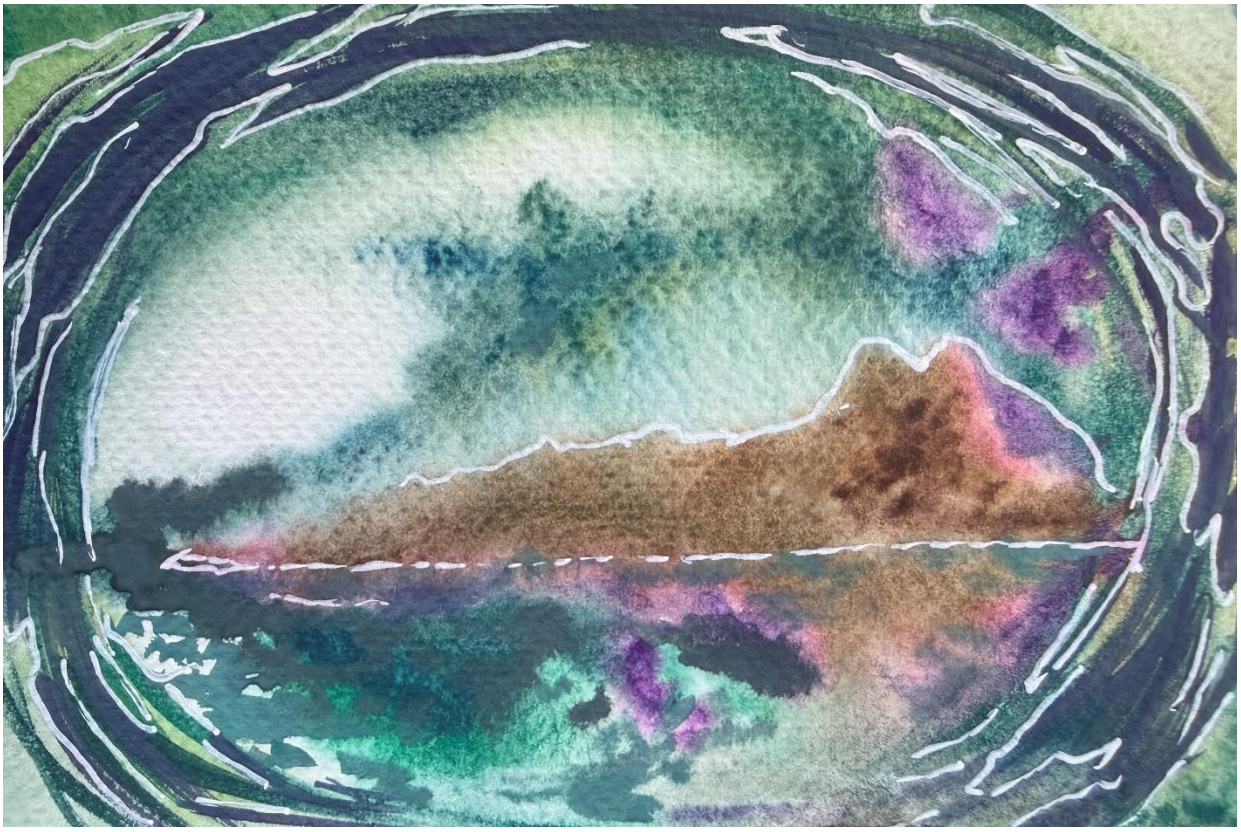
Some of my neighbors leave their wetland alone, happy for the extra privacy, while others have extended their lawns bit by bit, tired of wilderness-creep. Some fear these woods, imagining a tangle of ticks, rabid animals, dog-gobbling coyotes, pushy bears, and falling trees. One neighbor hires someone to spray the perimeter of his lawn with pesticide. Another neighbor replaced his wetland with a pool.

On rainy days, the rain flows down Hungry Hill, saturating our wetlands per plan, following gravity to the foot of the street, where the water collects in two pools of rich black water.

One day in late spring, as I walked my dog down the hill and stopped to admire these vernal pools, I was surprised to see a pair of ducks paddle out from behind a grassy tuft. Three miles from Long Island Sound, and as many from the nearest lake, how did the ducks know about this oasis, I wondered, and where would they go in summer when the hot days turn it into a parched mud flat?

I see now that the name Hungry Hill is a misnomer. The land is far from barren; it nourishes my soul. I savor the sound of tree leaves fluttering in the wind. I watch birds dart and swoop across the lawn. I am soothed by the sight of a monarch tilting toward a flower. The air smells good. The quiet is restorative. Because of the bleak prognosis for our world in the face of global warming, I find it not merely satisfying to fixate on my personal forest, but essential. And as long as the ducks return each year—and so far, they have —I hold on to hope.

Margot Clark-Junkins is the author of a book about her grandfather, Following the Front: The Dispatches of WWII Correspondent Sidney A. Olson (*Bloomsbury/Rowman & Littlefield*, 2024). *She received a MA in design & curatorial studies from the Cooper Hewitt/Smithsonian Design Museum, and has worked as an independent curator, art reviewer, and art educator. She writes a Substack column, "Following the Front" and is currently at work on a collection of short stories.* *www.margotclarkjunkins.com*



Poems by Taylor Staubach

Nothing new except what has been forgotten

My son shows me things on the internet.
Songs, CD players, side bangs,
a book I read in sixth grade.
Objects from a childhood that I forgot about
dormant under layers of unraked leaves,
piling up in the perpetual autumn of my mind.
When he was six I taught him how to throw sticks off a bridge
into the current
and race to the other side.
Like my mom taught me,
like Christopher Robin taught her.
I had forgotten that sticks run faster without branches
and that it's a rookie mistake to drop your stick
too close to a rock,
lest it get caught and disqualified.
One day he may find himself on a bridge.
I hope he remembers his way to the sticks
so he can show someone else the proper technique,
and says yes when they ask to listen to a rap artist
he forgot he knew
on the ride home.

Taking a walk without a cell phone

Untethered
In free fall.
Unbotherable.
Undistractable.
The only chimes left are the wind chimes
I've never noticed, because this is the first time
the wind has blown just so, with me here,
just so.
Unreachable.
Ungovernable.
A pioneer from 1999
Up on my tech-free horse.
My brain wonders when my sister is due home,
but the answer will have to wait.
Better yet--surprise me:
Let her appear like an unexpected gift on my doorstep,
my eyes backlit by delight
instead of her ETA.
Unmoored.
Unattached.
For twenty minutes, I am free.

Siding

I complain about siding
and old windows,
outdated bathrooms
and mold riddled showers,
until a late summer night
on a rotting porch,
when the crickets roar
their deafening lullaby,
and I can't think of anything except:
this is perfect.

Taylor Staubach is a Berkshire-raised writer and communications manager for a regional land trust. She spends her workdays advocating for local conservation and her free time trying to reconcile her connection to nature with her involuntary urge to check her phone. She writes about memory, curiosity, and the strange experience of being part of the last generation that remembers life before the computer room.
Website: https://substack.com/@taylorlore



Poems by John McKinley

Meadow Walk

Over fallow fields

the aspen quakes,

the wind whispers

as it shakes

the thistle and thorn.

A turkey wanders,

with little sound.

The berry waits,

still not found.

Hope Refracted

The sun glows
morning-bright,

each ripple catching
a different light,

refracted,
yet clear.

The hope of dawn,
draws him near.

He casts his net
across the bow,

focused only
on the moment now.

Skin cracked dry,
he waits –

a watchful eye
on the thinning lake.

Once thick with perch,
the receding waters

slowly prolong
his search.

With every toss,
he feels new loss.

Little to gain
after hours of strain.

The sun sets
on another day.

He gathers his nets,
and walks home to pray.

Poem inspired by The New Yorker *article "Lake Chad: The World's Most Complex Humanitarian Disaster"*

"Turf Wars"

Every day it begins anew – the fight for light.

Across the forest floor, ferns reach beneath the dappled canopies of towering oaks, chestnuts and maples, stretching toward the sun. The contest is not fair. The ferns live between the cracks of billowing leaves and branches of their larger arboreal counterparts. They also compete against each other. One fern lifts its fronds into the light while another waits in its shadow.

And still, they thrive.

They have adapted to a life between light and shade, sometimes inhabiting both at once: one part of the plant waving bright, another disappearing into darkness.

The pattern repeats: light arrives, retreats and returns.

Not knowing when the sun will next appear, the ferns remain ready – waiting to dance.

John McKinley writes about landscape and our connection to place. His professional work has spanned sustainable finance, philanthropy, academia, and public service across Africa and the Middle East. He spends his time between New York City and Northwest Connecticut with his wife and three daughters. He can be contacted at john.g.mckinley@gmail.com.



A Singular Tree
by Nancy McMillan

Next door to my childhood home in Poughkeepsie, New York, in the 1950s, a seventy-five-foot sycamore tree held court over the front corner of our neighbor's property. The tree's mottled, peeling bark resembled snakeskin. Splotches of grey-brown bark curled back to reveal an inner layer of ivory wood. Its towering presence felt fearsome and alive, and its sharp-pointed leaves resembled hands that could belong to a fairy tale giant.

A hedge running along our driveway defined the boundary between our two yards. The dozen or so of us neighborhood children, from six different families, had established breaks in that hedge as we ran from yard to yard. The lot next door was attractive for both its size and flatness. We played baseball games in the back corner under its mulberry tree, squishy berries staining our legs and arms, and used the yard for daring nighttime games of Capture the Flag.

In this neighborhood, we flexed our young bodies with an enviable freedom: we biked and played games, climbed trees, hid out in sheds, rolled down hills in the summer in full body contact with the earth and in winter sledded those same hills. Between games, we would take breaks in each other's houses, flopping down on soft chairs in TV rooms; but mostly we were outside. For me, outside was a safe place to be.

Inside my house, family life was dominated by my older sister, who decades later would be diagnosed as bipolar, and by my wild oldest brother, who would become an alcoholic. Their tension kept me frozen. I did not have a human I could confide in. I hardly knew how to verbalize the feelings trapped inside me. Escape for me, though, existed in the quiet of the shrubs bordering our long porch, or in the woodsy cave of the forsythia bush next door -- and under that sycamore I found something more than escape, power and stability.

One hot, sticky August afternoon, when I was eight, a thunderstorm approached from the west. I stood on the landing between the kitchen and the basement, watching the storm intensify through the windowed door to the driveway. As the sky darkened to pewter, my hand remained on the cold metal knob, waiting for my courage. When it was high enough, I jerked the door open and ran out, cut through the hedge, its stick ends scratching my arms, and stood under the sycamore and looked up into its canopy.

Thunder vibrated in my chest. At the quick flashes of distant lightning, my eyes widened. The tree's high, pale limbs became starkly outlined against a charcoal sky. As the air cooled, I smelled rain. I stood, my body torn between the impulse to run back to the house and the deeper desire to stay and be enthralled by the power of this tree standing mighty and strong against the storm. My thrill was tinged with fear. Rain drops splashed my cheek, but I held myself in place until a crack of lightning

directly overhead made me jump, and the rumble of "the angels bowling" chased me through the side door of my house, wet, panting, and exhilarated.

I don't remember how long I stayed under that tree, but the experience during the storm marked me. The encounter was a gift and a beckoning.

Later in life, I lived by the Pomperaug River in Woodbury, Connecticut, where tall, graceful sycamores line the riverbanks. I found companionship among these familiar trees, common to New England flood plain forests. They became silent sentinels witnessing and absorbing my emotions without judgment or shame.

As a child, I hadn't learned the names of plants or trees, but I lived among them and absorbed their life force. I didn't know then that nature would become a gateway for me to experiencing a mysterious power and to finding solace in its presence. Nature laid within me a foundation of both physicality and an inner, albeit unconscious, awareness of the wider natural world, an inheritance that I treasure and that I believe all children deserve. This is what Richard Louv was referring to, in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, when he writes, "Nature introduces children to the idea—to the knowing—that they are not alone in this world, that realities and dimensions exist alongside their own."

Now, six decades later, the sanctuary I found under a mysterious sycamore has become a permanent altar, one to which I often return.

Nancy McMillan is the author of March Farm: Season by Season on a Connecticut Family Farm *and is a Pushcart Prize nominee (CT Lit Anthology* 2020). Litchfield Magazine *has published her feature stories, one of which placed first in the CT Press Club 2022 Contest. Her work has appeared in the* Toronto Journal, Pangyrus, The Sunlight Press, Persimmon Tree, and Edible Nutmeg. *She is seeking publication for a YA Novel and is at work on a memoir. More information at www.nancymcmillan.com or email her at nancy@nancymcmillan.com*

The Sculpin
by Francesca Beach

The shoreline is flat and rocky, water spraying up from the ground around our feet. I am watching my feet, careful to not step on any critters. I am tired. I bend down into a squat on the rocks, butt lifted to avoid getting it wet. There is a heron stepping in slow motion across the shallow edge of the water. *This is his 9am spot*, you say and we marvel at how delicately he moves across the silver. The sun is rising quickly. It's an ideal spring morning in Washington; the air is sweet and pine and the sky is a pale iridescent blue. I think I spot the head of a seal bobbing in the water to my left, in the distance.

You are preoccupied with a rock on the shore. *What are you looking at?* I call over to you. *I don't want you to see*, you reply, and I shuffle closer. *What is it?* I ask. *A fish is caught in here, in this rock, and I am trying to get it out*, you say, focused on the task. I imagine the fish floating up with the tides in the early morning, expecting to be carried back, trusting, and instead finding itself in a dark waterless cave. I imagine its gills gasping for water and finding only air. *He's probably been here for hours*, you say, your hand hidden underneath the rock, in that mysterious crevice. I stand and start to pace. The sky is brightening, more birds are joining the heron in the shallow water, cleaning their feathers with their beaks. The rocks are sharp on my bare feet. I kneel down next to you and try to peek into the crevice where your hand is, still searching, still grasping for this slippery suffering creature. Finally, your hand emerges, at the end of your fingers a brownish fish the size of a persian cucumber, wriggling and writhing. *Run, run*, I say panicked, thinking about the gills, and we dash across the rocks. You place the fish in the water. We watch in silence as the ride comes gently, and moves away, the fish staying in place. *He's probably in shock. Maybe it was just too much*, I report and we stand watching, hoping for movement.

Later on, we will leave the fish and meander around the shore, looking for creatures. Much later on, you will tell me that you researched this fish (the sculpin) and you found that their fins and gills expand and become spiky as a response to stress. You will tell me that maybe that's why you couldn't pull the fish out, because it felt threatened by the presence of your hand and the spikes got caught on the rock over and over again. You will wonder if maybe you should never have pulled the fish out at all. I will reassure you that the fish would have died anyway, and at least you tried to save it. At least you tried. It could have lived. There is no way to know.

Francesca Beach is a writer, musician, and psychotherapist currently living in Seattle, Washington. She has been published in the West Trade Review, *and is currently working on a creative nonfiction piece about her experience living with a chronic illness. Her writing is interested in the places where psychology meets spirituality, illness meets identity, and nature meets the embodied experience. She writes about the body not simply as something to inhabit, but as a source of knowledge, grief, desire, and meaning. Francesca is an avid Iyengar Yoga practitioner and a lover of memoirs, horses, and the sea. You can reach her on Instagram, @farmerfraank*

Rising Tide
by Susannah Lawrence

how an osprey cocks her talons at the surface with each hover

how the tide surges landward, yet rushes seaward by the shore

how a night heron holds his ground, a squat ascetic in the reeds

how purple martins gaggle by their house, choose company and clamor

how that corgi on an airing veers in my direction as if I've hooked him

how an egret lets me near and then nearer until he lumbers into graceful

how every sparrow whisks to cover in mistrust of my intentions

how black swifts knife the sky into shards with their bodies

how this sun plays at fire on the trunks of oaks along a street

how light fades on the water, flares once more to molten rose

how across the flooded marsh trees in bloom ghost the dark

Susannah Lawrence lives in northwest Connecticut, the rocky part. She is the author of a full-length collection, Just Above the Bone. *Her work has appeared in* The Connecticut River Review, The Cortland Review, The MacGuffin, Nimrod, Poet Lore *as well as other journals and in the anthologies* Where Beach Meets Ocean *and* Waking Up to the Earth. *She is a proud and thankful member of the Monday Poets, which for 30 years has been providing close listening and honest feedback to its members.* susannahwood.1@gmail.com

Three Views of an Inland Forest from a Washashore
by J. E. Dunn

I. Writing Nature

I keep looking for a tidal swell beyond pitch pine and stunted oak,
Wondering about the edge where wind-bent woods sinks into swale
So swale can lift into dune so dune can fall to wrack-lined sand.
There's no horizon here.
Movement seems vertical under this high roof
Of leaf shapes I don't quite know hiding the sky,
Its stars and cirrus, behind a trembling of peridot.
Beyond the thick trunks along my path is a greener
Place of more trunks, and more beyond, and more.
It seems too clean, this forest, all canopy and column.
There's no familiar trellising of poison ivy and catbrier,
No coastal tangle of alluring invasives—
Fragrant *rosa multiflora* and *lonicera japonica*, bird-laden
Privet, iridescent porcelain berry—all promising
A dune fox's sudden face in the shadows.
This breeze has no salt and this path is not founded on sand.
These animals are still peripheral, glitterings and shiverings
In endless green and I am also trying to be something
In these woods with no sea clouds or stars to compass me.

II. Advance Regeneration

In the afternoon I clamber a wooded hill
Behind a forester, carefully stepping around
Oak saplings I now see everywhere; they are waiting,
The forester says, for light—the slow time
Of other things dying and falling,
Or an instant of wreckage clefting this forest's roof.
They will outlast heat, cold, and the mouths of deer,
The forester says, snapping the top off the nearest one,
And they will even survive fire.
And then we, forester and followers,
Move below these shadowed saplings
To their little sprawls of roots, to the suckering spread
Of dying beeches, to the soil's sweetness
And its past: this charcoaled hearth we stand on,
Black and dry now, if you dig down a bit,
Was once sealed to smolder for days, and before that,
The forester says, probably there was fire everywhere.

He wants to write a book about hands,
The different people and the different work their hands do,
But it's fire he knows and it's fire in his revelations now:
The lucky burn in a lightning-struck trunk,
The usefulness of embers kept and stoked there, or carried
Away and on; the fire's tending of forests then
And the tending of forests' fires now;

And this inheritance of burnt timber inches under leaf litter,
Below the patient oaks, below the fingers that break
Young wood to show it will survive.

Later, at the bottom of the hill,
We spot flames springing from the forest floor:
The bulbous cinnabar of chanterelles.
Don't eat them, the forester says, just in case,
And then we are underground again, in mycelium
As resilient and determined as a floor of oaklings
No single hand can snap into nothing.
These skeins of filaments don't love, don't help,
Don't warn, aren't mothered in the way we might like.
Competition drives the ecology;
Cooperation and symbiosis are secondary.

That's what the forester says.

And then I see the forester's forest,
A crucible of accident and impulse,
The glow in the smolder:
A world like fire.



III. Edge Effect

An ornithologist has gathered us, a clutch
Of walkers and writers with questions
And notebooks, for learning
In this August morning's woods.
It was supposed to be a walk
But some dozen feet of path offers riches
Enough to touch: dewed jewelweed,
A scarab beetle's facets, the feathery edges
Of ferns. There are vanishments, too,
In the notes of a red-eyed vireo,
Then a green-eyed one, before a robin's warning
Sings the woods into silence.
An hour in we ask our guide to resolve the mysteries
Of migration and succession:
Why do these birds come so far year on year,
And if these trees aren't ancient
But sprung from clear-cut earth
And birds make a summer's life here
Doesn't that mean there's hope for this world?
There is no answer we can write down.
The group moves on but I get caught
On something said about darkness and deer-browse
Impeding growth under trees:
But along the trail there's a strip of light
And all kinds of things grow.
We have gone almost nowhere

And arrived at the understory and the path:
A seam of sun in this vast inland forest
Where attention in wait might alight
Here, now there, become riotous or fleeting,
Or something unanswerable,
All kinds of things growing all kinds of things.

Before I reach for my pen
A tangle of life takes flight in my head:
I see this forest again, from seeds to leaves
To wings to song.

Dr Jennifer Dunn holds a doctorate in English from Oxford University, where she has taught literature since 2002. Now based on Cape Cod, she teaches online for Oxford Lifelong Learning, oversees teaching in the department's online-course program in literature and creative writing, and serves as Assessor in English for the Certificate of Higher Education. She has published on modern fiction, women's writing, and literary theory. Her interests extend to creative writing, ecocriticism, and the relationship between storytelling and place. Before academia, she spent her summers happily monitoring endangered shorebirds. Outside of teaching, she hikes, kayaks, and roams Cape Cod's mudflats. www.jenniferedunn.com

Autumn Musings - 2026

By Michelle Alfandari

"Everything is connected." We hear those words and vaguely believe them to be true, but we don't embrace them until we are ready.

I was lucky to grow up a three-minute walk from the ocean, making it possible to develop a relationship with this force of nature early in my life. Mine was a year-round love affair with the sea, but Autumn was a favorite time: the summer residents had departed and left the beach and the ocean to me.

The ocean was a place for solitary walks, for contemplation, for navigating the slippery jetties as waves pounded the massive rocks. Or surfing on my boyfriend's too-large surfboard, thrillingly catching a wave bigger than I was ready for, until it got the better of me. The tip of the board pitched forward, I flipped in the air and then fell into the powerful wave. Swallowed up by the vastness of the endless water, I was pushed and pulled roughly in all directions, losing all sense of what was up or down. Even so, I wasn't frightened; or perhaps I just didn't have time to be, and so I intuitively relaxed, going with the twisting currents of the water's energy. The force of the wave eventually subsided, the wave itself once again becoming the vastness of the ocean, leaving me in thigh-high water, alive, exhilarated, and feeling an even greater intimacy and connection with the waters.

I always figured that I would return to the sea when I retired, but instead, here I am in the hug of a woodland far inland, atop what is called a mountain but is really a 1400-foot hill in the northwest corner of Connecticut. There is no ocean here, just a stretch of wetland between the house and the woods that has lots of nameless life, buzzing and crawling about.

My relationship with the ocean was so interactive that I felt a part of it. In contrast, when I first moved here, about ten years ago, it felt like a foreign land filled with creatures that slithered, walked, loped, and crawled, and for the most part were to be feared, avoided, and whenever possible, destroyed. But slowly, while doing my uninformed best to maintain the gardens that I inherited, I started noticing the plants and animals around me.

As I write, it is almost officially Fall, and on our property the landscape is visibly changing. Some of the flora and fauna now have names beyond plant, tree, flower, animal, bird – nouns that were the extent of my taxonomic vocabulary not that long ago. As I acquire each new insect or plant identification, I feel like a child discovering a new word and wanting to use it repeatedly. But, it's more than that. Knowing the specific names of the plants and animals that share this property, this road, this earth with us opened a visceral connection with these beings, without having to anthropomorphize them. I am 'seeing' them with new eyes. So, while I can wax poetic about the changing colors of autumn, what I feel more strongly and celebrate are my new relationships with the ever-changing, ever-transitioning natural world around me.

I am feeling like fall myself – that is, in transition. I don't know if I feel old, but I don't feel young. Ambition seems to have fallen away like the dead branch of a tree, dangling for a while and then finally dropping, silently and unnoticed to the ground. In time, the rotting branch will provide shelter or sustenance to insects; it will decompose and enrich the soil. I have no idea if my fallen ambition will enrich anyone or anything else, but for me, its absence has opened up more space to see, feel, hear, smell, and taste the natural world around me; and to appreciate that nature isn't a backdrop for human life, it is alive with the senses of belonging and connection that we feel ourselves, just expressed in different ways.

Michelle Alfandari is an accidental conservationist, converted in a single lecture by entomologist Doug Tallamy. She is co-founder, with Tallamy, of Homegrown National Park® (HNPark.org), a global science-based grassroots movement to raise awareness of the biodiversity crisis and the simple solution we can all be part of — restoring biodiversity and ecosystem services by planting native plants and removing invasives. She was previously the founder and CEO of MODA Licensing, a global licensing and marketing agency based in NYC. She lives in the NW Corner of Connecticut, in an old house on a dirt road, with her artist husband, Tom Goldenberg, and their most lovable mutt, Kiddo. michelle@malfandari.com



Two by Bina Thomson

Students of Flight

Echoes of time fill this space.
The walls breathe the past into my sweaty lungs.
I can't smell much past old smoke,
the way the timbers seem to sigh and exhale it.
The heavy wooden desks with rusted hardware speak to a different time,
and I wonder whether I might belong here.
I shake out a wrist sore from writing,
glance out the open window to watch the barn swallows flit outside.
A breeze rewards my efforts,
it is a steadying relief.
Did the forestry students of the past feel the same in this space?
Did they feel the sweat drip down their spines,
taste the remnants of their after-lunch coffee
heavy on their tongues?
I imagine that they too watched the swallows,
their shimmering acrobatics on air currents
both a dance and a chase.
I wonder how swallows learn to do this—
are they taught by severe, strict teachers,
the avian equivalent to professors
in thick wool socks and ancient boots?
I am here because I am being taught,
guided and inspired,
but I've always had that voice inside,
begging me to notice and make note,
to try to create art out of art observed.
The swallows must have the same;
the freedom to fall cannot be taught,
but it's in practice that they gain their strength.

The hike I take to stay alive

I am surrounded by trees of all shapes and kinds, tucked in with the striped maples of the understory, looking up at the distant towering oaks. The rain has stopped, but the air is still thick with moisture, and the leaves occasionally drip with leftover rain. The damp earth smells like tobacco. I pause my walking to crouch down, inspecting a minuscule fern growing from a boulder's mossy surface. I can't help but be moved; there must be some sort of God if these moments of tiny beauty can exist. An owl swoops down, unseen before she reaches her perch in a white pine. The soft gray sky brightens as the sun rises, working to break through the clouds. I run my fingers over the spongy moss, marveling at the soft fibers of the fronds. A tick scales the landscape of my calf, tempted by my blood and body heat, seeking sweat-damp hair in which to burrow. I remove the tick and crush it between two rocks, the smaller of which fits perfectly in my palm. I can feel the gazes of the squirrels and the birds, the chickadees and the Blackburnian warblers, assessing if I am a threat. But there is more that I cannot see; beings beyond, watching me move and breathe and weep. They are why I walk this trail when the weight of my own existence is too much to bear. Does anyone else ever hate the sound of their own breathing? I don't know what to call them, they whose current of guidance is unseen; they have never formally introduced themselves. Again and again they invite me, accepting my anger and grief, my pain that I leave as a tender offering. I try not to overstay my welcome. I let myself be changed by my time in their presence, and I promise try to stay alive a little longer, to take this walk again.

Bina Thomson is a poet, writer, and avid reader of all genres. She graduated from West Chester University in Pennsylvania with a Bachelor of Arts in Literature and a minor in creative writing. She is passionate about sourdough bread and good coffee. When she's not reading or writing, she's hiking in the woods with her dog or cooking with her husband. Her work for this anthology is based on her participation in the GMF nature-writing workshop. You can follow her other writings at substack.com/@binathomson.



Boats
by Rachel Slajda

The beach here is not a sandy dream. The smart move is to wear water shoes, so that your feet won't get cut up by mounds of snail shells when you walk to the Sound.

People hate on the Sound. They accuse Long Island of cutting off our access to the true ocean and leaving us with this cloudy estuary instead. They go to Rhode Island for the smooth soft sand and surfable waves.

But there's so much here. The snails are called "slipper shells" or "boat shells," because on the inside of the shell there is a small shelf like a tiny deck, or a seat in a rowboat. My mother called them "fairy boats" when I was little. However, when I google the phrase, I can find nothing about these dear slipper shells except a poem from 1880 in the *National Journal of Education*:

> I found a fairy boat upon the shore,
> One little seat it had, and nothing more;
> What boundless ocean had it wandered o'er?
>
> The venturous boatman, where indeed was he,
> Who launched this shallop on the billowy sea,
> And left it stranded on the beach for me?
> -W.W. Bailey

Today, my mom denies that she ever called them fairy boats. I've asked around, of my friends' moms, aunts (women being the more reliable keepers of lore) and no one has claimed the name. But I don't think I made it up myself.

Going further down the Wikipedia rabbit hole: Slipper shells (*Crepidula fornicata*) mount each other one by one, each sequential shell becoming smaller and smaller, creating stacks in which the larger females are on the bottom, with males on top. If the females of a stack die, the largest male will become female.

Perhaps then she will inherit the lore.

In Britain, the animal is called the common slipper limpet, which is fun to say. Even more, from an essay on the site of the British Marine Life Study Society:

> The bottom limpet or limpets are always female, the top ones always male, so the male *simply* extends his long penis down the side of the chain and inserts its tip into the female's shell to fertilise her eggs. [Emphasis mine.]

I find myself next on the World Register of Marine Species (WoRMS), where I learn that in German the name is *pantoffelschnecke*; literally, slipper snail – which, to be honest, is a little disappointing.

It's also known as an "oyster-pest" because in Europe, where the snails are invasive, they damage oyster fisheries by starving the oysters and sometimes literally smothering them with sheer numbers.

I am myself a predator of oysters, and have a tattoo of another native North Atlantic snail, the knobbed whelk, which crawls along the bottom of the ocean in estuaries and uses the flat part of its shell to pry open oyster shells. (My method is slightly different.)

Among my collections of shells and pretty rocks, I find just one slipper shell. It isn't much to look at, with smooth but uneven edges, splotched brown and tan instead of purple and pink. But it's mine. And next time I go to the beach, there will be thousands more fairy boats.

Or whatever anyone wants to call them.

Rachel Slajda is a lawyer, journalist, and lover of the Sound. She is a native New Englander and lives in New Haven with her cats Ricki and Moira. She can be reached at rachelslajda@gmail.com.

Poppy Seed
by Martina Müller

I travel to northwest Connecticut with the fresh knowledge that a monumental change is on the way.

It's the height of summer and the forest is lush, each plant fighting for its share of sunlight in the frenzy of life. As I drive along a gravel road lined with towering trees, I find my perspective shifting from "me" to "us". You are little more than a heap of cells, no bigger than a poppy seed, but already I feel your presence as if I were holding you in my arms.

Out of the car and ambling along a forest walk, I listen to the busy chatter of nature enthusiasts. People of all ages, wearing typical tree-hugger attire - Patagonia pants and Tevas - recite the name of each species. Here's orange jewelweed, busy growing its seed pods that will eventually burst with a twist. Over there, see the goldenrod in full bloom? And just a bit further, the elderberries are slowly ripening.

I sneak around the group and pluck a berry, plopping it into my mouth like a kid stealing candy. Will you do that someday, too? The berry tastes bitter as I squish its flesh between my teeth. As soon as I swallow, I feel guilty. Maybe you don't like unripe berries. Or raw ones.

The air is muggy, and I feel exhausted. Before I left home this morning, I got another heat advisory alert on my phone. No surprises there. It is August, after all, and the past several years are among the hottest on record. But now I'm worried it might be too warm for you, that the fans at the camp we're staying at won't be enough. At the same time, you're making me so tired that I have no choice but to take extra naps. I retreat from the walk to lie down inside.

The sweaty nap behind me, I go on the next guided hike, letting a Veery's song - flute-like, descending - pull my attention from my own tiredness. The ecologist's explanation of atoms and molecules in constant recycling comes back to me as I gaze at the dying ash tree in front of me. How many of its atoms have been part of a human before? Even if the answer is none, this tree's story is married to ours, its fate sealed by the shiny green beetle we brought over from Asia.

The forester says not to worry, that a rare few ash trees show resistance to the emerald ash borer. The species may rebound in a few thousand years, even if hundreds of millions of trees must first perish. I acknowledge the fate of this ash, and try to take comfort in the possibility of its distant descendants. But it is hard to take consolation from such a far-away future. The loss is happening now, and its consequences will be felt alike in my and your lifetime.

I think about all the havoc we've wrought - my generation included. The Asian and European pests, the herbs and the fungi and the thousands of insects. From each of these creatures' perspective, we're godsent: middlemen transporting them to a new place with plenty of food and no predators, free of charge. We move them around without understanding what will happen next, and then we spend decades

trying to undo what we have done, elaborate schemes that sometimes help but more often fail, and occasionally make things worse.

Standing among these trees I begin to wonder: when do we stop fighting the changes we have caused? When do we accept that the world we are trying to preserve has already shifted beneath our feet? When do we adapt?

When I think of you, the answer is crystal clear: you will have no choice but to adapt. If you enter the world in 2027, you might live to see the year 2127, or even further. A century is difficult for me to imagine. I can hardly take in this forest as it is today, let alone imagine what it will look like when you are my age.

What trees will still be standing? What birds will still sing? Which berries will still grow wild along the trail? Which disasters will have become ordinary enough that you barely notice them? I don't know. I cannot protect you from a future I cannot see. I cannot promise that this forest will still be here, that the climate will be as forgiving, or that the world you inherit will be as abundant as the one I am now walking through.

But adaptation and fighting are not opposites. A species can resist a beetle and change. A forest can lose certain residents and still become something new. Maybe you can also do both: learn to live in the world as it is, while joining in the effort to repair what we have done and stand against future unraveling.

Little poppy seed, as I stand here, surrounded by this summer forest, I know I can't promise you the safety of an unchanged world. What I can promise is to teach you how to pay attention to it and honor it. To notice and protect the first flowers and the last berries. To love what is here while it is here, while adapting to the changes we can no longer avoid and standing against the ones we still have the power to prevent. Above all, I can promise to show you how much beauty there is in this living world, and teach you how to belong to it while helping shape what comes next.

Martina Müller is an environmental policymaker who grew up between Brazil and Germany and has called New England home since 2017. She helps advance policies that reduce disaster risk through multilateral engagement with governments. Her career spans public service, international organizations, and the nonprofit sector, grounded in a master's in public policy from Harvard University and a law degree from the University of São Paulo. A lifelong lover of nature, she is now working on a near-future novel. muller.martina@gmail.com

Closing Remarks for the First Annual Nature Writer's Retreat
Yale Forestry Camp, Great Mountain Forest
by Bruce McEver

Good afternoon, I am Bruce McEver, and I've been asked to offer some closing thoughts on our conference and to discuss some of the spiritual aspects of experiencing nature and the more evocative and ephemeral side of nature writing.

First, to orient you as to who I am and where I come from, I live right over the mountain in the Housatonic Valley, exactly where the Housatonic and the Blackberry rivers converge around an island. You can see it from the ledge of Canaan Mountain. From above, if you look down, this piece of land looks like a snake with the egg of the Earth in its mouth-- much like the great serpent mound in Adams County, Ohio-- the world's largest prehistoric serpent effigy. (How many have seen this?)

The egg is thought to be a "cosmic egg" representing the birth of the universe, maybe spiritual rebirth, while the snake represents time or a creative force. Because the head of the serpent aligns perfectly with the summer solstice, some believe the oval is the sun and the formation thus becomes a celestial calendar. Whatever its symbolism, that oval is where a meteor hit 4 million years ago, How ancient people would know this and build an earth work and mound around is another mystery; but it's one of the ancient wonders of this country -- if you have never been there, go see it.

Anyway, I own some of the land that is about to become a nature preserve and also some of the land that once belonged to Hal Borland, where he wrote the 20 something books that we have been talking about, and recorded the changes of seasons and the lovely details of everything that goes on in in a quiet and delightful way on Weatogue Road, and in the adjoining old growth forest of enormous cottonwood and sycamore trees.

I came to this area from Atlanta, Georgia where I was a Boy Scout and in charge of the nature hut at the Bert Adams Boy Scout camp. So, I got the nature bug then, and have wanted to be out of doors ever since, where I find and feel close to nature and, yes, to a divine presence that I am constantly on the lookout for when I'm outside in nature.

In my efforts to escape New York City weekends, my wife and I began searching in this area and found a small cabin, today a guest house next to a larger home on Weatogue Road. At that time, 1983, the cabin was one of the few things available, and we jumped on it, primarily for its location overlooking the river and the view of Canaan Mountain but also for the great wolf pine in the back yard, which is a magnificent and sacred tree. My wife also liked the litter box door with a little cat carved on it. For whatever reasons, I'm glad we settled here.

In 1994, we were surprised to discover the boys' club camp next to us had been bought by a developer who planned to turn the camp into a 13-lot subdivision. The

Blackberry River Run, ourselves, and our neighbors were against this, so we organized to slow down his efforts. One thing I had to do defensively was purchase Hal Borland's farm, on the other side of the development, so that the developer could not expand. I bought it out of default from the Salisbury Bank. Eventually, though, I had to sell off that historic house.

Our land just seemed a special place to us, but when I began reading the late Hal Borland's books I began to understand why it was so special. His wife Barbara was still living in the house at the time. I soon discovered Bartholomew's Cobble, a nearby natural limestone and marble rock garden at the other end of Weatogue Road that had been an old sea-bed. At one time, beneath this part of the world a river ran through, turned the soil sweet, and changed the geography, which resulted in more plant diversity here than anywhere else in New England. That is documented in Bartholomew Coble; if you haven't been there, please go and see it.

I began keeping journals and writing, in between building and operating a business in New York City. I've written several books of poetry -- another one is forthcoming -- and a memoir, *Many Paths: a poet's journey through life, death and Wall Street.* I keep track of nature through my journals and poems. Nature informs all of my writing. Here's a poem I wrote about a spiritual experience just before I took off one spring morning from a family farm in Georgia.

When the Woods Walked

It was just after dawn, illuminated

the yellow-green forest tops unfolding

across from the house on the Little Sandy,

up from the church's immersion pool.

The place is still sweetly haunted

by my late wife and her family,

and surrounded by trees

saved from developers.

It was the sound of water,

the stream coursing the shoals.,

spilling over and smoothing the granite shelf

that charmed me past mornings

cacophony of birds, excited

by emerging insects.

It was life restarting before me:

the unfolding of little red buds to green

in the treetops, sponsored by

the vast machinery of trunks

sucking sap from roots sourced by the stream,

all working right before me.

The trees shared their secret

with me, not their miracle of changing

carbon dioxide into oxygen,

but they moved first, stepping forward,

reaching through, to my understanding---took me in.

It was as if the ancient Sanskrit text

we translated in class came to life at last.

The wisdom of the Upanishads

poured over me, and I was baptized

on the spot shouting:

I am that,

I AM THAT!

I find, as in the above poem, that there are key moments when writing becomes spiritual; in the observing of nature I in fact become nature observing itself. Here is the knowledge--here is the presence. I am inside the mechanics of the trees. I want to protect this, and I have protected this place and have cause to love and remember it. This is the sacred encounter -- like reading the ancient Upanishad text.

This weekend, we've heard the full range of nature writing, and can now examine its spiritual dimensions. Doing so was pioneered by Thoreau and Emerson through the transcendental movement based in Concord, MA, as I was reminded when I used to visit Ron Thiemann, the former Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, a good friend and my faculty advisor. The Transcendentalists saw nature as a pathway to the divine.

John Muir astutely observed, "In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks". For Muir, mountain encounters were conversion experiences. Nature observations can be a spiritual practice, not just mere documentation.

There is in fact a sacred feeling in observation, as it cultivates reverence along with curiosity. We recognize the interdependence of life around us, rather than just cataloging its items. We seek a presence in its stillness; it cultivates a contemplative attitude. Last but not least, it acknowledges the mystery around us that cannot be fully explained. As nature writers we are challenged to try to get as close as we can to describing the ineffable, but alas, we never can do it fully. However, it is the attempts that are often our most profound and beautiful works. Here is a poem that I wrote down in the Housatonic Valley, looking up at the Canaan Mountain and the halo-like cloud around its base.

The Tau

The amber rim of morning
illuminates a mist shrouding
the mountain's foot. A will-o'-the-wisp,
as if shy of revelation,
retreats through fall-yellowed woodlands
into the valley of two rivers.
Bearing mysteries
learned at a master's feet.

Like a reoccurring dream
searching for meaning,
it steals the ordinary of the day
robbing routine, insistent
on interpretation.

The shape-shifting cloud,
says: Slow, consider
the urgency of those great flocks.
Vee-ing South---

What drives
those dawn treaders
disappearing into the mist?

Like an ancient landscape

painted on a parchment scroll,

you recognize the fabled land,

once forgotten,

the way,

now before you.

Now about the spiritual dimensions in Hal Borland: It's not obvious in his writings but it is there, subtly and indirect. His spirituality is implicit rather than explicit. It is woven through his practice of attention, rather than being expressed in mystical images. He is the spiritual naturalist through his discipline and his daily observations, which are almost meditative, and through his deep love, as expressed in careful attention. There is in his writings a quiet respect for the sacred cycles and an acceptance of mortality and of natural laws. His *Sundial of the Seasons* and newspaper columns embody a sort *of lectio divina* or sacred reading of the natural world. His approach was consistent: observation and aware presence equal spiritual discipline; paying attention becomes an implicit spiritual instinct and attitude.

Most importantly for Borland, cyclical time was sacred; seasons have spiritual rhythms—they are not mere weather. He sees the annual return as renewal and reassurance, an acceptance of natural cycles that reflects one's spiritual surrender to larger forces. This quiet acceptance of mortality is presented without sentimentality. Death is a natural, necessary and sacred part of life. This is Stoic wisdom, with an underlying reference to what goes on daily and that has been deeply observed. For example: Each season has its own gifts, and the wise person learns to receive them. This sounds simple, but it reflects spiritual receptivity.

What Borland does not do is claim that nature explicitly reveals the divine. He avoids ecstatic or transcendental languages, and does not philosophize about interconnection; rather, he remains grounded in his observations. He is more like Montaigne the Essayist than like Emerson the Visionary.

Borland's greatest spiritual achievement may be his refusal to sentimentalize. He doesn't impose meaning on nature. He doesn't demand that nature validate human emotions. Nor does he claim special access to the divine truth. This is in itself a spiritual position: humility before creation.

What is Borland's spiritual messages? Again and again he stresses: Show up daily -- presence is a practice. Pay real attention -- love requires scrutiny. Accept that wisdom is nonresistance. Find sufficiency in the particular-- one place, deeply known. Honor cycles -- death and renewal are sacred. And speak plainly -- truth needs no ornament.

For Hal Borland, a walk in the autumn woods attended to carefully is prayer. Knowing your watershed intimately is spiritual knowledge. Accepting limits --

seasonal, personal and mortal -- is enlightening. Witnessing without demanding meaning is the deepest reverence.

In conclusion, I will call the spirit of Borland's spirituality that of Tuesday morning. Ordinary discipline – renewable and reliable. He doesn't write about encountering the divine in nature; instead, he embodies a life of continuing, humble attention. This is perhaps the most sustainable spiritual practice. Not dramatic enlightenment, but daily devotion. The sacred is not elsewhere or extraordinary. It is here today in what you observe with love.

We find this also reflected in sacred scriptures. One of my favorite texts is the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas. When it was found, along with an ancient library, in a cave in Nag Hammadi desert, it was thought to be a source book of the sayings of Jesus. Certain of its passages do tie to the Gospels Relevant for us today is the passage about Jesus' response when questioned as to the location of the Kingdom of Heaven. "And Jesus said: If those who lead you say to you: See the Kingdom is in heaven. Then the birds will precede you. And if they say to you, it is in the sea. Then the fish will precede you. But the Kingdom of heaven is within you and without you. If you know yourselves. Then you will be known. And you will know that you are sons of the living father." This same text is found in the gospel of Luke. Chapter 17, Verses 20. and 21. Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees. When is the Kingdom of God coming? And he answered: "The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. Nor will they say, look here it is. Or there it is. In fact, the Kingdom of God is among you."

Thus, my friends as we come to the end of this conference, we have examined a number of significant nature writings -- from the horses' mouths! -- and discussions of how we all delight in trying to recreate with words the world that the Good Lord has created and continues to create all around us --the wonderful feeling that we all get from being out in nature. The Bible and Jesus are telling us that the elusive kingdom of God is all around us indeed. When we appreciate it, we are in our own heavens, and today. We just don't realize it. And it is our awareness and our observation that, like Hal Borland's, will eventually pay off for us as we consistently show up to enjoy and document this wondrous environment here around us.

God bless you -- Good luck and keep up your good writing.

H. Bruce McEver is a businessman, poet, and philanthropist. He holds an BIE from Georgia Tech, an MBA from Harvard Business School and an MTS from Harvard Divinity School. In 1983 he founded Berkshire Global Advisors, a strategic investment banking advisory firm. Co-founder of The Foundation For Religious Literacy, he is a professor of practice at Georgia Tech and serves on its board, as well as on the advisory boards of the University of Georgia Press, Harvard Divinity School, and Emory University. A trustee of Great Mountain Forest, Trustees of Reservations, and other conservation organizations, he is the author of three books of poetry and the memoir Many Paths: a poet's journey through life, death, and Wall Street. https://brucemcever.com.

Footnotes for May Joseph's essay on pages 29-33

[i] Communication with William Gridley, Head Steward, Aton Forest Inc, September 7, 2026.
[ii] "NPS National Natural Landmark summary" *National Park Service*. February 5, 2004.
[iii] Billy Gridley, *The Spirit of Aton Forest: Frank Egler, Rebel Ecologist, in Pursuit of Science and Natural Area Protection.* Norfolk, CT: Aton Forest, Inc., 2026.
[iv] John Anderson, Gene Billings, Ian Civco, Frank E. Egler, "Spaulding Pond Mini-Wilderness Preserve North Swamp Area Map & Guide Private, Self-Guided Interpretive Nature Trail." Courtesy of the Aton Forest, 2026.
[v] Warren G. Kenfield. *The Wild Gardener in The Wild Landscape: The Art of Naturalistic Landscaping*. New London, Connecticut: Connecticut College Arboretum, 1994.
[vi] Frank Egler, Aton Forest Fellowship Irrevocable Trust as Amended November 27, 1992. Courtesy of the Aton Forest.

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