

From the Executive Editor:

The vulnerability of children, the intricacies of growing up, the joys and heartbreak of love, the complexity of intimacy in and out of marriage, the fecundity of nature, racial and cultural conflict, the wounds of war, the “ecology of memory,” the death of a parent, the death of self—these subjects and others fill the pages of our new issue. As always, the editors and editorial boards worked tirelessly and with great passion to select the strongest, most distinctive work from the large volume of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction submitted to us.

From the long list of possible titles for this issue, we chose *All We Cannot Alter* from the poem “Is This What Poets Do?” by Elizabeth Oness:

All we cannot alter becomes a kind of altar,
a place we revisit against our will

because we need the sacred
when we're scared or scarred or both.

What the poet does is to *start* at, rather than be stopped by, the finality of what

cannot be changed. In searching for the right language to do this, the poet must go beyond words. First, she must know what and how to think and feel; she must be able “to give myself up / to everything I love . . .” (Caitlin Bailey, “Heart Triptych”). He must learn how to translate “my body into some new / language” (Todd Davis, “Translation Problems”). She must see the surface as well as what’s beneath: “Only the essence of them. / The stories underneath the lacquer” (Claudia F. Savage, “Light on Fire”).

What *is* this new language? A way of articulating and making meaning out of what we cannot alter, out of what scares and scars us, out of ordinary and extraordinary moments, out of individual and collective history, out of death (“articulation of the final lucidity / a prayer to paper . . .,” Alison Pelegrin, “Bogue Falaya Death Barge”). The writer looks for words to name a place: “Not the one spelled out / by map or atlas, but the name that says / where I was, and also, who I was / just then, the time of day . . .” (Lee Colin Thomas, “Indiana Corn”).

The fiction chosen for this issue presents a range of voices and narrative structures and an array of subject matter and themes. In the opening story, “Joey” by Kathleene Donahoo, a vulnerable foster child’s bond with a caring neighbor is put at risk by his own coping mechanisms and an insensitive foster mother. The family losses and conflicts forming the backdrop for a teenage girl’s coming-of-age experiences in “Up Dell Drive” by Sara Reische Desmond mirror the geographic and cultural collisions in the girl’s neighborhood as well as in the larger world.

The nature of intimacy and love in a marriage is at the heart of a young married couple’s raucous threesome date on a summer evening in “An Exaltation of Larks” by Theodore McCombs. In “Duotone Portrait of a Dragonfly” by R.T. Jamison, two misfit characters, a Japanese woman and a young American man with a passion for Japan, meet in a market and have a brief sexual affair. Both are loners whose realities are shaped by their own unmet needs and imagined futures. “As You Are Now” by Jeff P. Jones features a decaying zombie roaming a post-apocalyptic Midwest wintry landscape. At once human and nonhuman, he tries to hang on to his humanity in a brutal world. What can and what can’t be changed in the lives explored in these stories offer a continuum of challenges as well as opportunities for their authors and their characters.

This year’s *Meridel Le Sueur Essay*, “Mood Rooms” by Mary Cappello, is excerpted from her forthcoming book, *Life Breaks In: A Mood Almanack* (University of Chicago Press). In it, she reflects on the meaning and nature of

moods, using the metaphor of “room,” among others, as a way to capture “the vast and variegated architecture of mood rooms that have shaped me” She likens moods to the niches inside the Capuchin Catacombs on the island of Sicily, her father’s ancestral home, recesses constructed to fit the deceased person’s size and shape: “Moods are niches that I want to imagine as separable from the containers that take us to our deaths. I want to believe that some niches exist for us to die in, others to live in, and that those (invisible) containers we choose to live in are our moods.”

The creative nonfiction we’ve chosen is an exciting mix of voice, form, and content. “The Café Book” by Charisse Coleman is a lovely lyric essay that channels Sei Shōnagon’s late-tenth-century *The Pillow Book* in its diary-like, poetic reflections and lists. Another lyric essay, “Consolation” by Sarah Elizabeth Turner, tracks the joyous trajectory and heartbreaking end of a relationship. “R.I.P. Anita” by Billy Middleton asks not only how one helps students cope with the death of a fellow classmate but what one should feel himself when faced with the event. In the touching and hilarious “On the Death of a Difficult Parent,” Judith Pulman compares the death of her father—“full of piss, bile, and an unstable self-image”—with the death of her guinea pig, Henry—“docile, adorable, and obliging.”

A working-class father’s lessons to his children about money are at the heart of “The Quickening” by Katrin Gibb: children + chores + earnings = money in the bank, a stable future, maturity. In “Faith/A Travelogue” by Marlene Olin, the narrator and her husband embark on a trip to Italy with a group of friends who’ve traveled together for years. Haunting the group is the situation faced by one picture-perfect couple—former football quarterback and homecoming queen—who are traveling with their adult autistic son who may or may not know that his mother is dying of cancer.

Paul Van Dyke’s “Goomey and Aflow” tracks the touching friendship between the author, Aflow, and a Somali man, Goomey, he meets in prison. The author enlisted in the army after 9/11 and served in Iraq; Goomey fled the fighting in Mogadishu and joined the militia to seek revenge for the murder of his father and brothers. Their mutual experience as soldiers is the “common bond that transcended race or culture.” Heartbreak, death, terminal illness, war—these leave inalterable scars that the authors of the creative nonfiction in this issue seek to understand and, through art, transcend.

Poetry, perhaps even more than prose, creates that timeless and transformative moment that makes the impossible possible, that turning (using Jane Hirshfield’s

language) toward movement and change. The mini-fro clumps that fall from the narrator's hair as his wife cuts it in their backyard are scattered by the wind and claimed by "eager / practical birds" as the stuff of "a thousand strong nests" (Michael Kleber-Diggs, "Songs for the Source"). Nature, of course, can hold death and rebirth simultaneously, not just the melting spring earth and its bursting seeds, but the "resurrected sense / of self long dormant" that follows (Brandon Krieg, "February Twenty-Ninth"). Abandoned crab shells ("homes of dead things") become refuges for other lives, just as a woman's "empty belly" yearns for a body "to liven me up and move me" (Emily Grelle, "crab —shell").

Even the end of a relationship, when "everything goes blank" and the couple no longer have anything to say to each other, still holds moments of movement: "For now, close your eyes, let the cold wind / wash over your bare head, and just hold my hand. / It will be enough" (Kris Bigalk, "Enough").

Childhood is full of endings. The child shrieks when the bubble he's blowing breaks: "They don't last!" And then he blows another (Paisley Rekdal, "Bubbles"). A mother teaches her children that every living thing turns into dirt. But the dead bird "becomes clover, breath of mouse, / meal of the owl" (Carolyn Williams-Noren, "In a New Town for an Old Friend's Funeral"). The flags on the imaginary walls of the fairy tale read by the child are blown to tatters by the west wind but live on in the poet's memory, as does "the girl running through the trees / . . . pear in pocket" (Susan Marie Swanson, "The Castle That Grew Up in the Orchard").

In this year's writer's interview, Jamaal May—editor, educator, and author of the poetry collection *Hum*—explores a range of topics that include the sources of his work ("I'm always looking for the thing underneath the thing in front of me"); his working method of assembling parts to make a whole; his path to success ("Basically, you've got to look at the horizon and make every step towards it count, make every step enjoyable, make it thorough, make it resonant so it leaves a footprint."); his approach to language and texture; great new Detroit poets; slam poetry; and his reasons for writing.

Stan Sanvel Rubin includes four books of poetry and one book about poetry in his essay review, "Enlargement." After reflecting on Percy Bysshe Shelley's claim that poets "are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," Rubin wonders how large poetry can be in today's digital world. His title, and the title of Jane Hirshfield's new collection of essays, *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World*, say it all. "For Hirshfield, poetry offers a continual openness and fluidity which is nothing less than an enlargement of our being

through the interpenetration of self and world.”

Rubin also reviews *The Beauty*, Hirshfield’s new book of poetry. These are poems written by a mature artist who is able to “enlarge time by opening new perspectives of external gaze and internal vision.” He follows with a review of Mary Jo Bang’s seventh collection, *The Last Two Seconds*, a response to the fear of imminent apocalypse felt so strongly in our 21st century. Jericho Brown’s second book, *The New Testament*, also enlarges—drawing on but moving beyond his Louisiana and Evangelical roots and his African American and gay identities. Finally, Rubin sees *You Da One* by Jennifer Tamayo as a “genre-fracturing text” that “exemplifies the dispersal of self that characterizes postmodernism.” It, too, fits the theme of “Enlargement” in being so much more than it appears, integrating flashy word play, visual pyrotechnics, pop culture, and surrealism with a narrative about the poet’s return to her native Colombia and a reunion with her difficult father.

We are happy to welcome Laura Flynn as this year’s essay reviewer of creative nonfiction. In “We Do Not Know Alone,” she has chosen two Graywolf books—*Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine and Eula Biss’ *On Immunity: An Inoculation*. While both books have been the subject of numerous reviews, Flynn’s choice to write about them together enables her to talk not just about the books themselves but about their “eerie prescience”—*Citizen* written pre-Ferguson and *On Immunity* released in the midst of the Ebola outbreak; their rebuttal of the old saw that personal writing and criticism don’t mix or that such books by women aren’t marketable; the way in which strong emotions—anger (*Citizen*) and anxiety (*On Immunity*)—haunt the pages; their indebtedness to literary and intellectual ancestors; their shared belief that isolation is not an option (“We can cause harm through our words in the same way that we might pass on a virus”); and their endurance as works of literature.

This year’s issue was designed by Eric Yevak of DesignWorks at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. In curating the folio of photographs for this issue, Eric sought to address the complicated and deeply personal nature of how we as individuals acknowledge our own existence: “The human condition is rippled with dualities: the desire for growth/transformation thrown against insecurities, fears, and desires both public and private.” These images, writes Eric, are distressing in their directness and beautiful in the exquisite ways in which they capture the mundane rhythms of everyday realities. All bear witness to who we are and to what can and can’t be altered. The cover image

we selected, “Smile Milwaukee,” a photograph by Cameron Wittig, beautifully captures the ways in which a place, an object, which is fixed in time one moment can be transformed into something completely new.

Jane Hirshfield contends in *Ten Windows* that the two core qualities of “poem-ness” are “a distilled surplus and alteration of being.” A good poem carries meanings “beyond its own measurable capacity” and leaves the reader “ineradically changed.” Good writing offers the reader the possibility of transformation, a way of changing the inalterable: “Alteration—a changed state of being, a changed state of feeling and comprehension—is what we have built art’s cupboard to store.”

As you read through our new issue of *Water~Stone Review*, I invite you to reflect with our authors on all you cannot alter in our human condition and be open to the turning that literary art makes possible. If you don’t feel it the first time, read it again.

Mary François Rockcastle