

The Blue Guitar



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Co-Editors’ Note

In this time of gratitude, we have so much to be thankful for:

Thankful for all of the talented Arizona artists, writers and poets whose work has graced the pages of The Blue Guitar for going on 14 years. Thankful that they continue to hone their craft and take risks to push the boundaries of their genres, for without their risk-taking, creativity would be stifled.

Thankful that we could enjoy The Blue Guitar Festival of the Arts on the first Sunday in November and the weather cooperated with delightfully mild temperatures after another scorching summer. Thankful for the partnership of the Arizona Consortium for the Arts and the Creative Drill Sergeants and the hard work of all of our wonderful musical performers, literary readers and volunteers to make this endeavor possible.

Thankful for the continued hard work and dedication of Elena and Jim Thornton, and Elena’s vision and leadership as CEO of the consortium as our organization celebrates 15 years.

Thankful that we have been able to continue our mission of bringing the arts and literature for free to the community and providing support for the artists, writers and poets in our community.

Thankful for all of you, our readers. We wish all of you our very best this holiday season!

Rebecca “Becca” Dyer
and Richard H. Dyer Jr.,
Co-Editors



Co-Editor
Rebecca
“Becca” Dyer



Co-Editor
Richard H.
Dyer Jr.

Editorial Staff

Editor: Rebecca Dyer
Publisher: Elena Thornton

Editor: Richard H. Dyer Jr.
Artwork for front,
back covers: Marjory Boyer

Camping

By Roxanne Doty

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He said he wanted to take her up to the mountains north of the city.

“Have you ever been camping?”

“Yeah,” she said. “When I was a kid.” But, that was a lie.

Her parents had never taken her anywhere, never done anything but work and sit around the house drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, the TV always on, tuned to some cop show. She was thirty-six years old and that’s what they were still doing.

But, this new guy who wanted to take her up to the mountains didn’t know shit about her parents, so she could make up anything she wanted.

“We’ll drive up Sunday afternoon,” he said. “Miss the weekend crowds and come back Tuesday morning.”

That sounded good. She’d get her roommate to call in sick for her at the semiconductor plant. She’d be back in time to take her best friend out to the male strip club for her birthday.

He picked her up in his Ford F250, a tent, cooler and Coleman stove loaded in the truck bed. She watched him as he drove through the city and hit the highway going up north. He had a nice profile. In fact, he was very good-looking, probably the best-looking guy she’d found on SoulMates.com. Blue eyes and wavy blondish hair with bits of gray at the temple. He was quiet, not much of a talker. “It exhausts me,” he said. “All those words coming out of people’s mouths. I don’t know how they do it.” A couple of times he took his eyes off the road, looked at her and smiled. Sort of.

When they reached the small town with a turn-off to the road that would take them to the camping area, the surroundings became dense with trees. They began the ascent up the winding mountain road. He opened the windows. The air was fresh and cool. It smelled of pine.

The sun was beginning to set when they reached a sign that read, “Dispersed Camping.” Rain drizzled on the windshield.

“What does that mean?”

“Just what it says. Dispersed. Other campers aren’t right on top of you. They’re usually assholes, with kids and dogs. No bathrooms, toilets, camp ranger.”

He turned onto the dirt road. They passed several campsites, spaced far from one another. Most were empty. About a mile and half down the road a small car was parked, next to it a one-person tent. A low-to-the-ground folding chair faced the mountain’s rim. Up ahead the dirt road ended at a thicket of tall trees. They pulled over at the last campsite about thirty feet from the rim, an expanse of pine trees visible in the dusk. Mountaintops in the distance looked like dark clouds drifting in the sky. He pitched the tent. He said he didn’t feel like starting a cook fire, said he was tired. So, they had some cheese and crackers and chips before they went inside the tent. The screened opening faced the rim. She looked into the night. The drizzle had stopped. He reached over once and laid his hand on her stomach. He came closer. Kissed her. They tried to have sex, but it wasn’t working for him.

“That’s okay,” she said.

“No, it isn’t fucking okay.” He spoke gruffly, made it sound like it was her fault. He turned away.

She recognized that gruff voice, the same as the one her dad used with her mom all those years.

The next morning, he set up the Coleman stove and made scrambled eggs. He wanted to show her his favorite hiking trail. They had to walk back toward the entrance to the camping area. They passed the site with the small car. It was an old Corolla hatchback, faded red, rust along the underside. A tall

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Roxanne Doty lives in Tempe, Arizona. Her debut novel, “Out Stealing Water,” published by Regal House Publishing, was released on Aug. 30, 2022. She has published short stories and poems in various literary journals and magazines, including *Superstition Review*, *Forge*, *I70 Review*, *The Blue Guitar*, *Soundings Review*, *Four Chambers Literary Magazine*, *Lascaux Review*, *Lunaris Review*, *Journal of Microliterature*, *NewVerseNews*, and *Saranac Review*.

man with white hair and beard waved as they passed. The trail was to the left, Juniper Cross Cut. It was cooler up in the mountains than back in the city, but even at the higher altitude the day was going to be hot. It already had that feel to it. She looked at her watch, 11:30 a.m.

Ponderosa pines shaded the trail. The sun peeped through in a few spots. The trail wasn't well-marked. She kept her eyes on her surroundings but there wasn't much except trees. She'd only hiked in the parks close to the city. The trails were always crowded, but she liked having other people around. He walked fast and she had a hard time keeping up with him. Once he stopped and turned toward her. "Keep up, will you."

She'd met him three weeks ago on the dating site, a couple of friends had said it was much better than the others. There hadn't been a lot of information in his profile. It said he liked to hike and read. Forty years old, no kids. He'd taken her to a Lucinda Williams concert on their first date. Anyone who liked Lucinda Williams had to be okay, right?

She came to a trail sign with an arrow pointing to some boulders a couple of feet high. Just beyond the boulders to the left the trail continued. But, he had gone right and was so far ahead, she had to run to catch up.

"Hey. I think we need to go left." She called when she got closer to him.

He ignored her and kept going. He told her he had hiked just about every trail in the state. Maybe he knew another way to get to the stream he said they would encounter. She thought about the stream as she walked, pictured cool, clear water flowing gently, saw herself removing her shoes, putting her feet in the water. Maybe she'd go all the way in, cool off her entire body. Even in the shade the heat was becoming intense. She followed him, trying to pick out things to remember so she could find her way back to the sign with the left-pointing arrow. She noticed a row of four trees with yellow Xs painted on their trunks. She kept walking, afraid of losing sight of him. He finally stopped and she caught up.

They were in a clearing. She couldn't make out a sign of a trail in any direction. She looked back to the trees with the yellow Xs. She could barely see them.

"Do you know where we are?"

"Yeah. We're on a hiking trail." Sweat dripped down his temples

"I think we're going in the wrong direction."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" But he sounded a little less confident about the direction they had taken.

"It means you're making me uncomfortable. I don't think you know where we are. I want to turn back."

His face was red. He looked angry, but he said okay and they turned around. When they reached the trail sign by the boulders,

she said, "We should have gone left here."

"Nag, nag, nag."

They were both too hot to continue and headed back to the dirt road. Sun slammed down on the road the way it did back in the city. They approached the campsite with the red hatchback. The man was packing up, loading a cooler into the back of the car. The tent lay flat on the ground.

"Heading out?" She called out to him.

He nodded and walked over to them. A black lab followed him.

She reached down and petted the dog. It licked her hand.

"Yeah. Moving on," the man said. "Been up here for six days."

The man was from Nevada, had spent the winter in Death Valley.

"Camped in Utah most of the spring. I like to keep moving. Me and Kassie." He nodded toward the dog. Smiled.

The man was old but looked strong, substantial. His arms and legs were muscular and tanned. She looked back at his car as they left and headed back to their campsite. She wished he wasn't leaving.

When they got back to the campsite it was 2:30 p.m. The trees were sparser than on the trail, not much shade. He spread a blanket under the biggest one and took off his shoes. He asked her why she was so mad at him. He looked hurt and confused, like he might cry.

"Are you serious? You just took off out there, acted like a jerk and almost got us lost."

"It was an adventure." He smiled, a sheepish smile. It reminded her of the way her dad used to look at her mom after drinking too much the night before, throwing things around the house and scaring the shit out of them. "Why don't we just leave?" She had asked her mom many times, but her mom just shrugged. "He'd be lost without us."

"What if I wanted to stay up here longer?" The sheepish smile was gone.

"I told you I need to be back by Tuesday night."

"Is your friend more important than me?"

"What?" Some things about him were beginning to frighten her.

"Nothing." He lay down on the blanket, closed his eyes and put his hiking hat over his face.

She was exhausted. She unzipped the tent. It was roasting inside. She wanted to be away from him, but there was no place to cool off. She lay down on the blanket next to him. His breathing was heavy with a slight snore. She wished they were at a regular campground, not this dispersed one with no facilities, no rangers, maybe no other campers. They'd seen a few tents close to the entrance but maybe they had packed

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up and left. She kept thinking about the woods, what it would be like to be completely lost, surrounded by dense forest and clearings that led nowhere. He had turned what could have been a pleasant hike into a scary, disturbing experience.

She gazed at the sky. It was a deep crystal blue, beautiful despite the sun and heat. Expansive, wide open.

She noticed the top of his keys protruding from the right-hand pocket of his shorts. The truck was about fifteen feet from the blanket where they lay. She didn't know if the door was locked.

She sat up slowly, quietly and lifted herself into a squat position. He moved a little and she froze. But, he was still snoring. The keys had slipped, jutting further out of his pocket. She reached her hand toward them. She was almost touching the plastic key cover when her eyes caught movement on the other side of him a few feet away. A snake. He had told her there were snakes up here. "Rattlers," he'd said and smiled.

For a couple of seconds, she was mesmerized by the snake slithering through the tall grass. She grasped the keys and pulled, slowly at first, then yanked them from his pocket. She ran to the truck. It was unlocked. She got in, locked the doors and started the engine.

Sitting in the driver's seat, the truck seemed huge. She backed it onto the dirt road and put it in drive. She was certain the engine would wake him up. She looked over to the tree. He sat up quickly, rose to his feet. The snake was closer, out of the tall grass, the front of its body raised off the ground almost in a half-circle. She stepped on the gas and sped down the dirt road.

6 Poems by Isabella Condon

Observations of the Unnatural World

Cat

There's something gold
In the sunlight of a warm day
Under gazebos
Or pavilions
And yet it stays gold
In the frigid shadows of October
Where it's quiet and frozen
I could turn around to sleep
And find you in my arms still hours later
While a cold hand on your stomach
And a hard head on your shoulder
Shockingly don't make you pull away

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Isabella Condon is a Tucson-based writer studying journalism at the University of Arizona. She is a lifelong poet who remembers producing some of her first work as early as 7 years old. This collection, "Observations of the Unnatural World," was inspired by her move from Northern Colorado to Southern Arizona and the changes in her deepest, personal relationships throughout that process. In life, she aims to always keep her eyes open, always keep writing, and always stay weird as she pursues a career in documentary filmmaking.

June Bug

Nostalgic and light
Atop a hill in August
Looking at a meadow and a town
Separate from the world
Separate from whatever you're avoiding from there
The wings of a bumblebee
Silent but shaking me
As I run from a thunderstorm
I wonder if she's okay

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Whiptail

In the desert
Petroleum lawns
Disguised
They shine as something sweeter
It's difficult to judge
Where the carpet stops
Where the earth begins
While the boundary is visible
The shape is unclear
Afraid to move too much
I feel a tremor
I know I'm likely to trip

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Roach

Writhing for hours
Beneath the bed
Oh how I twist and turn for you
Above you
And below
And in the morning
When I have ceased
When I begin to rest
You continue
It's futile
Reaching out your arms
But oh
She who won't answer
Watches patiently
Not with mercy
But certain guilt

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Puppy

Ouch
Tiny teeth dug into you
Stuck into me
I want to run through the park
With no shoes
I want to walk on hot coals
With no shoes
Scraping sidewalks
Your paws
My knees
Your needs
Do you see right through it
I'm rabid
Are you tiring yet
It's 6 AM
Goodmorning
Goodnight
Ouch

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Dog

Thud
Against the wall
Lick your wounds won't you
Roll over
Show me the fleshy parts
I can fix you up
I'm sorry
Lick my shoes why don't you
Bite my laces
Panting
You can't breathe?
Try harder
Kick
Thud
Against the wall
Forget won't you
Lick my shoes why don't you
For I've fed you
And bathed you
You know I'll continue
Thud Thud Thud
I'm sorry
Wake up it's dinnertime

© 2022

3 Poems by David Chorlton

Canyon de Chelly

The rain turns around and begins
to flow back into the sky. A low cloud
grips a mesa with its talons
and pulls it from the surface of the Earth
revealing one more red rock canyon
filled with souls. The walls are marked by clawing
where they tried to climb out.

History

curls up at the edges
and the open spaces tear apart as easy
as ripping up a treaty.
A dark heat settles over the land.
There are no ladders any more
to reach houses built into
the walls, but those between the houses
and the sky
remain in place
for access to join a hawk in flight.
Easy now to navigate
the cliffs, circle columns rising
from the stony ground, and balance
on the heat. To fly
and not be followed, settle high
where nobody can reach
and be a spirit leaving when
the body can't hold on.

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David Chorlton is a transplanted European who has lived in Phoenix since 1978. His poems have appeared in many publications online and in print, and often reflect his affection for the natural world, as well as occasional bewilderment at aspects of human behavior. His newest collections of poems are "Unmapped Worlds" from FutureCycle, and "Poetry Mountain" from Cholla Needles Arts and Literary Library in Joshua Tree, CA.

Navajo Landscapes

The road remembered glides
with no effort across
flat country that ends in a brushstroke dragged
along a sky soaked in water
where the weight of it
rests while the edges bloom into the land's
imagination.

Rocks the ground
can no longer contain
stand up as landmarks for anyone
who needs to know
where they are going,

but which
direction hardly matters.
The landscape's inner life reveals
a kind of loneliness. It's easy
to feel lost where the Earth arcs
and the sun is balanced
on its highest point

like the destination
at journey's end, when the way
there is by holding
to the underside of a cloud
as it follows the broken yellow line
to infinity.

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“Navajo Landscapes #1,” a watercolor by David Chorlton.

Beyond Landscape

The land ends where
music begins: the out of tune horizon
sings to the sky. Clouds
and memory

part ways
where a distant mesa
turns to sound. The Earth's bones
push their way through
the surface; no harmony
just jut and push

against the light
while a thousand years of rain
smoothes them for the next
thousand, which comes
to fashion them

into the shape
of heat. Drive to creation's edge
and look ahead at language
losing its way.

Words float
away, turn to stars
when the here-and-now
is dark, dark, dark

and wind
is the devil's bow drawn
across what gods once claimed
as theirs.

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"Navajo Landscapes #2," a watercolor by David Chorlton.

Reflections on a Cup of Tea

By Paula Ashley

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I bring a cup of water to boil in the microwave. When the timer dings, I pull it out of the microwave and set it on a hot pad on my kitchen counter. Meanwhile, I have opened the rectangular bamboo box my son gave me for Christmas. The lid is held onto the box by a fabric covered elastic band, the ends of which are tied together and held by a small bead. I select the small silver tin marked The Dalai's Daily, an Indian mix perfect for daily meditations, scoop out a teaspoon of little black curled up leafy things, and put the caddy into the hot water. Five minutes. I take my cup into the backyard.

There is a lawn chair there under the dappled shade of my ash tree. I sit back and wait for the tea to cool a bit more while I imagine Mr. Fu behind a bamboo curtain in a small shop with a red medicine chest that has a myriad of tiny drawers holding his medicinal teas. There is a golden dragon painted across the red chest. When I opened the box for the first time, I went to my computer to look up Gong Fu Teas. No Mr. Fu. Just two dudes from Des Moines, Iowa, riding their bicycles into tea growing areas all over the world to collect the finest teas to bring back to Iowa for their loyal customers. They videotape their excursions into these country mountain sides, and show the tea growers and the ladies hand picking their teas, and drying them in large bamboo sieves. No Mr. Fu to be found.

The tea is cool now and, well, different. I am not a tea

connoisseur so I don't have the vocabulary to describe the flavor. This is not a tea I am accustomed to. I wonder how my son got into being a tea connoisseur. He didn't learn that from me.

My mind flits over to the fountain in the middle of the yard. It has two tiers and when the sun is bright as it is today the current from the solar panel is strong. The stream of water bubbles up and splashes over the top bowl into the larger bowl below. Today the droplets splash further down onto the plants growing in the pots circling the fountain on the ground. The amaryllis have finished blooming, the stalks have been cut back. The thyme has not been trimmed and is bursting with tiny white flowers. A lavender newly planted. A rosette succulent whose name I don't know is doing well. There is the tall chocolate plant with spikey leaves lifting toward the sky. The burbling water distracts from the street noise on 59th Avenue only two houses away.

My tea cup is almost empty. Time for my morning meditation almost over. I really wish there had been a Mr. Fu to lend mystery and aura to his teas. Tomorrow I will sample Ancient Happiness, a Japanese Sencha Green Tea with a medley of sunflower, rose and cornflower petals, and invite my imaginary Mr. Fu to join me under the ash tree. We will chat about the mystery of happiness while we sip tea in the leafy shade hoping a hummingbird will join us to sip water from the fountain.



Paula Ashley is a retired software engineer. She lives in Glendale, Arizona, with her husband and a colony of feral cats who sleep under their bougainvillea and sometimes honor them by following them around the yard. Currently she is working on a family history/memoir of her paternal grandparents, but this essay about a cup of tea unexpectedly popped into her mind. Email: p.c.ashley@ieee.org.

Rediscovering Water: An Old Friend

By Emily Palanjan

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I have always been fortunate enough to be surrounded by water. Growing up in Southern California, I had the vast ocean at my fingertips. The beach was my oasis. My family would go to the beach every weekend we could. I have such fond memories of playing in the sand and swimming under waves with my brother. I never realized how much I took for granted and how much the beach means to me.

The ocean grounds me.

Especially during the pandemic, the ocean was my therapy. I would often find myself sitting on the beach alone and staring off into the distance where the shades of blue from the ocean and sky blended together. It was a reminder for me of how limitless this world is and it made my issues smaller. I have never felt more connected to nature than when I am in water. Water seems to be one of the purest resources on this planet.

Now I live in the desert, where water is scarce. The Santa Cruz and Rillito rivers are dried up. There are not many lakes close by and the ocean is about a four-hour drive away. It was a difficult transition to move away from the Pacific Ocean, but I have become even more appreciative of water. I have learned and seen the effects



Water rushes down the stream on a sunny afternoon at Tanque Verde Falls, Wednesday, Aug. 17, 2022, in Tucson, Arizona. This hike is two miles long on the ridge of the Rincon Mountains. (Emily Palanjan)

of water scarcity more than ever before.

Tanque Verde Falls is my new oasis. It is a breathtaking hike where I am able to reconnect with water. It is about a 40 minute drive east of campus, getting me out of my college bubble. The first time I hiked here, it was a magical experience.

When I parked and started the trail, I heard rushing water. Immediately I stopped in my tracks. It is a sound I have not heard in a long time. We hiked down the trail, weaving through the shrubbery and saguaro cactuses. The sun was beating down on us and soon enough we reached the start of the stream.

At the first chance I got, I took off my shoes and sweaty clothes. I lowered myself from the rocks that bouldered the edges of the fall and into the stream. The first touch of water refreshed my entire body. It brought me back to the cold rush I felt from running into the ocean as a kid.

It was almost like I was getting baptized back into nature again, reintroducing myself. The juxtaposition between the adrenaline rush from being in cold water and how at peace I felt within it, is something I missed.

Water keeps living things alive. It keeps me alive.



The author writes: "Hi! My name is Emily Palanjan and I am a senior at the University of Arizona double-majoring in Environmental Studies and Communication with a minor in Journalism. This is a first-person article I wrote about my relationship to nature, and especially water. In the future, I hope to become an environmental journalist and work in the field of science communication."

A Poem by Kat Emmons

A Mouse in My House

A mouse in the house.
A mouse in my house.
Oh surely there isn't a mouse in my house.
A house whose very existence shouts cat with a capital C.
A house that's home to large cats, small cats, black ones, white ones, and ones of several colors.
A house where cats drape themselves on television sets, peer down from bookcases, sleep on beds, stand on kitchen counters demanding at least half of your dinner, and hiss at dogs while standing on the chair behind your head.
A mouse in the house.
A mouse in my house.
Yes, a mouse — of all places — in my house.
A house with electric pest repellers, one of Home Shopping Channel's hottest sellers.
A home with four dogs always on the prowl, four dogs who love to investigate things.
There was a mouse in the house.
Truly a mouse in my house.
There was a mouse, a tiny mouse, who came to live in my house.
How else could I explain partially eaten chocolate bars in the candy drawer, the hole chewed in the bag of chocolate coffee, and coffee decorating the cupboard drawer?
Then there was — oh my dear I hate to say it in gentle company — the droppings.
Yes, in spite of the dogs, the electric pest repeller, and cats galore.
Truly there was a mouse in the house.
A chocolate-loving mouse who fought the odds to live in my house.
Not just any house, in my house filled with cats — that's cats with a capital C.
A mouse whose mental state was suspect, indeed.
Now it wasn't long before I discovered the true mental state of this tiny rodent.
It came the day I tried to give my dogs their heartworm prevention meds.
It seems the mouse was drugging himself to withstand the pressure of living in the house.
The little creature tried the heartworm medication of every dog.
Settling on one for the largest dog in the pack, it ate four tablets, destroying four months of meds.

Continued on page 18



Kat wrote her first short stories in high school and her first poems in college. Over the years she took part in various writing groups. However, it was the writing groups hosted by the Dog Eared Pages Book Store and the many wonderful participants who became friends and writing peers that brought about her first published short stories in the anthology titled "Flashes of Light on a Dark and Stormy Night." This is her first published poem.

I remember well the laughter of the vet.
She could not contain it after learning there was a mouse in my house.
I had to tell her — how else could I explain my need for heartworm meds?
The shame of having a mouse in my house.
Alas, the shame of it all.
A mouse in the house.
What went wrong?
Were the dogs sleeping when they should have given chase?
Was the ever-popular pest repeller sold on television, a fake?
What of the cats? The large ones, the small ones, the black ones, white ones, and ones of several colors.
Cats who roam the house both day and night, what of them?
Were they too well feed to do their duty, to guard their home?
What of me — the creature-loving human who believes there is a place for all?
What was I going to do about a chocolate-loving, drug-addicted mouse in my house?
I'll tell you what I did.
I moved everything of importance from the kitchen drawer and closed it tight.
I moved the items he loved to eat to another section in my house.
I did not look back.
They have remained safe ever since.
Is there a mouse in the house?
A chocolate-loving, heartworm drugging mouse in my house?
The answer is I do not know.
I do not want to know if there is a mouse in the house.
I really, really do not want to know.
Is a mouse in the house?

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The Unknowable Soul of Burma

By Mary Knapp

© 2022

Dear Reader, before I begin this story, a question hangs over it that I haven't yet fully resolved.

This is a story about Burma, or Myanmar if you prefer, but it could be about many countries really. Frequently, my experience in a country turns out to be more difficult than I realized it would be, but it's also true that I do not appreciate until much later, the depths of kindness and friendship that I have encountered there as well.

But if I had chosen a more comfortable journey, I often wonder if I would have missed the spirit, the culture, the essence of the people entirely. This is the question that I turn over in my mind about Burma and about travel in general and for which I still seek resolution.

I doubt that there have been many improvements in "creature comforts" since I returned from Burma. Far from it. These days, it may even be too dangerous to return. I don't really know. But despite the relatively modest difficulties I encountered while I traveled there, I offer this point of view instead. Some journeys are unexpected gifts, waiting with patience to reveal themselves. If a strangely appealing



Boarding a train in Burma. (Mary Knapp)

destination should appear on your horizon someday, particularly those less traveled, it is always best to have your bags packed and to be prepared to take up the challenge. And there is no place where this advice served me better, than on that journey back in 2016 to Burma.

So, on that note, let us begin.

I arrived back in those halcyon days before COVID decided to blossom and we all still existed in a charmed interlude of pre-pandemic naiveté. I was wandering almost aimlessly from country to beautiful country in Southeast Asia that year, discovering what I had missed by living so long not seeing what I was then so fortunate to see. Reading my rumpled journal pages that survive from those days, I realize how I struggled to do justice to the sight of jungle cloaked mountains. As my plane came in low to land at the tiny airport, I described the mountains as being covered with the thickest of emerald quilts, unbroken by roads, factories or civilizations. I didn't know I wanted to be there, yet I suddenly felt

that I didn't want to be anywhere else.

Our plane bumped its way along the theoretical landing

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Mary lives and writes in the West Valley. She spent her career as a fisheries biologist and now eagerly awaits her return to traveling — to the lesser-known corners of the world — where she likes to live among the people and learn as much as possible. She can be reached at marymknapp@gmail.com.

strip until we came to idle in front of neat rows of bushes and a crowded little white building filled with Burmese families awaiting their turn to fly. The airport was called He-Ho. Possibly one of the tiniest I have ever seen. No town beyond it, just the doll sized airport, the bushes, the plane and the jungle.

At this point I knew I was home.

I had already spent a few days in the capitol, Yangon, trying without success to learn a few words of Burmese and to get a sense of the country. Yangon was much bigger than I expected and there were absolutely no Westerners there at all. Could it get any better than that?

My journey started out at the Ocean Pearl Guesthouse downtown. The lobby of the dubious hotel was occupied day and night by a full complement of chain-smoking Burmese dudes in well-worn undershirts. Quite a welcoming committee. Apparently, I was a source of curiosity if not amusement when I asked questions at the front desk about places to eat and how to get to the Shwedagon Pagoda. They must have laughed at that.

The Shwedagon is so breathtaking that it is literally impossible to miss. The astronauts can probably see it from the International Space Station without even trying. It's not just the size of the temple itself — although it is big and of an unusual shape. It is the dusty gold presence of the thing and the way it seems to hover over the city night and day. Once experienced, it is not easily forgotten. And I experienced it as often as I could — dazed, bewildered, in awe of the worshipers as much as of the Pagoda itself. Inexplicable and forbiddingly beautiful is as close to a description as I can muster.

I got plenty of double takes as I ventured out of the hotel. I did my fair share of gawking too those first few days out in the city. In addition to intermittent trial visits to the Shwedagon, I made it my quest to find the perfect noodle stall for supper. But my noodle radar abandoned me, and I had to settle for a mom-and-pop Indian Restaurant called The Great Star. There I found hot and spicy rice bhaat with over-the-top service.

On these rounds, I couldn't help but notice all women and most men wore sarongs — referred to as "longyi." Disconcerting at first but with time longyi came to seem completely natural.

In Yangon first thing in the morning, the well-dressed businessman can be seen sporting a crisp business shirt with a color coordinated longyi, flip flops, a briefcase, and of course the necessary umbrella. After all, this is Burma and it's going to rain. Have I told you about that aspect of the country? After all there wouldn't be lush jungle quilts to cover the mountains without the rains that make the jungles grow.

While I had been preparing for the trip, I read the few practical guides to traveling solo in Burma that were available. Apparently, the best way to travel in the interior was to hire a driver who spoke English and was knowledgeable about various



Shwedagon Pagoda. (Mary Knapp)

provinces that were open to foreign visitors. The government, from my western perspective, seemed rather quixotic, throwing juntas like sinister birthday parties on a whim. More serious actions involved the military. Aung Sun Suu Kyi, daughter of the leader of the Independence Movement in Burma, held power only sporadically. It seems she had been under house arrest or worse more frequently than she had been able to lead the government as a free person.

During my time there, Aung Sun and the rest of Burma were enjoying an extended period of relative calm that would last for a good while, or so it seemed. The government, the military, the powers that be, appeared to have no beef, at least no major ones, during these days — these Burmese days I was fortunate enough to enjoy unimpeded. And yet, not too long after I returned home, fires began to rage there. Otherwise sane people lost their minds. Families escaped to the safety of neighboring Bangladesh. Religious leaders lost their souls. And blood flowed in the streets like new rivers.

As I write these words in 2022, the fires no longer burn, but the damage to the Burmese people has been done and can never be undone.

I traveled then, like an innocent abroad, unaware of the dangerous days that I dodged and how fortunate I was. The choice of Zaw as my driver was perhaps not quite as fortuitous. At least it seemed so at the beginning.

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Although he spoke English and recognized the few sites I was interested in visiting, Zaw seemed to have a different itinerary in mind as we began our journey. When I asked why we were not visiting some of the towns we had agreed on, he said it was because the sites were either closed to visitors or no highway had been built there yet. I understood the problem of being closed to visitors but told him I was fine with taking bumpy back roads. Besides, if I had wanted to drive on super slab highways, I could have stayed in America.

Possible mistake number one. There would be many more, but I quickly lost count.

The next day Zaw shifted to driving on back roads. The ride was as bumpy as all get out but at least we were now seeing the “real” Burma. The sites were gorgeous. Breathtaking even. Water buffalo tilling rice fields with young boys in knee deep water behind them and wisps of smoke rising in the background from the sacred volcano Mount Popa. But I couldn’t help noticing that I was being thrown from one side of the back seat to the other, repeatedly, like a sack of potatoes. ‘Flung’ may have been a better way to describe it. Zaw had delivered me to the back roads and to the “real” Burma as I requested, but he had also decided to continue to drive as if we were on a smooth eight lane highway.

I have since discovered this driving trait may be inherited. I once read that the definition of a Burmese driver is someone who keeps one foot on the accelerator and the other in the sweet by and by. I can think of no better description of Zaw’s alleged driving skills.

Nevertheless, I put up with the potato sack flinging in exchange for getting close to the real places and people of Burma. We saw hundreds, if not thousands of sacred pagodas, scattered about the landscape without apparent preconceived plan. Yet, what should have seemed chaotic was instead a countryside that inspired awe, reverence even – difficult to describe and quite possibly impossible to duplicate.

Eventually, I announced to Zaw that we were pulling over to the side of the road. It took several repetitions for him to comply, but finally we slowed to a stop. At that point I gathered my humble belongings, got out of the car, and declared to a startled Zaw that the potato flinging had come to an end. From that point on, I would be riding alongside him in the front seat, hoping against hope, it would be the least painful position I would have to endure. I waited patiently for him to move his junk out of the way, settled into the front seat, and survived the rest of the journey no longer the worse for wear. I know nothing about passenger car dynamics. I just know that the journey became survivable – and before it simply was not.

Speaking of pulling over, I must tell you that frequently I am in need of a rest stop. And as you may have guessed, finding any

sort of restroom in Burma is difficult. As a matter of fact, public bathrooms may not even exist in Burma at all. Fortunately, Zaw was my ally in these matters and was on the lookout for any opportunity no matter how unlikely.

One morning when things seemed particularly critical, Zaw pulled over to a house in the middle of nowhere that must have seemed fortuitous to him. A husband and wife came to the door, and I watched from the car as he explained to them the situation. They graciously showed us in and personally directed me to their bathroom. I was so grateful, I could have hugged them, had I not been in such a rush.

As it was, I don’t remember their bathroom so much as I remember the welcome the couple gave us. They insisted we share tea around the kitchen table. Their shy teenage daughters helped with translations, as they exchanged life stories about the same struggles and joys all families experience. I noticed that they considered whatever material successes they achieved in their family life just as important as the family members themselves. When they introduced us to the family, they displayed particular pride when their elderly mother joined us at the table.

We lingered at the door, talking, taking photos, saying goodbye for some time. I will never forget this beautiful little family in the corner of Burma. Their simple warmth and happiness was like a hearth that consistently radiated an easy love. I wonder sometimes what kind of greeting the same little family would have received if the tables were turned and they found themselves in America one day and needed to knock on a stranger’s door.

Zaw and I continued our search for whatever unusual sites would come our way. In Burma, the Irrawaddy River divides the country neatly in half, east from west, as if it were the central vein of an elm leaf, directing water down the middle of the country to the Bay of Bengal and out to the Andaman Sea. We were nearing the eastern half of the elm leaf of Burma and the storied Shan province. And at this point, I got the distinct impression that Zaw was more than ready for his duties as an erstwhile tour guide to end. I couldn’t say I would be unhappy to see him head off toward his home in Yangon either, but first we had a few more sites to see, planned or otherwise.

As we pointed the car towards our next destination, the evening light descended, and we grew quiet with our own thoughts in the cool air.

In the distance to our left, we could see Mount Popa as he contentedly smoked his evening volcano pipe. Off to our right I thought I could hear a roaring sound which seemed to get closer and closer. Zaw, wanting to discourage additional exploration, stated there was nothing there and so continued to drive on at our usual breakneck speed. The roar continued – coming from

the jungle side of the car - and it was starting to drown out all other noises. I craned my neck to see what was going on but the jungle would give up nothing. Zaw finally slowed and turned on to a little side road. I thought he had turned off to explore the source of the noise, but I soon realized he was turning off because the car had decided to come to a complete stop.

After all our near misses so far, all the disagreements over where we were and where we wanted to go next, somehow the car deciding to stop at this point didn't seem like a big deal. The car had quit in the middle of nowhere before and probably would again. By this time neither one of us had much money to speak of but it didn't bother me, and it certainly didn't seem to bother Zaw. He mumbled something about calling a relative to walk him through diagnosing the problem with the car.

I took this as an opportunity to investigate the roaring sound and told Zaw I was going to walk back down the little village road to find out what was what. Evening was starting to close in, but the more I walked, the less able I was to locate the powerful mystery noise.

Instead, I detected lights coming from a house I hadn't noticed, tucked into some low trees on the edge of the jungle. I approached for a better look and realized there were several men working on the inside and outside of the home. Yet the house didn't seem to need repair or reconstruction. And on closer inspection the men appeared to be artists rather than workmen — their tasks to make of the house a quiet masterpiece.

One of the artists was working quietly on the walkway leading to the front door. I wandered over to him and asked without words if I could look at what he was painting. He smiled and motioned his acquiescence. It was a beautiful Gaugin-like painting he was making along the walkway, blending the surrounding forest seamlessly with the house and garden. It was almost too much to take in, and I had to look away briefly. I walked carefully toward the inside of the home and another artist working there. He was painting walls, ceilings, wherever, with rare scenes using paints that seemed to make the house almost glow in the growing darkness.

Zaw came trotting up the road then. I called to him to look at the unusual house and paintings. He seemed less than enchanted. Certainly less than I was. I told him that now that I had found this house I absolutely must find the mystery waterfall. But he pointed out it was getting late and he had repaired the car and it was ready for our drive to the hotel. Returning to the present, I realized it was in fact quite dark and we were fortunate to have a working car to get to our destination. Reluctantly I conceded. I didn't want to concede, especially to Zaw, but I had no choice. We returned to our little car, the dark road, and another Burmese night.

Several years later I found a picture of the waterfall in a low-

key Burmese tourist pamphlet. In my mind's eye I had pictured it not as a waterfall but as a ferocious torrent of pure water propelled straight out of the side of a cliff tumbling down onto a series of rounded black rocks and finally into an overgrown cave or river. The picture in the tourist pamphlet looked a bit less spectacular.

But that house — that house I saw in the evening twilight — my Paul Gaugin house — was astonishing. It awaits me still.

Besides waterfalls, boats, ferries, fisheries, and markets of any kind, I am drawn to trains and railroads. A substantial railroad system was laid during the British occupation throughout the mountains of eastern Burma. Sections of this system still exist today with some of the most spectacular mountain scenery and hair-raising trestles imaginable. Local families in company with brave tourists depend upon the stretch of rail from Kalaw to Nyaung-Shwe in particular. I hadn't spotted any other tourists, brave or otherwise, while in Burma never mind on the mountain railroad, so I had the role all to myself, and happily so. I was ready to roll.

There seemed to be some navigational confusion as Zaw drove toward the Shan Mountains and the railroad terminus at Kalaw. Looking back on those somewhat irritable last few days as driver and drivee, I wonder if we weren't both clearly ready to be "shed" of each other, as folks say in Alabama. I know I was ready to bid him a fond farewell, and likely he felt the same.

We finally arrived in beautiful Kalaw, serenely set among forested mountains and hills, reminding me of nothing so much as a muddled but lovely Vermont in summertime. Zaw pulled to the side of the road and deposited my rag tag baggage at the curb. He assured me that at the top of the hill I would find the best restaurant Kalaw had to offer — this being lunchtime — and bid me a hurried goodbye before he took off in a cloud of dust.

Once I struggled to the top of the hill with my belongings, I did find the restaurant he described. It may indeed have been the best establishment in all of Kalaw, even Burma for that matter, but unfortunately, I'll never know, since it was very empty and very closed.

Not far away, was a restaurant/chalet — called The Seven Sisters — perched on the edge of the hill. With its door propped open and luncheon specials advertised in Burmese on a chalkboard by the door. I was in luck. Spicy noodles were on special that day!

Minutes after I took a seat, a young waitress appeared out of nowhere with piping hot tea, a glass of cold water and the promised noodles, spiced to perfection. She recommended the Eastern Paradise Guesthouse not far down the road. It was clean, spacious, and bug free. Without a doubt, my definition of paradise.

Now that I was “Zaw-less,” things started to look up. My routine upon arrival in a new town is to catch my breath, unpack, change clothes, and arrange my humble belongings into little piles before hitting town.

I don’t know if it was the fresh mountain air or my own feelings of being untethered but, for a moment, Kalaw reminded me of the wild spaces and no boundaries of my own beloved American Southwest, just quite a lot greener.

I meandered through the town aimlessly until I realized that eventually I would have to find the train station the next morning and make doubly sure I was in the right place after all. I have been known to get unaccountably lost from time to time.

I saw the unmistakable site of a convenience store a few blocks away. Any do-it-yourself traveler will know exactly what I mean — signs in English and Asian advertising junk food galore — ice cream bars if you’re lucky. Waiting my turn at the counter, I stepped up to find a large gregarious clerk who welcomed me to Kalaw — in perfect English — and began to regale me with the wonders of Burma and questions about the U.S. I thought to myself, “... yes, I could get used to Kalaw and fit in here almost immediately.” Finally, he took a well-earned breath and I asked if Kalaw was a train stop. He assured me it was and gave detailed instructions on the easiest way to walk there. Our conversation finished, he would not allow me to pay for my gigantic water or snacks and sent me on my way with genuine good luck wishes. The only way I can describe him and the encounter is to say that this is what keeps me on the road, meeting one and all and coming back for more as soon as I possibly can. Until then, I send blessings to them all.

After a refreshing sleep in my Eastern Paradise lodging, I was off early in search of the promised train station. Soon enough,

I spotted a crowded street and turning down for a better look I found that I had entered a lively morning market with stalls lining both sides of the street. It wasn’t clear exactly what was on sale, but it felt almost mandatory that I should purchase at least a few things just to get a better look. Resisting the urge, I wound my way instead among the crowds and saw that down at the bottom of the row of market stalls was the much sought-after Kalaw Train Station.



A Buddha of gold. (Mary Knapp)

Now that I was finally at the station, I found a comfortable place to sit, sidling up next to the station like a chick to her mother hen and indulged in my favorite pastime of people watching.

The train system dates from the British Raj, but best not to think of all the suffering that the construction must have required. Instead, I concentrated on the here and now as I sat at the periphery of the action, constructing the first draft of a future photo album in my mind consisting of photos of women balancing stacks of vegetables on their heads, a man frying samosas at a stand near the station door, and sparrows expertly untying a bag of rice left unguarded on the station floor.

Suddenly the pace quickened and women in their longyis rushed unsteadily away from the tracks as the train came screeching to a halt into the station. Relieved of its current passengers, the new passengers

began to load the empty train cars by standing outside of the open windows and passing load after load onboard. Soon there was no more room for anything except people. When I sensed that there was a tiny lull in the stream of passengers, I squeezed on board, and somehow found my seat. There was already a layer of forage leaves there, destined for beasts of burden in the highlands, but I thought, “more’s the better” and sat down on top of it all.

Finally, the train struggled to life with a jerk and slowly began its impending journey up the tracks. There were windows in

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each train car, but they were the open air kind — it kept things breezy and cool and made it easy to see everything outside quite clearly. We didn't set out to break any speed records. I think most of us were just interested in arriving.

The old train rocked along the track in a slow but stately way, swaying from side to side as if she were an old Russian grandmother rocking her twins, one on each hip. It was easy to see the farmers out working in the tea plantations, their red scarves and white shirts as bright as postage stamps against the green of the tea leaves. We could see them, and they seemed to be able to see us as they turned to look as we passed by.

Railroad crossings were always a joy. At each intersection, black and white striped poles were lowered, holding back a collection of impatient pigs and ducks, school children, farmers, and kids on motor bikes as they looked in our windows curiously at us and we looked back at them.

The journey passed in about three or four hours, far too quickly to my way of thinking. It wasn't that we went back in time so much as we went to a different place. It was a place high in the mountains in Burma, so different from the one I know that it is almost impossible to imagine now and so very difficult to describe. I would return if I could with open arms.

When we reached our final stop, I climbed down from the train amidst general confusion and began to work out the best way to get to my next destination. It was a surprise to discover that the only way to get there was by way of the bed of a pickup truck. But fortune smiled and we made it all in one piece, and best of all it didn't rain. Next stop — Nyaung Shwe.

I found a little nondescript, out of the way hotel there — the kind I like — and felt myself settle in for the duration. I don't remember having a return ticket to anywhere yet, just a few suggestions about unusual places and things to see or do in the area.

Somewhere along the way, I read about a home spun tea shop tucked away in Nyaung-Shwe that is a great place to relax and enjoy some superb tea. I had an idea of the general location, so I made it part of my daily routine to walk past the vicinity at odd hours to try to spot it. Not unusual for me, I saw nothing in the appointed place. Nevertheless, in the process of searching for the tea shop, I found the most interesting grocery and tchotchke stores, Buddhist monk (and nun) clothing stands, and horses in fancy plumes awaiting their owners with empty wooden carts at the curb. Just normal life in far Burma.

During my meanderings, I met a travel agent who wanted to work on her English. She didn't need any improvement at all, but during our conversation I learned that Nyaung-Shwe was a renowned education center for Buddhist priests. In fact, in the next few days the results of the annual qualifying exams for the Buddhist priesthood would be revealed and those who passed

would be joined by their families and a huge celebration would take place in the heart of the town. People would flood in from farms and villages scattered for miles around Nyaung-Shwe and Buddhist rejoicing and celebrations would come to pass. I decided then and there that I would stay to see at least part of what would transpire.

But first I went back to my frequent occupation, that of seeing whatever and everything that looked even remotely interesting around me. I happened to look between some odd buildings a day or two later and I noticed an open door in a wall squeezed between the two buildings. If there was a sign, I didn't see it, and besides how would I understand it even if there were?

Anyway, coming closer, I craned my neck and caught just a glimpse of tiny tables inside, lots of people, mostly men it seemed, sitting at the tables talking and reading newspapers, and the broad back of what could only be the proprietor.

This must be the place. The heavenly tea shop I had been searching for!

I screeched to a halt, walked slowly toward the open door, and entered noncommittally, noncommittally since tea shops are not ordinarily a woman's place. But no worries, the lovely rotund proprietor turned around, opened his arms wide, leaned back slightly and boomed "Welcome ... Welcome!" I immediately found a seat. And within sheer moments, an earthen-brown cup of luscious delicately spiced chai tea was placed kindly before me — the scent arriving on my tongue just a moment before the piping hot liquid itself. Never before and never since have I tasted such a delight. This ... this was transcendental tea ... homey, simple, and full of welcome and affection. Inexplicably a deep warmth lingered in my mouth like a blessing. To make it even better, the proprietor's wife placed a basket of piping hot sweet treats near me on the table. I sipped happily and smiled a thank you over the brim of my cup to them both. Content for a moment, I pulled out my scrap of a journal and pen in hand I began to hastily swirl down the pages, making certain to capture the feelings so that someday I could tell the stories of then, making sure I would remember them now.

A few mornings later, on my early walk after the rain had stopped, I visited my now most favorite Tea Shop again, and then cruised the market area, finding a noticeable buzz of activity. Lots of sandalwood was for sale, more than usual, and market stalls of everything known and mostly unknown, were full. I noticed too, the rich bright colors of clothing worn by some of the women and men gathered together in matching groups like clusters of grapes among the gathering crowds. I hadn't noticed them before and I decided they must be some of the family members that were arriving to celebrate the graduation of their sons and grandsons into the Buddhist priesthood.

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The women's head dresses and shoulder draping consisted of twisted fabric in bright swirled colors. The men's clothing was smaller in scope but equivalent in richness. Jade greens and jewel blue-greens were prominent but there were many other colors in ripe reds and orange worn by others in attendance as well. The physical bearing of these intriguing people was unusual. They were mostly watchful and quiet and their movements held considerable grace and calm. Their manner was almost regal in a way, so much so, that after taking only a few surreptitious photos I put my camera away, feeling somewhat chastened.

Only much later did I learn that these were members of the indigenous tribal people from the Shan Mountains. If legend is to be believed they descend from the "Wa" people whose women wore stacks of brass rings around their necks for beautification and the men collected the heads of their enemies as trophies. They now swear allegiance to a Burmese Buddhism shaped down through the centuries, and were that day part of a bright inexplicable amalgam of a celebration and conduction ceremony for their sons and family members.

For now, I was the unexpected witness to a celebration that was clearly gaining momentum yet one that I could barely understand. I suppose you might compare me with an older Burmese lady, not able to speak English, being set down in the midst of Town Square USA on the Fourth of July, with the parade about to begin. Best just to go along with it all. And that's what I did in Burma.

After I had seen all the people I could see, and the market stalls I could get close to, in short order it became obvious that I was not going to be able to move very much because of the size of the joyous crowds. So I inched my way back to the hotel and decided it would be best to sidle off back to my next stop before the celebration consumed all the oxygen in the town. And although it was a happy celebration, a completely joyous one, of course it wasn't mine, no matter how much I wished that it were.

On my journey from town I felt as if we were salmon swimming upstream — the single pickup I was in on one side of the road ... and a constant stream of singing, smiling young people, flags held high, riding buses, pickups, and cars on the other side of the road ... on their way to the center of their own private enlightenment.

In a sense, I wished I could join them, even knowing that it would be a complete impossibility. Their joy was so pure, their yearning palpable. The memory of it remains with me to this day.

Just a few days later, and far too soon, I was back in He-Ho, this time taking off from the tiny airport, with its neat bushes outside, carefully planted in the middle of the vast jungle that

is Burma. It was raining as I leaned forward to look out the window of the plane, and without warning I started to cry. Who could possibly create such a country as straight forward yet as stubbornly bewildering and beautiful as Burma? And how could I have lived without ever having experienced it, at least once in this lifetime?

I had made Southeast Asia my home that year without meaning to, but I have always found that no plan sometimes is the best of plans. By the end of the year, I was back home, trying to bring some organization to my life and to my journals most of all. I found that I held a special place in my heart for strange, enigmatic Burma. So unlike any place I had been before or since. So resistant to scrutiny or categorization. And all the better for it, I'd thought.

Organizing my kitchen one morning my thoughts were interrupted by a BBC news bulletin. It seemed that the tiny ethnic Muslim minority was being driven out of Burma by the Army. The Army itself sliding from one deranged junta to the next. Pogroms, burnings — it was undeniable and it would not stop. It seemed that the treachery would not end until every single Muslim person, every single person really who dared stand up for democracy no matter their religion, had been cast out.

I could not understand it and I still cannot understand it, but it happened and I believe that it continues to happen in some measure to this day.

I found my thoughts are immediately to memories of the people I had met in Burma. The lovely Bathroom Break family who opened their door and their hearts to me when I needed it so badly. Were they safe?

The gregarious Convenience Store man who would not let me leave his store until he provided me with food, snacks, and anecdotes for my journey. What had become of him?

But most of all I thought about the proprietor in the tea shop in Nyaung-Shwe.

In my mind's eye I could see him in his little shop as if I were back in Burma again ... opening his arms, smiling broadly, and welcoming me into his shop and making it a safe place, a warm place for me for a little while, while I was alone in his country.

I have to wonder if he is safe and that he and his family found a way to survive. That the welcome he offered me — big and generous and wholehearted and completely without reservation — that that welcome and that protection came back to him in equal measure — no — came back to him and his family one thousand fold.

But I have to admit that the hope I feel for him and for all the people of Burma, now thousands of miles away, rides on the most slender of threads, until it has now become nearly weightless and in time seems to drift away ... until it disappears almost completely into the mist and the rain.

Torie Cooper

Tempe Artist



“Savannah Skyscraper”

**Acrylic
16 x 20
2020**



Torie Cooper was born in California but grew up in Australia. Eventually she found her way back to the U.S. and moved to Tempe, Arizona, where the beauty of the Sonoran Desert continues to inspire her. Having family and friends on opposite sides of the world, Torie often travels between the northern and southern hemispheres. Aside from creating art, she's also an author and poet. Torie's many interests include natural history, conservation, science, palliative care, and music. Email: Eternityart77@gmail.com.

Torie Cooper

Tempe Artist



“Young at Rest”

Acrylic

16 x 20

2020

“I’m a self-taught artist, which means I’ve spent years making messes that I’ve had to clean up. ‘Happy accidents,’ as painter Bob Ross would say. I’ve learned to be patient, adaptive, and keep a spare roll of paper towels on hand. My experience with media includes graphite, charcoal, colored pencils, watercolor, oils and digital art, but acrylic is by far my favorite choice, especially for paintings. Slowly building up layers and colors, I enjoy the process of witnessing a painting come to life. There’s something very special about creating something from nothing when confronted with a blank piece of paper or canvas. I’m especially inspired by the natural world, which is my cathedral and classroom. Most of my art features wildlife. Additional muses for my work involve indigenous cultures and spiritual themes. Art in all of its many forms is worth nurturing, and I truly believe we’re all artists at heart. What do we wish to bring into this world? Let’s draw it, write it, sing it, dance it – create it!”

- Torie Cooper

Torie Cooper

Tempe Artist



"Waiting for You"
Acrylic
24 x 36
2020

Torie Cooper

Tempe Artist



“Warrior”
Acrylic
16 x 20
2021

A poem by Gari Crowley

fly

just a need for greater peace or the despairing uncertainties of being grounded,
and those internal and external pressures so that I wish I could fly as I have in a few
dreams: to the mountaintop, a wilderness, above the waters,
singing to the blue heavens so as to count this soul worth saving.

ascending into the night between the lights of earth and heaven where hope is
a wonder when unfettered of human disfiguration leaving with the ease of
Pachelbel's cannon, D major, I would weep before God for this miracle of
happiness and peace, that I would awaken and know for a fact it is not a dream.

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Gari has spent his entire life in Arizona except for three months in California where his younger brother was born. He has always had an interest in the borderlands, its life and people, not to mention the variety of creatures both venomous and non-venomous. He lives in southern Arizona with his wife, Linda, and their two indoor cats, Tony and Mario (also, the three strays with two kittens that they feed and water.) Gari is seventy years old and enjoys gardening.

3 Poems by Janet McMillan Rives

Find Me

*Find me wild about stir-fry, about red velvet
sofas and the people who sleep inside books
and dream about commas.*

— Kelli Russell Agodon,
“Praise”

Find me wild about trees
magenta blossoms on desert willows
a verdin’s nest in the blue palo verde
mauve flowers gone so quickly
from sturdy ironwoods.

Find me wild about deserts
that ground me, mountains that lift me
the Catalinas, the Tortolitas
wild about rivers, the Canada del Oro bone dry
the Rillito running wild in summer rain.

Find me wild about writers
Leopold, Lanthan, Harper
words about geese, creeks, barn owls
Frost, Kooser, Crews
stories of pastures, prairies, bluebirds.

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Janet McMillan Rives was born and raised in Connecticut. In high school, she moved to Tucson, Arizona, where she currently lives. She taught college economics for thirty-five years and retired as Professor Emerita of Economics from the University of Northern Iowa. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *The Avocet*, *Lyrical Iowa*, *Raw Art Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Heirlock*, *Sandcutters*, *The Blue Guitar*, *Unstrung*, and *Fine Lines* as well as in a number of anthologies, most recently “Voices from the Plains IV” and “The Very Edge.” Her first chapbook, “Into This Sea of Green: Poems from the Prairie,” was published in 2020. Her chapbook “Washed by a Summer Rain: Poems from the Desert” is forthcoming in 2023.



Interior Design

I wonder for an instant who gave me
the wood block depiction
 of San Xavier Mission
 matted in soft sage
then remember its place
on my parents' bedroom wall
 this keepsake we traded
 back and forth for decades.

I've been switching artwork from wall
to wall, anything to surprise me,
to nudge me out of this trap of dull days,
make me think of when
and where I bought these prints—
 an art fair in Iowa
 a museum shop in Paris
 Hong Kong's tourist store.

Today a package arrives on the porch,
a fresh shower curtain for the guest bath,
 so much brighter, white
 with leaves in jade,
 chartreuse, juniper,
on the floor a new rug
 subtle hues, reminders
 of this indulgent earth.

Walls in the master bath are newly
decorated with four framed works of art,
treasures retrieved from their hiding place
under the bed
 in each a hint of red
 to echo the crimson clock
marking the hours till we might
reclaim our vibrant lives.

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Twice a Cowgirl

That was the year I ate alone almost every Saturday,
listened to KTKT on my unwieldy portable,
used my clothes allowance to buy Levi 501s,
turquoise western shirt, white cowboy belt
with a huge silver buckle. That was the year
I turned seventeen, the year we moved west,
traded our maple syrup for prickly pear jelly.

I thought western clothes might turn me into
a happy teenager, might make me feel like I did
ten years earlier, on my seventh birthday,
no doubt a frigid February in New England.
In the dog-eared photo taken that day,
my jacket hangs on the porch railing—no way
I'd cover up the plaid shirt with pearl buttons,
red bandana tied around my neck,
rabbit's foot suspended from a belt loop
on my jeans, me smiling a lost-baby-tooth grin
on that my lucky day.

By seventeen I was ten years and twenty-five
hundred miles from that tiny cowgirl in the photo,
a teenager now, dressed not just for a birthday party
but for the entire rodeo week in Tucson
including two days off from school
to watch barrel racers, bull riders, calf ropers.
What made me think looking like a cowgirl
could bring back the joy of childhood?
The tooth fairy had long ago filled the gap
in my smile, but other pieces were missing—
a sister gone off to college, parents out again
at some fund-raiser, my friends of a lifetime
back east, sledding the hills of my homeplace.

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Grasshopper

By Adrienne Kinney

© 2022

I'm standing at the precipice of the Atlantic Ocean. My feet are engulfed by cool, damp sand and waves lap gently at my ankles. It's low tide and the vast bed of sand is littered with the juxtaposed debris of an urban beach: bottle caps next to crab shells and kelp with seagulls interspersed among families. I wish I had escaped the day to a wooded forest. After a week marred by shocking, devastating loss, I'm searching for some relief from the immense weight of grief, and I yearn for the shaded, secluded succor of evergreens. Instead, I'm at the ocean with its putrid smell and cluttered canvas of sand; but still, I hope for comfort.

I wiggle my toes further into the sand. Feet firmly buried, I raise my face toward the sun and shiver as the warming rays mitigate the chill of the ocean. I smile as my friend does the same, and her laughter loosens the dense pit of grief in my stomach.

Turning my eyes from the sun, I survey the sparkling expanse before me. Leaning closer, I see flecks of gold embedded in the sand. I don't know the origin of the flecks, but I imagine a boulder weathered and worn cracking into the ocean. I imagine the pieces swirling with the currents and lulled to a shore miles away. I imagine the suspended pieces falling into a mesmerizing, sinuous pattern as the tide ebbs. I wonder if the flecks will soon be swept back to sea, and I feel the edges of my pain swept away with them.

Among the golden grains of sand, I see a shell scalloped with lines of purple and grey. And on the scalloped shell sits a grasshopper. Time suspends as I kneel to pick it up. I'm cautious, expecting the grasshopper to leap away, but it doesn't. The gentle, undaunted insect allows me to lift the shell. I turn it and lock eyes with the creature. The grasshopper is a stunning moss green with dark, deep eyes; we stare at each other. I'm hypnotized by the woven hatching on its thorax and the delicate, feathery wings. I admire the curvature of its eye. I wonder if it's afraid to be so far from home and how it came to be on this life raft at the edge of the waves. I wonder what it thinks of me.

I pivot toward the nearest grassy sand dune as the grasshopper's antennae wave delicately in the breeze. The animal quivers but remains on the shell and our eyes stay locked. We walk in this way, connected and utterly entranced, the length of the beach. The slow, meditative kinhin transcends my grief and I take deep, relieving breaths. I set the shell among the reeds and as the grasshopper hops away, I silently thank it for the revelatory interaction. I watch until it's lost, and the sound of my friends in the distance stirs time to resume.

Rejoining my group, we pause to snap a photo then head back to our car. As we walk grief returns and washes over me, but now I think of my grasshopper and I know that in the future, quiet moments will soothe some of the pain.



Adrienne Kinney is pursuing a PhD in Applied Mathematics at the University of Arizona. A Kentucky native, Adrienne studied Art History and Mathematics at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. She's passionate about science communication, and studying environmental and public health issues through the lens of mathematics. This is her first foray into the world of creative writing.

2 Poems by Duann Black

We Are One

I will never forget us.
Days we spent
Roads we traveled
Smiles we shared
I always remember you.
The day we met
The kiss we shared
The questions we asked
Memories will not dim.
See that photo?
Hear that tune?
Smell that fragrance?
Feel that touch?
Taste that kiss?
You and I are one.

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Duann Black is a writer, author, and poet with stories to tell and things to say. During a multi-year break from emptying ink pens onto paper, she strived diligently to spell “grammar” as chief editor for Alan Black, author of 20 books, including “Metal Boxes” and “A Planet with No Name.” She is a well-traveled military retiree always ready with a story to share.

Voluntary Service

You seem familiar.
Have we traveled the same roads?
I see your lined brow, your furtive look.

Yes, we've traveled the same road.
We've felt the same tears.
We've fought the same fears.

We walked into harm's way by choice.
Service before self.
Duty above all else.

Family of arms,
Trained to safeguard.
Dedicated to defend.

Men and women together
Goals to finish.
United as family.

Stars on a broad field of blue remind me of you.
Stripes of red and white are the struggle we forged through.
Voluntarily we served.

Remember those who came before.
Don't let others forget as they walk upon the soft green grass.
Their freedom was paid by you.

I know you now.
I remember you beside me.
We traveled the same rugged road.

Freedom exacts a price,
Generation by generation.
Remind those who follow, to volunteer.

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At the Crack of Dawn

By Duann Black

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Comfortably seated in a living room easy chair with his feet parked on a hassock, Alex began his story, “At the crack of dawn—”

Sally raised her hand, “Pardon me for interrupting before you get into your story, but exactly what time is the crack of dawn? I’ve never understood that phrase.”

Alex saw she was wearing her innocent face. He thought for a moment. “I don’t know. Let me start over again, okay?”

Sally nodded as she folded her hands in her lap.

“Somewhere around sunrise—you know—that time of the morning when the sun is peeking over the McDowell Peaks?” Alex paused to see if she would interrupt him with another question about the exact time his story was starting.

Sally said nothing, so he continued. “Somewhere around sunrise, an odd sound outside my bedroom window woke me up.”

Sally allowed him to go no farther. “Was it in the backyard or coming from the patio?”

Alex slowed his breathing and unclenched his jaw to calm himself. “Do you want to hear my story?”

“Sure I do. Why aren’t you telling it?” Sally smiled.

“I’m trying to start my story, but you keep interrupting before I can start the second sentence.” Alex sighed. “You won’t hear the story unless you let me get started. And I won’t finish the story unless you hold your questions while I tell it. Agreed?”

“Well... what if I have a question and I’m afraid I won’t remember it by the time you finish telling your story? You always tell stories that have way too many words in them and go in so many directions that by the time you finally swing back around to the original story path, I’ve forgotten what you originally said.”

Alex didn’t enjoy seeing the frown on his girlfriend’s face. It meant a serious fight was just around the verbal corner unless he spoke carefully.

“Earlier this morning, I heard a sound coming from the backyard. I couldn’t determine what the sound was while lying in bed, so I got up to open the Venetian blinds, to see what was causing the clatter.”

Sally’s right eyebrow rose ever so slightly. He either had her interest, or she was gearing up to ask him another question.

“Before you ask me a question, please let me continue.” He waited for her to signal that he could continue without interruption. Finally, she nodded slightly. It was a subtle signal a seasoned auctioneer would notice.

“Yes, I meant to say clatter. It’s the only word that describes what I heard. The sun wasn’t above the McDowell Peaks to the east yet, and the sky was changing from black to blue. It’s my favorite time of the morning. I like watching the blue chase away the stars in the black; when the dividing line of day and night is clearly visible.”

“Shadows from the trees along the east cinder block wall draped across the pool obscuring my view. I wasn’t thinking clearly because I woke up from a sound sleep. Looking from left to right along the top of the pool, I felt something to my immediate left just outside the window. I turned and my breath caught in my throat.”

Sally looked like a kitten focused on a laser pointer quivering on the far wall.

“I dropped the Venetian blind, stepped back, and blinked a few times. I tried rubbing the sleep from my eyes. It rattled me. I wasn’t scared, mind you, I was rattled. I shook myself, ensuring I was wide awake, before peeking outside again. Thankfully, I didn’t see what I saw the first time. I’ll tell you what I thought I saw, if you promise to not think I’m crazy. Do you promise?”

She blinked several times before nodding. “I promise.” She said.

Alex adjusted his shoulders along the back of the easy chair. Once again comfortable, he continued. “Good. The first time I looked out of the window, I thought I saw a large gray eye almost touching the windowpane. When it blinked, I let go of the blinds and stepped back from the window.”

Alex noticed her wince. He imagined she was unaware of others in the living room or the smell of turkey, her favorite food. She looked like he was her entire world.

Now he had to figure out how to finish the story he was inventing as he went along. He inhaled deeply, capturing the delicious aromas drifting in from the kitchen. His taste buds tingled at the thought of juicy roast turkey, hearty dressing, fresh-cut green beans, and cranberry relish. His favorite dinner was about ready to serve.

“Remember, I said I was a bit rattled? It took a couple of seconds for my breathing to return to normal. When I opened a small space between the blinds, it was gone. I thought it was my imagination playing tricks on me. That has happened before.” He paused. “Remember when I thought there was an alligator in the pool?”

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Sally sighed, shaking her head. She looked over her glasses, apparently about to say something, when Alex continued with his story.

“Anyway, there was no big gray eye outside my window. I looked at the pool and the shadows had moved. They looked different from moments earlier. That must have been what I saw, shadows.”

“Dinnertime, let’s eat. First come, first served.” Alex’s mother’s voice, loud and clear, carried throughout the house.

Immediately, Alex left the comfort of the easy chair. Offering his hand to help Sally up from her seat to escort her to the dining room, he noticed her confused expression. He smiled, leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek.

“Let’s eat.”

“I Killed Him”

By Duann Black

© 2022

“I killed him.” Black mascara trails chased tears down her cheeks. Gasping for air, she sobbed, “I killed him!”

“Ma’am, please settle down. I need to ask you a couple of questions.” I handed her an old-fashioned hankie my dutiful wife ensured I carried every workday. Today was the first time I had cause to use it.

The woman dabbed at her eyes, leaving black stains on the hankie. Then she blew her nose.

“Ma’am, who or what did you kill?” I did not retrieve the hankie. It was going into the trash right after the forensic laboratory finished testing it. I never wanted it back.

“I saw a sidewalk smudge with a spreading pool of liquid surrounding it. Kneeling down for a closer look, I saw clothing and artifacts, like those of a miniature toy soldier. I fear I was losing my mind. But—”

“Ma’am, do you know who this is, or was?” I kept my voice calm, not wanting to upset her any more than she was already. A toy soldier lying in a puddle on the sidewalk was a unique case. I wondered if someone at the law enforcement station was playing a joke.

“Yes, my husband. We’ve been together for fifty-six years. He went out to play war games with the neighbor and never came home. When I went next door to check, I accidentally crushed him. On the way back, I noticed the sidewalk murder. I can’t live without him.”

Suddenly, she clutched her throat with one hand and her chest with the other. Before my eyes, she began shrinking. I activated my crime scene recorder. No one was going to believe this. As the woman became smaller, I moved closer and zoomed in to ensure video accuracy. Less than two minutes later, she was sitting next to her tiny husband’s crushed body.

How do I file my report? How do I place this woman in custody? Who’s going to believe this isn’t a fake video?

I powered down the recorder, removed the videodisc, and crushed it to dust in my fingertips. For a closer look at the crime scene, I knelt on the sidewalk close to the weeping woman. She was using my tiny hankie to dab at the sidewalk liquid near her husband’s remains. “Ma’am, you can keep the hankie. I have others. I’m sorry for your loss. The police will not be bothering you again concerning this matter.” There was nothing more I could do to help her.

I walked back to my crime scene floater, cautiously examining the sidewalk before taking each step. Once inside, I installed a blank videodisc into the recorder. Before liftoff, I filed my report. “Case Number 554-Alpha-Sixteen. Case opened and closed without incident. Phone call came from a distraught woman who reported her husband was missing. He was found before I arrived at the scene. The couple has been reunited. Nothing more to report. End case file.”

What do I say to my wife when she asks why there is one less hankie in this weekend’s laundry?

Radar Operator

By Duann Black

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“Sir, radar shows a fleet of enemy spacecraft heading our way.” The radar operator adjusted the quality of the scan and duplicated it on the overhead screen for the night shift supervisor. “What are your orders?”

“I’m not sure. What does that radar tell you about the incoming spacecraft?” The officer rubbed his forehead.

The radar operator looked at his new supervisor. He looked like he was trying to make a hole in his forehead to scratch his brain. “Radar verifies the spacecraft are the enemy, and shows their flight path, speed, and time of arrival. The information is displayed on the main screen for you, Sir. We have less than three minutes to take action.”

“Why three minutes, Trooper?”

“Sir, after that time, it will be too late for our planetary defense forces to engage the incoming threat, because they’ll be too close to the planet. What are your orders?”

“How much time did you say we have to decide?”

“Sir, we display the countdown clock next to the estimated arrival time on the screen.” The trooper left his radar scope to point out the clock on the big display for his supervisor. “Right here, this is the countdown clock.”

“I see we have plenty of time to decide.”

“Sir, are you certain?”

“Yes, Trooper, I can read a clock as well as the next man. We have two days, twenty-three hours to decide. I’ll call a meeting—”

“No,” the trooper interrupted, “that is not correct. We now have two minutes, nineteen seconds to take action.”

“No one can respond that fast. Return to your duty position, Trooper. I’ll have the steward bring in our mid-morning tea a little early. We’ll discuss who to invite to tomorrow morning’s meeting to help make this decision.”

The trooper shook his head. “Sir, may I be excused?”

The supervisor paused for several seconds. “You’d like a bio break before tea? Go, but hurry back. Tea will be here shortly.”

Santa's Cousin

By Duann Black

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It was early afternoon on the Eve of Christmas, when Rudolph spotted Santa's cousin atop a snowbank at the edge of Santaville crying into a mug of iced cocoa. Rumors around the Santaville were saying Santa's cousin was disappointed. The elves heard him asking Santa if there was anything he could do to help prepare for the upcoming flight. Santa had no work for him.

Leave it to Rudolph to come up with a solution. He waited until darkness had fallen and the workshops were empty. The elves were enjoying family time, and Mrs. Claus was watching Santa's favorite bio-documentary nestled within his broad arms. Rudolph borrowed a sleigh trainer large enough to carry Christmas stocking sweets. He found Santa's cousin nursing a cold bowl of soup in a lonely corner of the main workshop cafeteria.

Before Santa's cousin—let's just call him SC, shall we? Before SC realized what was happening, Rudolph was whisking him away from Santaville, in the sporty sleigh trainer. Rudolph hummed holiday tunes while his shiny nose kept time blinking on and off. It was the only way Rudolph kept the proper beat. He wasn't old enough to have all the holiday tunes memorized.

SC hummed along with Rudolph. His thoughts returned to wanting to help Santa this Eve of Christmas. If only there was a way. Looking around, his surroundings were unfamiliar. He saw browns and greens on the ground, where he expected to see the blanket of white that covered Santaville this time of year.

"Rudolph, where are we? Where are we going?"

Rudolph looked back at SC, winked, smiled, and continued humming his favorite holiday tune, 'I'm Dreaming of a Reindeer Christmas.'

A short time later, SC saw a dome of lights glowing on the horizon. The forest blanket gave way to cozy cottages nestled between sleighways running every which way.

The ground loomed close as Rudolph directed the sleigh trainer to a brightly lit building at the edge of the village. Rudolph engaged sleigh stealth mode before the building and parking lot lights could paint the sleigh trainer in a warm glow. After a rapid descent, the sleigh trainer bounced twice before coming to a stop near the building's front door. When he confirmed the coast was clear—no people in sight—he nodded for SC to exit.

Turning back toward the sleigh trainer, SC saw a piece of paper floating in the air close to where Rudolph would be seen standing, if unstealthed. He carefully pulled on it, avoiding the

wet reindeer saliva at one end. It was a Santa Extra coupon. SC had heard of them, but assumed they were an elf myth because he had never seen one. Yet, here it was, in his hand, ready for his use. The coupon value read UNLIMITED and it was set to expire at 11:59 on the Eve of Christmas.

Two hours later, SC exited the building next to the sleigh trainer, followed by two store employees and the manager. A whiff of chocolate filled the air. Both workers pushed and pulled behind them, carts filled with bags of sweets. They placed the bags on the sidewalk, wished SC a merry Christmas, and returned the empty carts to the store.

The store manager shook SC's hand. "Thanks for eliminating our chocolate stock. I can close the store early for the first time on Christmas Eve. You're certain someone is coming to pick you and your bags up?"

"Yes, sir. I am certain my ride will appear shortly. Thank you for helping me get the best value from my Santa Extra coupon. Enjoy your family this Eve of Christmas, and have a merry Christmas." SC patiently waited as the manager went back inside the store. A couple of minutes later, the employees exited the building and the inside lights winked out. The manager waved at him as he locked the front door.

SC stood alone next to the darkened store, surrounded by bags of sweets. Soon the parking lot was empty of vehicles and no human was in sight. All was quiet, a gentle breeze whispered through the pines. The air felt crisp and clear.

SC double-checked the area, ensuring it was free of humans as far as he could see. He hoped Rudolph had not moved away from the building. He did not want to raise his voice above a whisper. "Rudolph? You can disengage sleigh stealth mode." Nothing happened. No sleigh trainer was in view, and Rudolph's shiny bright nose was nowhere to be seen.

"Rudolph? Where are you? The area is clear and I have plenty of sweet stocking stuffers to help Santa make the stockings extra specially stuffed this year." He stretched out his hand to where he thought he had retrieved the coupon from Rudolph's mouth. He felt nothing but empty air. Moving his hands along what should have been Rudolph's side, hoping to find the harness, he wondered where the reindeer's shiny nose was when he needed it. "Rudolph!"

Waving both hands outward in the empty air between himself, the side of the building, and the edge of the sidewalk, he finally touched something. It was Rudolph's wet nose.

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Suddenly, the sleigh trainer appeared with a snort from Rudolph. “Did I wake you?”

Rudolph nodded and blinked his nose twice.

SC began loading bags of chocolate, nuts, fruits, and other delicious sweets into the sled. Rudolph’s brightly lit nose ensured every tasty bag was retrieved. With the sidewalk empty, both checked the area again to ensure it was clear of watchers. Rudolph picked up an errant sweet morsel from the sidewalk, smacked his lips, and showed he was ready to depart. SC stepped into the sleigh trainer a moment before Rudolph reengaged sleigh stealth mode.

Shortly after liftoff, the sky filled with fluffy snow. Rudolph captured several flakes on the tip of his tongue before the Santa Alarm announced the Eve of Christmas countdown was starting. He had three hours to reach Santaville and be in place at the staging area, ready for pre-liftoff procedures. His tummy grumbled. He had missed Eve of Christmas dinner.

SC sorted chocolate and other dentist-approved sweets into bags for easy retrieval during Santa’s flight. He hummed several Christmas tunes as he worked. He again thought about his desire to help Santa this Eve of Christmas. “Santa has to let me help him this year. There are so many extra sweets for filling stockings it may cause him to run behind schedule. I hope I haven’t caused more trouble by not getting Santa’s approval before making this trip.”

Rudolph blinked his nose in time to each Christmas tune he hummed. The distance to Santaville was lessening by the minute, but time was running out. Liftoff was rapidly approaching. The Eve of Christmas countdown always ran on time. Santa was never late.

Thirty-seven minutes before the staging area assembly deadline, Rudolph stealthily landed the sleigh trainer onto its liftoff pad. Elves came out from behind their hiding places, pulling trolleys. Loading teams worked quickly from both sides to empty the sleigh trainer of sweets. SC sat dumbfounded. Rudolph flashed him his widest smile.

The last loaded trolley exited the pad as an elf stepped onto the sleigh trainer’s step. “Welcome back, SC. You excellently used the Santa Extra coupon. You saved the confectionery shop countless hours. Rudolph sent us his arrival time an hour before landing, giving us plenty of time to arrange the sweets transfer without causing Eve of Christmas countdown delays. The sweet smell of chocolate and tempting candy kisses preceded your return, lofted on the snowflakes gently blanketing your flight path.”

Rudolph and SC followed the elf into the Eve of Christmas staging area. The area was bustling with excitement. Everyone was making last-minute preparations. Santa was directing

reindeer harnessing while overseeing sleigh packing. The last trolley load of SC sweets was already being placed in large bags positioned on both sides of Santa’s mighty sleigh.

“Ho, ho, ho, about time you two arrived.” Santa patted Rudolph’s nose. “You were cutting it close. Santaville has enjoyed chocolate-soaked aromas since your liftoff. Do you have enough nose power to lead my sleigh tonight, Rudolph?”

Rudolph blinked his nose twice, winked at Santa, nodded, and began his favorite reindeer prance. Two elves placed a feeding basket in front of him. It was a variety of mosses, herbs, lichen, tender willow twigs, birch leaves, and fresh cut green grass arranged by the reindeer greenhouse elves specifically for him. There was enough time in the schedule for Rudolph to enjoy his favorite Eve of Christmas dinner, including dessert, chocolate-covered fungi.

“Good. Enjoy your dinner, Rudolph. This year we have enough sweets to fill every stocking to the brim, enough to make every dentist happy next year.”

“SC, thank you for helping make this year’s flight extra special. By the way, the jump seat at the rear of my sleigh has your name on it; it is the perfect position for accessing your chocolate and sweet stocking stuffers. Stuffing stockings with sweets is your job this year—if you’ll join me.”

“Uh..., ah..., oh...” SC jumped up and down, laughing. He was doing his own version of the reindeer prance. He nodded. “Yes, I’m ready to ride.”

“It’s time for you to gear up. Assembly deadline is ten minutes away. The seconds to liftoff are counting down. North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), a US and Canada bi-national organization responsible for aerospace control for North America, is ready, satellites should be in position, and chocolate fills the air. Your job is to spread that chocolate around the world.”

“SC—for tonight your initials stand for Stocking-stuffer Champion—SC for short.” Santa chuckled.

With a wink, Santa shouted, “Saddle up! Reindeer, perform your final harness check. Elves, please give me a go, no go on the rest of the Eve of Christmas Checklist.”

Santa mounted the majestic sleigh, settled into his well-padded seat and clicked his four-point harness into the safety-approved locked position, before running through his final liftoff checklist. In his rear-view mirror, he watched the elves assist SC to the jump seat. Once SC was nestled into his comfy, hi-flying seat, Santa confirmed the jump seat harness lock light glowed a steady green. A final check of the Christmas tree lights across the sleigh’s master dashboard confirmed all were solid green, indicating that all was ready for liftoff.

SC mimicked Santa’s actions, confirming his mini dashboard displayed all green lights. He discovered an unlabeled toggle

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switch. He jostled it up and down but noticed no change to the dashboard lights.

“SC, what are you doing back there? Do not push buttons, pull levers, or play with toggle switches. You have plenty of work to do tonight, so keep your hands off anything but stocking-stuffer bags. Ensure your sleigh communications headset is securely buckled and do not sing along with the reindeer during the flight. We do not need them veering off course because a jump seat singer distracted them.” Santa’s hearty laugh echoed through the staging area.

Elves supporting sleigh liftoff began moving out of the staging area, pulling hoses, ropes, trolleys, and assorted equipment with them.

The precision and speed of the operation impressed SC. He tugged on his harness to ensure it was secure. In a few moments, he would experience what it was like to be Santa on the longest night of the year.

Santa activated the sleigh’s interspatial communication system. “NORAD, this is Sierra Charlie One.”

“Sierra Charlie One, please authenticate, North Pole.”

Santa checked his NORAD-approved authentication card for the proper response. “Rudolph.”

“Roger, Santa. Your flight routes are clear and satellite tracking is in Christmas mode. American and Canadian Air Force personnel worldwide are awaiting your arrival on their tracking screens. Headquarters tracking center in Colorado picked up the scent of chocolate just before you called. Please convey our congratulations to SC for his excellent Santa Extra coupon choices. You are cleared for liftoff.”

“Ho, ho, ho.”

Santa activated the reindeer anti-gravity harnesses and the sleigh began to liftoff from the staging area.

“Rudolph, up, up, and away. You know our route. Merry Christmas to all.”

3 Poems by Richard Fenton Sederstrom

Lightning Flash, a Strobe Dream

*Where will I go now to sing new poems?
And beauty? Enchantment's ended at this thatch hut.*

— Du Fu

Another night.
Another night and another night
with more minutes than hours.

In weather like this, it seems
more hours awake than minutes asleep.

Wind and I are up together to answer male needs,
relieve the pressures of night on aging systems,
mine if not Earth's.

If Earth is tired as well
it may mostly be of me and of my human-kind.

Wind blunders around the dark
swinging lamp on the sleeping-porch.
Stumbles over my windowsill.

Wind and I blunder together toward the bathroom
but we glance outside.
If that ancient kindred jackpine snaps, shudders
cabinward, I need to see what happens. But

I don't want to be here when what happens
happens. Whether I see between lightning-strikes
or not— wind from the east—I'm his target.
But who is "He"?

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Richard Fenton Sederstrom lives in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, where he was raised from age ten, and from which he received his first cactus puncture the day he arrived, one afternoon in 1954, a lesson he still appreciates. Sederstrom's new book, "Icarus Rising: Misadventures in Ascension," appeared this year. A new book, "The Dun Box," is finished and in the hands of the editor, being gently disciplined.

My cabin is cousin to these pines,
the last of their race around my house—
cabin born of lumber slash and slash fire ashes.

All dying now out—for what does not?—
of senility aborning.

Pines of our cabin, the Folly,
are maybe a couple of generations older
than these loyal decrepit pines.
Maybe the Folly will protect me.

It has over and over again—
especially the thirty years I was elsewhere—
remembering, prodigal to our mutual care.
Kindredship blossoms with ages and space.

I hear, feel the brittle soul-pine bend,
whip back and back and back again,
watch through a strobe light of lightning flashes.
Nature's manic kinetoscope.

In the only second of perfect darkness
I hear the tree snap.
I look east toward the splintered dawn again.

I am glad at what I cannot see beyond the lightning
or hear beyond the thunder to where some gods approach
through imperfect darkness.

Shadow deities loom gray through the invisible
pink of no dawn at all. Toward me. Alone.
And He?

The lightning? Wind? Fate?
The fierce wind bellows: Aurochs.
She charges out from the east across the lake.

Or are my fiends and follies my self and soul alone,
with no more than the whirling singular night for company?
The storm I must have wished for.

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Iguanodon I—Aye?

*Some Introductory Remarks from a Re-Evolved
Imagination*

What you need to know about Iguanodons
(well, no,
you don't need to know at all, of course),

the duckbilled Hadrosaurs in particular,
is that unlike any other avian,
they had a jaw mechanism that moved for munching.

That evolved mutation
allowed them to chew their food
—eat on the run.

That is why the family was so successful for so long—
some hundred million years.
Serene efficiency.

What would a mechanism like that—
a bird that chewed—
have allowed their varied species to evolve toward?

Bad news for insignificant mammals,
who could not have kept up
with the feeding technology.

(As to your question of my own appetites and relations:
Carol teases me about how long I chew my food,
my response being that

I like to taste what I'm eating,
just as my English grandmother did,
who cooked to our shared taste. She and I

*

are meditative eaters, like the rest
of our Iguanodon family. One day perhaps,
our supple jaws will give us speech.

Speech will allow us imagination graced in time.
Would another 100,000,000 years invite
our song and soul?

How many years have humans left to blurt your blab?
We have out-spanned you who imposed names on us all,
ineptly—"terrible lizard"—

Continued on page 47

by 500 times. More or less.
We have yet to feel a need for TV spots with angry lies.
Like humans,

we suffer the ugly balance of carnivores—
like, oh, your politicians, capitalists,
neo-nazi bloggers, even your devoted citizenry.

We endure Tyranosaurs, Dromeosaurs,—
dense jaws, sharp teeth—
who eat some of us, not too many, really.

But too many; you know what I mean.
We've never wished to evolve mouths
that can eat them back.

Let me, in saurischian humility,
in avian soaring freedom— well, after you've gone—
offer an image toward someone's poem:

We have ever been and are
in your Lego Block imaginations,
LARGE! Time

and the evolutionary competence of herds
make multitudes. Make art that we carve
with our lives and our bodies, and we lay softly

our collective *bas relief* between
the solid strata that the work of Earth
opens to the sun on a vast and imperturbable future.

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Bear and I at Rest Again

*The bear spoke to someone there, perhaps to me,
For in this cave of sleep
I am at home to bears.*

N. Scott Momaday, "In the Bear's House," 1999

1

I have always been a light sleeper. Or, no.
I think maybe a heavy sleeper and an easy waker,
sometimes to take my drift through the stars
for a brief landing, waking only

to respond under the surface of the lake, maybe
to loon-call. And then to surface,
rise through schools of small dark fish,
allow for the Moon's cold gravity and pale welcome.

Then to sit up in the narrow field of my bed,
to watch the wakened stars framed by tree-shadow,
the faint new ones from the edge of the galaxy.
I study the cave wall for its map. Ask Night Bear.

I remind myself that I have never had a falling dream.
It is only gravity that threatens distant accidents.
But gravity streams are easy to choose and control,
for the conscientious dreamer.

2

Now that I am old, have grown heavier
over the ache-stunned nights,
I awaken heavier too,
and awaken to the Earthier conditions

of my plod-along pasts.
When I raise the head with open eyes
I look out toward the lake, and some light,
some unrecordable hemi-glow

too dim to recommend dawn, allows me
to see the hammock, hung between the two old spruce
where the hammock always hangs.
The hammock bulges heavily toward the ground.

Continued on page 49

3. Wind Bear (from *Folly*, 2011)

East Wind blows. Thuds its shoulder
against our cabin, blows sleep away.
A rolled-down sunshade slaps, thunks
darkly on the outside wall, and I am alert

to the adventure of weather, hearing aspen
snap in the lightning, a strobe-lit distance,
and the surprised pop of a transformer.
A jackpine vanishes in the black flash.

This is the death of the new, this rebirth
of old dark centuries, unlit entrance
for Bear again. Teeth in the dark
bite against the white bone of Wind-borne,

Bear-borne ivory lightning, Bear-throated
thunder and controlling teeth, hard kiss
of Bear-lust, castanets in Bear's heavy
love-dance, Bear's rough ecstasy of summer.

4

Storm over—storm long over—and
this a peaceful reckoning—with cold water,
with calm air, with the selenity of near space,
riding among trillions and trillions of leagues

of galaxies, like me only for now free from
the exigencies of temperature and confined
to gravity only of our private volition. I can see
now in the swaying comfort of the bulging hammock

beneath the black spruce the shadow-figure
of Bear again, at more peace even than Carol
lying beside me, purring as though to assure me,
and maybe Bear in Bear's own deep ease,

that our storms belong to the least flutter
of firefly electrons and to the electrons'
flashing and fading dimensions. I
am assured that my return to sleep now

would share peace with the truer souls
in my world; with Carol, with Bear,
with the modest company of a lone galaxy.
So I choose to stay awake beside it all.

And asleep, awake inside it all.

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The Annual Blue Guitar Festival of the Arts!

**Join us for an amazing showcase of the arts, with music,
dance, cultural presentations, art activities for children
and literary readings!**

Free admission!

**For more details, go to The Arizona Consortium
for the Arts website, www.artizona.org.**

Who we are

All about The Arizona Consortium for the Arts

The Arizona Consortium for the Arts is a nonprofit organization approved by the Arizona Corporation Commission in February 2008. We hold a 501c3 tax-exempt status.

We are all-volunteer. We are educators, artists, performers, writers and supporters of all artistic endeavors, and are proponents and supporters of the rich, vibrant and diverse community of the Greater Phoenix area as well as the entire state.

The Arizona Consortium seeks to create a multicultural, multidisciplinary arts center that will provide a home for our activities and foster artistic growth for people of



all ages in conjunction with exhibiting artists, writers, actors, dancers and musicians who will share their expertise in a gallery, theater setting.

Please visit www.artizona.org or www.theblueguitarmagazine.org for more information about

becoming a member, networking, donating, advertising, volunteering or submitting work to The Blue Guitar arts and literary magazine, Unstrung poetry magazine and The Blue Guitar Jr. literary and arts magazine for youth.

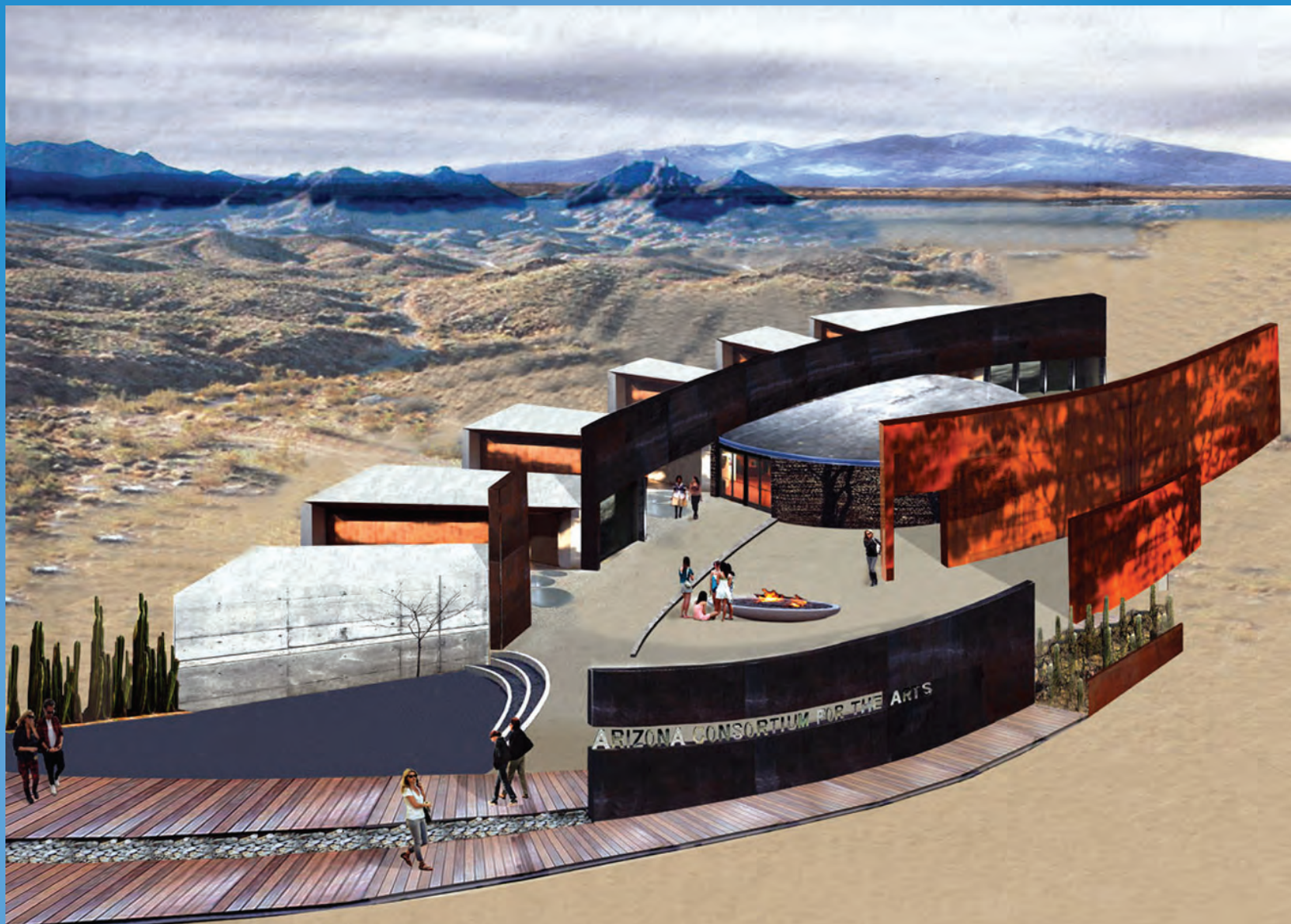
You can become a part of the Arizona Consortium and make a difference. There are countless ways to contribute, and the consortium is grateful for any donation in any form.

For us to grow as an organization, provide various services to artists, and support inspiring projects, your financial support is needed.

Every dollar received will support our website, the publication of our magazines, and the establishment of our future center.

Please visit our donations page, <http://www.artizona.org/donate.html>, and donate today!

Thank you for your support!



A rendering of the consortium's dream multicultural arts center by Effie Bouras, building designer, Mechanik Design Office, LLC.

The consortium's vision for a multicultural arts center

The rendering of The Arizona Consortium for the Arts' dream multicultural arts center by Effie Bouras, Building Designer, Mechanik Design Office, LLC.

The Center will be a source and a destination for creativity and inspiration. It will be a home for many wonderful community organizations, creative and innovative multicultural and multidisciplinary activities, classes and projects representing and celebrating our diverse community.

The Center will be a cultural icon in the Phoenix area.

The Center will be an inimitable foundation for a unique experience, one that you'll want to share with family, friends and community.

Designed by Effie Bouras, the Center will feature numerous spaces for the arts in all genres, performances and presentations. A flexible and variable seating performance theater for rehearsals, concerts, theatrical presentations, video art and films, lectures, meetings and recordings will be available free-of-charge or at a minimum cost.

Meet the staff of The Blue Guitar magazine



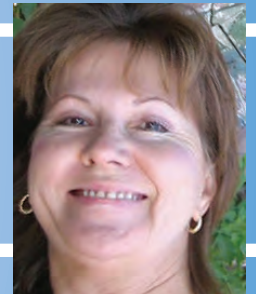
Elena Thornton, publisher: Founder and president of The Arizona Consortium for the Arts, Elena is an educator, artist and poet and lives in Phoenix. Reach her at info@artizona.org.

Rebecca Dyer, co-editor: A Tucson native, Rebecca is a poet, journalist and teacher residing in Mesa with her husband, Rick, her Blue Guitar co-editor. Reach her at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org.

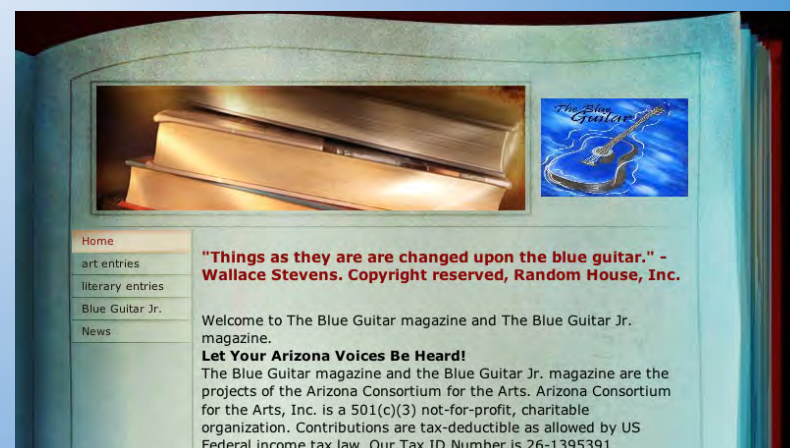


Richard H. Dyer Jr., co-editor: Richard (married to Rebecca, above) is the news editor of two monthly newspapers and two websites in the East Valley, a photographer and a welded-steel sculptor. Reach him at richarddyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org.

Marjory Boyer, cover design artist for The Blue Guitar: Marjory, of Scottsdale, is an award-winning artist, muralist and an acrylic-painting instructor. Her biography and contact information are available at mboyerart.com.



Check our websites for news on the arts



The Blue Guitar Magazine's website is www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.

Like us on Facebook.

Follow @BlueGuitarMagAZ on Twitter.

Check out The Arizona Consortium for the Arts website, www.artizona.org. There, you can sign up for an e-mailed newsletter. Also follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

www.TheBlueGuitarMagazine.org

Fall 2022

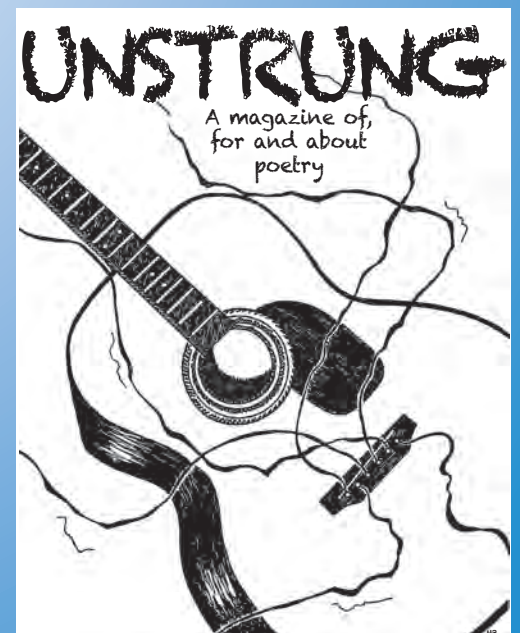
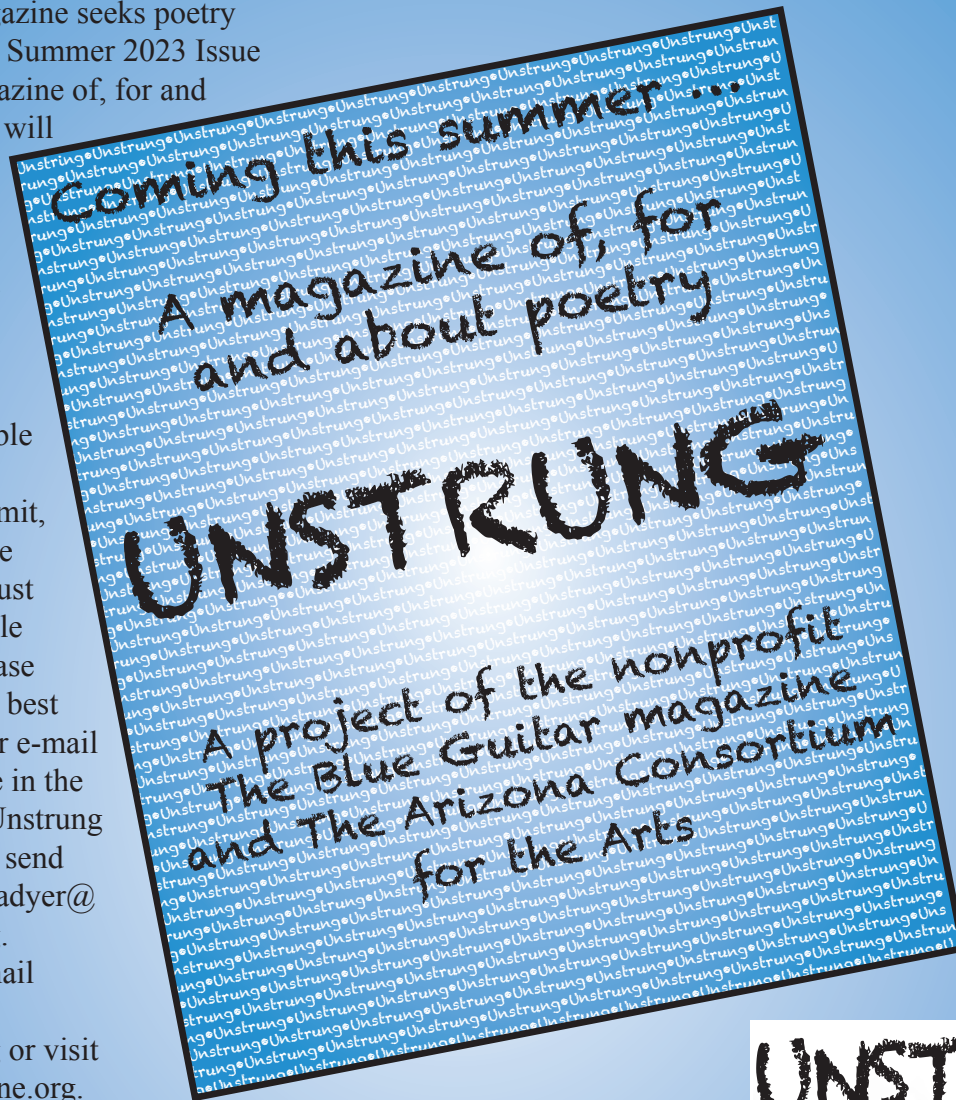
A Call to Poets for the 2023 Issue of Unstrung

The Blue Guitar magazine seeks poetry submissions for the Summer 2023 Issue of Unstrung, a magazine of, for and about poetry. Submissions will

be accepted from June 1 through July 4. Poets must submit original work and must have a tie to Arizona. Simultaneous submissions will be accepted, but the poet must notify the magazine as soon as possible if the work is accepted elsewhere. It is free to submit, and multiple poems may be submitted. Submissions must be in the best shape possible and publication-ready. Please include your name and the best way to contact you on your e-mail submission. Please include in the e-mail subject line: Attn. Unstrung — Poetry submission, and send to Rebecca Dyer at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org. For more information, e-mail Rebecca at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org or visit www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.

Unstrung, a magazine of, for and about poetry, is a nonprofit project of The Blue Guitar magazine and the nonprofit The Arizona Consortium for the Arts. The Arizona Consortium for the Arts is a startup, nonprofit group dedicated to supporting and fostering artists and the arts in Arizona, including the literary, visual and performing arts. For more information about Unstrung magazine, The Blue Guitar magazine and The Arizona Consortium for the Arts, visit our websites:

www.theblueguitarmagazine.org
and www.artizona.org.



A Call to Writers for The Blue Guitar Jr.

Open to children and teens who write
and to adults who write
for children and teens

The Blue Guitar Jr. magazine seeks literary submissions for its next annual issue for children and teens. Submissions from children and teens and adults who write for children and teens are sought by Oct. 1, 2023, in all genres — fiction, poetry, plays, creative nonfiction — all geared to appeal to youthful audiences. Writers must submit original work and must live in Arizona. Simultaneous submissions will be accepted, but the writer must notify the magazine as soon as possible if the work is accepted elsewhere. It is free to submit, and submissions may be made in multiple genres. Please include your name and the best way to contact you on your submission. To submit or for further information, e-mail Editor Rebecca Dyer at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org. For additional information, visit www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.

The Blue Guitar Jr. magazine is a project of the nonprofit The Blue Guitar literary and arts magazine and The Arizona Consortium for the Arts. The Arizona Consortium for the Arts is a startup, nonprofit group dedicated to supporting and fostering artists and the arts in Arizona, including the literary, visual and performing arts. For more information about The Blue Guitar and The Blue Guitar Jr. magazines and The Arizona Consortium for the Arts, visit our websites:
www.theblueguitarmagazine.org and www.artizona.org.

A Call to Artists for The Blue Guitar Jr.

Open to children and teens who create art
and to adults who create art
for children and teens

The Blue Guitar Jr. magazine seeks art submissions for its next annual issue for children and teens. Submissions from children and teens and adults who create art for children and teens are sought by Oct. 1, 2023, in all media geared to appeal to youthful audiences. Artists must submit original work and must live in Arizona. Simultaneous submissions will be accepted, but the artist must notify the magazine as soon as possible if the work is accepted elsewhere. It is free to submit, and submissions may be made in multiple mediums; up to 5 images can be submitted. Artists are encouraged to submit images of work by e-mail; please provide high-resolution JPEGs of 300 dpi. Images must be identified in the e-mail with the artist's name, contact information, titles of works, dates and mediums. Please include your name and the best way to contact you. To submit or for more information, e-mail Editor Richard Dyer at richarddyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org. For additional information, visit www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.

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www.theblueguitarmagazine.org and www.artizona.org.



A Call to Writers for Spring 2023

The Blue Guitar magazine seeks literary submissions for the Spring 2023 Edition from Feb. 1 through March 4. Submissions are sought in all genres — fiction, poetry, plays, creative nonfiction. Writers must submit original work and must live part- or full-time in Arizona. Simultaneous submissions will be accepted, but the writer must notify the magazine as soon as possible if the work is accepted elsewhere. It is free to submit, and submissions may be made in multiple genres. Please include your name and the best way to contact you on your submission. Submissions must be in the best shape possible and publication-ready. To submit or for further information, e-mail Editor Rebecca Dyer at rebeccadyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org. For more information, visit www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.

A Call to Artists for Spring 2023

The Blue Guitar magazine seeks art submissions in all mediums for the Spring 2023 Edition from Feb. 1 through March 4. Any artists who work in any visual art media, are 18 years or older and are part- or full-time Arizona residents can submit. It is free to submit and up to 5 images can be submitted. Artists are encouraged to submit images of work by e-mail; please provide high-resolution JPEGs of 300 dpi. Images must be identified in the e-mail with the artist's name and contact information, titles of works, dates and mediums. Submissions must be in the best shape possible and publication-ready. To submit or for further information, e-mail Editor Richard Dyer at richarddyer@theblueguitarmagazine.org. For more information, visit www.theblueguitarmagazine.org.



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**"Things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar."
— Excerpt from Wallace Stevens' 1937 poem "The Man With the Blue Guitar."
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Volume 14,
Number 2
Fall Issue
FREE!

*“Things
as they are
are
changed
upon
the
blue guitar.”*