



THE  
FIELDSTONE  
REVIEW

ISSUE 6, 2013



# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## Editor's Note

Shakti Brazier-Tompkins

[next](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

Welcome to the environment issue of *The Fieldstone Review*! Last year's theme of politics was so well received that the editorial team decided to do it again, and I think you will be pleased by the variety of ways in which our contributors have responded to and interpreted this year's theme of environment. From ice fishing and father-daughter relationships to a childhood spent under Grandma's unyielding rule to an antler's apologia, this issue's eclectic mix has something to suit every taste. I invite you to explore issue six's offerings as you might a garden: pausing to examine the intricacies of some parts and the vibrant textures and colours of others, but also taking time to notice what each part contributes to the whole.

Our editors are the face of *The Fieldstone Review*, and I thank Jon Bath, Jordan P. R. Bolay, Adar Charlton, Federica Giannelli, Robert Imes, and Martin Winquist for their dedication to this journal, and to the returning editors in particular for helping me to transition from my previous position as copy editor to my new role as editor-in-chief of *The Fieldstone Review*. I also want to acknowledge and thank our readers, Carleigh Brady, Devin Ens, Andréa Ledding, Jade McDougall, Catherine Nygren, Thomas Onion, Jessica Ratcliffe, and Meghan Witzel, for giving of their time and their talents as scholars and, in some cases, creative writers themselves. Their efforts have been invaluable.

Together, we have built *The Fieldstone Review* 6 out of the contributions of many skilled and discerning writers, and I am pleased to offer it for your exploration. I hope that you enjoy reading these pieces as much as we did.

Sincerely,  
Shakti Brazier-Tompkins  
Editor-in-Chief

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)



POETRY





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## Shed: An Antler's Apologia

Gina M. Bernard

You left me to splinter, resting first on bitter, windswept snow;  
now I'm witness to this shy lady's blush – her slipper,  
the harbinger of spring.

Take me back to the first flush of our verdancy.  
Your browsing nurtured my impatient growth  
as it branched before your eye.

*Please?* was not asked of one another in the mottled  
days that stitched together – spider thin and golden  
in their summer brilliance.

I regret that when offered protection, a velvet-soft upholstery,  
I began to harden. How easily I mineralized,  
my hostility contracting to a moon-white weapon.

I am grateful for ritual. Obstinacy forgiven beneath autumn's  
claret display – scrutinizing strength and defining ardour  
as the staccato clash of bone.

The end came without warning, blood welling in the pedicle  
of failed embrace. Cautiously, you stirred –  
healing from this somewhat expected separation.

I lie thus shed. Calcified and crumbling, I keep watch  
for you. Meanwhile, mice plot my measured demise,  
gnawing ravenously at our once-ornamental love.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

### Baffin Bay Sun

Marina Blokker

Ice calves from a glacial tongue,  
the past unlocks in a drifting sea,  
sweetens the salt, melt rises  
as the sun shines on and on,

shift of sheets, slip of stones,  
but what do we know,

weight of Monday,  
hump of Wednesday,  
we hunt, peck, follow an etched trail,  
sign the form overexposed in white,  
eat mango on meringue, laugh in ale,

support the small head, fragile pulses,  
honeyed milk drips,  
no rain but the waves come,

no weapons of war but glistening towers  
collapse in plumes, please reply,  
when will you return north,  
so long since you were seen,

memories of last winter,  
loping dreams of webbed feet,  
deep breathing,<sup>1</sup> our throats thrum<sup>2</sup>  
songs over lapping water.

<sup>1</sup> In his introduction to *Poems of the Inuit*, John Robert Colombo notes that “the Inuktitut word for breath, *anerca*, also means poetry” (276). From *In Fine Form: The Canadian Book of Form Poetry* (ed. Kate Braid and Shandy Shreve. Richmond, BC: Raincoast, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Refers to Inuit throat singing.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## "Just you wait and see"

Peter Branson

from "The White Cliffs of Dover" (Nat Burton/Vera Lynn)

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

Some species of long-distance spring migrants are declining in numbers at an accelerating, possibly unsustainable, rate.

Tonight the sky's all pulsing hearts, concealed  
like stars beyond the Milky Way. Not shape-  
shifters nor sleeping ones the Hopi knew,  
half ours, alternative far worse, they chase  
the tilt of Earth and charm us with their voice.  
Heralds, angels on high, no choice, inbred,  
trade weather, desert, ocean, birds of prey,  
for daylight, food, fair chance to breed and thrive.  
What if they don't turn up, flycatcher, swift,  
warbler and turtle dove, those cuckoos in  
'The Times', that nightingale in Berkeley Square?  
Will spring go missing too? Inexorable  
high tide; you don't believe it possible?  
It's here; get real, bluebirds at 12 O'clock.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)



# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## Living Water and Swan Song

Alyssa Cooper

These waters were alive  
only yesterday,  
    the glory of spring,  
as glowing white swans,  
with diamond necklaces  
and solemn eyes,  
brought their children to the light  
    for the first time.

Tiny, ugly bodies  
protected  
under the thick muscles  
of strong, snowy  
    wings.

They owned that water,  
playing high, musical notes  
in their tiny  
gaping  
throats.

But late last night,  
the storm  
brought the silence.  
Those frothing, heady waves;  
they killed them  
    all.

Now,  
the water is still;  
a black, inky mirror,  
    not a ripple  
to mar that glassy surface.  
Mother and father  
have deserted;  
stoic in their misery,  
they carried the weight  
    of their loss  
on feathered wings.

But the children remain.

Tiny bodies  
    float,  
lifeless  
on the river;  
they spread  
their stunted wings,  
and they

fly,  
  
sunk in the clouds  
that the water  
    reflects.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

### Cape Spencer

Aaron Daigle

We drive till pavement cracks.

Far ocean rolls in black,  
rhythmically raked by light-  
house; fingernails furrow backs.  
Breakers scoop out caves, salt-ground,

resound in the stomach of earth.  
Fogbanks from up shore  
bind our eyes: grains of mist settle  
beneath lids. The brain inhales.

Signs only emerge when near enough to touch.  
*Unstable cliff.* Might fall beyond the known,

to where a stretch of infinity  
tempts our toes.  
*Take just one step. Go on.*

We just shiver  
in a backseat  
and turn into one another.

A foghorn stirs unmarked wings  
and roars its sorrow  
into imperishable night.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## Notice of Occupancy

Norah Eastern

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

                  Come in, come in;  
welcome.

                  I'm Anna Pest from Budapest.

                  Hope you like the verb appeal  
                  the bush trimmed  
                  the clutter gone  
the garbage out – I swear  
                  (mouth washed out with soap and water).

                  In today's competitive market  
                  the staged hoem sells well.

                  Remove personal effects  
                  memory frames  
                  possessive pronouns

                  paint a neutral décor  
                  beige bedspread blotting out  
                  last night's lovemaking  
like a maid hired by a hotel that serves  
                  mass market metaphor enjambed  
                  at breakfast.

                  Leave an empty structure  
                  for the buyers to step in and  
                  see themselves.

                  Some may tromp in on trochaic feet  
                  or waddle like a pterodactyl  
but my pentameter of hardwood floor  
                  will echo my

                  – bs, this  
                  gouge out an "T" for an *eye* that  
                  also perceives the world through a Self.

                  I'll grant you an objective correlative  
                  if you'll pardon the nudes dancing  
                  on the wall

                  the offending books on healing from trauma  
                  the batik from Cape Verde dangled on thumb-tacks  
hanging in the hall  
                  the sighs

                  rustling the curtain  
trapped in the shower stall  
and the scattered midnight scribbles next to  
the bedside pharmacopia.

                  The poem is not for sale.  
I will not vacate these premises while you pay me  
                  a visit

                  catch your reflection in the  
                  I of the mirror  
as we live in the space between words  
                  our worlds  
                  theuni-verse.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)



## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

### In Which Summertime You Again Chase Bear

Jenny Lee Ferguson

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

The first morning you wake up burrowed between his wet sheets, you ask if he suffers a problem. By lunch, your boss pulling you aside to crack knock-knock-who's-there-girl-who-gets-tumbled-and-peed-on punchlines. In front of the children you chastise for eating nothing but French fries for lunch in this their summer haven. By dinner, the sheets he launders with two wilting lilac branches and you let yourself be sweetened. Can they see that you are sweating hops and rye?

In the heat dome, lie not touching, windows naked, open temptation for the breeze to slip the spaces between the walls of the old staffhouse, calm the resident mice, your shared heat-immune scurry, so you can get some damn sleep. Your body is a canvas for allergy, the touch of his bare skin.

That summer, you practice the art of lying to children about things they think they know, about things they know they know but five senses can't prove. The art of lying to children relies on not being too hung-over to remember your previous lies.

You've overcome other psychosomatic symptoms, forcing segments of chocolate to savour the belly of hives, the thighs of hives, the neck swollen hives –

When she visits, clasp his Colorado girlfriend's hand, your palms talcum because you've sweated all your sugared water in puddles at his feet, when the creek overflowed its banks years ago in puddles formed by the knees of another and take note that she's sweeter than you even with the cigarette smell staining her. The first morning you wake up burrowed between alone. If you could, would you drag her into the clutch of trees where prepubescent girls conduct their private circle and ask how often she woke – wakes – to his wet sheets, shares intimate things with strangers, hears the lilt of another on his sunkiss-chapped lips?

The art of lying to teenagers about things they think they know about things they know they know because they can smell him, the sugar of him on your freshly laundered shirts.

By August it's goodbye to summertime again, to feeling like chewing late raspberries the bear has picked through, bitter as festive holly to sweeten you.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## Picket-Line Poem 1

Jesse P. Ferguson

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

I.

The Honourable Society of  
No More Dirty Energy  
blogged yesterday  
that all plans for dirty-dollar  
power plants should be scrapped.  
The world simply cannot afford  
not to donate today. [Click Here.](#)

By making a much-needed donation  
today you will join GreenHearts  
in our work to train kamikaze starlings  
and learn our own dead weight.  
We engineer protection for the planet  
and find the solutions we need to our  
choose-your-currency-and-amount issues.

How can we put a price tag  
on unchecked growth in truth demand  
or on the unprecedented influx  
of donations into our  
much-needed, independent voice?

Our sustainable future accepts  
all major credit cards.

II.

The Right Honourable Minister of  
Anthropogenic Factors and Increased CO2  
announced yesterday  
that this government is every bit  
as serious about the stewardship  
of our environment  
as it is about fuel-efficient SUVs.

We engineer economies, he said, to maximize  
both capability and comfort, including:  
emissions targets for select industries  
and allowing less-polluting companies  
to sell so-called carbon credits  
to those that can reach 500  
highway miles on a single compromise.  
How can we put a price tag  
on unchecked growth in energy demand  
or on the unprecedented influx  
of foreign-investment revenue  
into our best of intentions?

Our sustainable future accepts  
all major credit cards.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)



## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

### Rugged

Heather Finton

There is a kind of rugged yes  
required of these winter women  
who learn about submission  
in standing up  
to collaborate with wildness.

We who sacrifice trees daily  
to warm our families,  
smoke ablutions mingled with light sweat,  
regret and necessity,  
honouring and willing.

Perfumed girls on beaches  
do not hear the same urgency,  
the crackle of survival in cold,  
footsteps understanding  
the value of wool.

It is a heritage of peace-making,  
apprenticing to a harsh teacher  
finding snatches of warmth,  
internal rivers of smiling  
when skin is frozen.

And when the sky-blanket  
covers us with immaculate intricacy,  
warmer than diamonds  
and farther removed,  
we know our kin dance with us.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## Recipe for Stargazing in Concord

Heather Hughes

First thing is to find Orion,  
how impatient lovers reach,  
by the hips. Stop to hope  
passing headlights will pass.  
Separate blinking wings  
from the slower flush  
of satellite. Settle into  
the folds of lawn chair,  
crick neck, wrap arms for  
warmth, ponder the insistence  
of nightbirds restless as  
we. Marvel, finally, not  
only at how our eyes grasp light  
as much by the distances between,  
but also at the joy of comity  
as we trace the same shooting star.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

*for Jack*

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)



# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## The Four Humours

Michael Prior

i.

Catch the last forlorn leaves falling. Watch them settle beneath your feet. There are murmurs of small lives ending and the hum of worms burrowing their way, ingesting the worn machinery of autumn. The moss bristles with waterless cold, the dark frost is readable like tea leaves – everything exhaling.

ii.

The white that fills an absence of dank-wood and descant, that crawls and flutters its way across the transparency of stifled thought – consider that this is the world unpainted and raw, everything numbed and stifled. The wind has eyes, the frozen water, a throat.

iii.

The bleeding remnant of what has past steals its way rootward, injects itself into the unfurling cells bent towards the heat. Lie on the ground, cover your face with a verdant mask; your emails unanswered, your letters composting in the box. Your sanguine questions trickle down to feed the unfamiliar shadows, the natural order of things.

iv.

Here, faced with the sun, the challenge to the rhythm of one foot after the other, you deepen, darken, stop calling home, hold the wrists of strangers and stir to their pulse.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## Elegy for Edges

Michael C. Rush

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

The impossible is of no interest whatsoever.  
The inaccessible is irresistible.

An acknowledgement of perpetual transience  
leads to the development of ecstatogenic techniques,

aspiration to deprivation  
abandoned for blessings of the yes-yes.

What to say to the literalist  
for whom abstractions lack edges to grasp,

who prefers the limits of banal concretions  
because he can count the feathers,

because the sensation of stubbing his toe allows  
him to pretend a conception of his forgotten origins,

because he relishes the comforts of recognition  
rather than the challenges of examining patterns?

Truth is imprisoned in a prism, fractalicious,  
with facets on facets, shattered into being

with the relentless eroticism of ice  
cracking rock.

The merely accommodating is much too small.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## Mindful

Lorelie Gerwing Sarauer

i.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

I encase my words in plastic, cut them apart and scatter them into the woods. My woods. My words popping up then and there through the moss sponge. How long will they last?

I bottle poems about my mother, throw one into a lake. I liberate her from the memory-taker, bring her here to be inserted into the slit bark of a tree.

One of my favourite spots is a bench on a hill in these woods. Three years ago, while chemicals were pumped through my body, I came here in my mind to sit, to feel the sun flicker on my face, hear the frogs' chorus: *I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm alive.*

I bring my stones here. One stone collected from each place I visit. I used to try to take every stone, weighting my pockets so that I could scarcely move. Allen would say, "I am not carrying your rocks in my suitcase." But I slipped them beneath the lining, tucked them into his woollen socks.

I think of clay squeezed through my hand, oxide-darkened and fired, scattered on the shore of a lake in Tasmania, dropped path-side in Pompeii, tucked into these woods.

The spruce trees, though tall and sturdy, are shallow-rooted. They can't be counted on for support though I've imagined a tree house with a dropped ladder where my grandchildren might play. Surely these aren't the first hard winds to blow here?

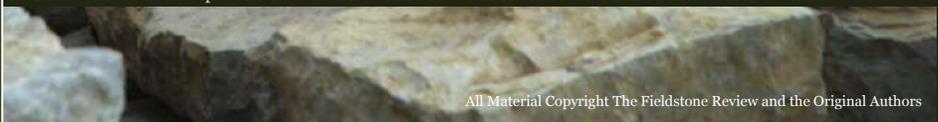
The man who gravels our driveway advises to scrape off all of the trees and start over. We have two and a half acres of trees. I grew up on the bald prairie, was always looking for shade, a place to hide.

My daughters visit during a summer on steroids. Heavy rains have caused the underbrush to build muscle. I stand on my bench to point out The Big and Little Dips, the baby birches I hope to move, the tree suspended above the entrance to the ridge where spruce have fallen, stacked like cordwood.

The girls see hiding places for bears and cougars that would snack on small children. They see a whole lot of work. They travel thirty minutes north to pitch their tents in Beaver Glen.

In the winter, deer plough a path around the hill and up to my bench. Are they curious or reclaiming their hill, their view?

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## These are not Metaphors (These were not Dreams)

Richard Scarsbrook

above the third eye  
in the pensive face that sees  
we carved our initials

(you plus me)

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

between the thirsty roots  
two-hands deep  
we buried our treasure

(a falcon on a quarter  
an owl from a box of tea  
the stones we carried with us  
the worry doll you made for me  
foreign coins, domestic marbles  
pearls from different seas  
and  
a silicate sliver  
from our secret island splintered)

we washed our lucky stones  
that we carry with us still  
in the stream  
that rushes  
through the park  
in the painting  
that hangs  
beside the bed  
where we  
make love

(you plus me)

these are not metaphors  
these are not analogies  
these are things  
we did for real

(for real  
not a dream)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

### The new place

Greg Stacey

When we moved in  
history shuffled over slightly  
on the couch,  
his spot where patterns  
in the fabric were worn  
he gave up  
but continued smoking  
and sighing  
and talking about Marx.  
My girlfriend liked him at first  
but after  
one night  
when he told her she looked like  
her mother's picture on the fridge  
and wouldn't apologize  
she stopped talking to him –  
I don't mind him  
history,  
but there's lots of people I don't mind:  
ego  
upstairs  
with the barking dogs,  
space and matter and their new kid,  
I kind of like the building.  
Compared to my old place  
where I and emptiness  
shared that Ikea bed  
in the middle of nowhere  
this is a dream.  
The street's louder here,  
the windows bright.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

### Other Skies in Other Places

J.J. Steinfeld

it is an over-documented time  
each second making as much sense  
as each withering week and month  
you look all around yourself  
practising methods of detection  
as a last resort looking upward  
the sky or what used to be called sky  
dripping confusion and memory  
the confusion clever as night  
the memory short of cleverness  
and other skies in other places  
you fearing night and its accomplices  
going into a room away from sky  
the walls painted as close  
to blood-red as the word allows  
the ceiling not a sky nor  
a word for sky and night  
and when you leave  
a year or two later  
having difficulty with time  
as with skies and colours  
seeking new colours  
the world had changed  
you deciding to call sky, *earth*  
and earth, *sky*  
and suddenly you could smile  
before the sky falls on  
you and your words  
leaving you colourless

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

### Indigo Child

Jessica Van de Kemp

Virgo bandies about  
the moon again.  
Snowflakes like little boulders.  
The strength of it  
gentler  
in the blushed grey.  
Ebbs like a woman might  
beneath a man.  
The old secrets unfolding  
in the underbelly of boot.  
Someone in the living  
room is drunk.  
Old Crow and the billowing  
veil of night.  
Velvet suit weighted  
by wet stars.  
Kissing Rowan  
on the root chakra.  
“Give me the pen, dear,  
it’s suicide.”  
Smell of slippery elm  
in the pantry.  
Grandmother’s swing of pendulum  
when old clock runs dry.  
Moment when knuckles measure  
scarred face with a violent tenderness.  
Cheekbones of a peacock’s strut.

The old breed.

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





# the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

## The Skyline Circus

Dylan Wagman

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

i

Gravediggers push earth into piles, next to piles, next to piles:  
Overnight tombstones identify the dead.  
They plough below sole-shaped paths,  
Severed stumps and gutted roots.  
These cranes are hungry, taming the wild wood.  
Puppeteers, pull and release  
Slabs and steel foundations.  
The skyline circus,  
Bringing players to a crowded scene,  
Each toppled on the other's shoulders.

ii

A parking garage on the roof of hell  
Where demonized drug hounds lurk for unsullied prey.  
A penthouse in the basement of heaven,  
With angelic agents snorting lines of cirrus cloud.  
A bridge of elevators smoothes the transition.  
The earth has been displaced  
Forced to roam, barren.  
The sky has been photographed,  
Folded up and documented.  
The sea has been bottled and bar-coded.  
How they scurry about their custom kitchens,  
Taking their T.V. nourishment,  
Making microwave entertainment.  
The night sky is the neighbouring condo  
And the stars go out at eleven.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





FICTION



## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

### The Sea

Evelyn Deshane

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

He said the sea would speak to him.

"Just like Jack Kerouac. At the end of *Big Sur*, he wrote a sound poem about what the sea said to him one night. It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever read."

I furrowed my brow. "How can the sea speak?"

"How can you not listen?"

When he answered me with questions, there was no point in arguing. So we walked down to the water for him to listen to his muse and for me to stare at the back of his head.

"It's not *Big Sur*," he commented. He took a deep breath, looking from the water to me, then back to the water. "But the sea could find me anywhere."

"We're actually on a lake."

"It's all relative. It's still water." He was getting defensive. "Water fuels creativity. I read that somewhere, ages ago."

I didn't doubt this; he read a lot of books. But he was always getting them mixed up and tangled with his own life like this.

"I should be married to the sea."

I sighed. This week the sea, the next the forest. This wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last. He always wanted to be married to something that was never his to begin with.

"But if you write a sea poem, you're not doing anything creative. You're just ripping off Kerouac," I told him with a shiver.

"Exactly."

It wasn't like him to agree. He had been staring at the water, but now turned his attention to me.

"I'm not going to write a sea poem. I'm going to paint her instead."

So we got a small house. It was on the edge of the lake. The sea, I mean. He wouldn't let me call it anything but. He put a sign over the door to his art room when he painted that read: "Big Sur – Listen." And then the translation from the sea: "Boom, shish, wahhhhh-la." He insisted they were words and that they could form their own language. He called it Sea-Shriek. I called him crazy.

When he painted, he didn't speak with me at all. He was too busy having conversations that he thought I could never understand. I was cast out for being a body of bones and skin. He wanted bodies of water.

But I didn't leave him. Instead, I got up at dawn and decided to walk to the water myself. I walked along the shoreline every morning I could. I talked to the fish, not to the sea, but I eavesdropped as much as I could. I watched him as he painted what the sea told him from the open window with the red drapes flapping in the wind. That window was always open. Even when autumn turned to winter and the nights grew tremendously cold, he refused to close it. He never wanted to shut out a muse.

When the doors were open to his room, I would bring him his breakfast on iron trays that the old owners had left here. Mostly toast with butter and orange juice. He started to put sea-salt on the toast and I didn't bother to question him. When he finally realized I had been walking by the shoreline, he didn't ask if I had heard her talk. He asked me to bring stones and shells and twigs. "Maybe if I knew what she gave, I'd understand her more."

He said her name was Amphitrite. She was the goddess of the sea, wife of Poseidon. He learned about that in another book he had read and then mixed up with his art supplies and canisters of sea-salt. I always wondered if he thought he was Poseidon. With the way he flung those brushes some days, his arm muscles bulging like that of a god, I knew he thought he was channelling some kind of higher power. But with each failure, he was reminded that he was just a man.

The months of winter passed. I brought sticks and stones and metal and my own bones up for his collection. Sea salt rotted the insides of our mouths. And he had still painted nothing. I prayed for our redemption by the jagged rocks of the water each dawn.

Then one morning, the wind blew in strong from the east through that always-open window. It knocked over his *ultramarine* onto an egg-shell white canvas and I breathed a sigh of relief. Amphitrite had emerged; the sea had spoken. From the shoreline and through the window, I watched him wait as the other bottles – *viridian*, *sepia*, and *cobalt* – fell over in succession and flowed onto the blank canvas. When I came back from my walk, he rushed over to me and showed me the sea, as if I had never been aware of its existence before.

He sold it that spring. Some fool bought it for a ridiculous amount of money. After the check cleared, I called the buyer crazy, but never him anymore.

We took the money and we moved to Big Sur. "It's not the same as before," he lamented. "The sea doesn't speak to me here."

He always did have that habit of rejecting what he wanted when it was finally given to him. I said nothing when he abandoned the water for the woods and insisted that the leaves were now his muse.

I still watch as he paints, only now the conversation is between the leaves of the trees. The window is still open, only this time the drapes are purple, and I am still all bones and very cold at night. I still bring him his breakfast when the door is open for me, but now his meals are on black trays that we bought ourselves with our own money.

And I still walk on the shoreline at dawn, because now the sea is only speaking to me.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)



Song of the Cicadas

Reed Stirling

next  
previous  
random  
past issues  
editorial board

The British cemetery faces Souda Bay with a sandy beach in the foreground, and lemon and olive groves all around. Hills roll up beyond the gate towards the heights of Akrotiri. Within are the graves of known and unknown soldiers. Among their Commonwealth brothers-in-arms lie five Canadian airmen. Under the moonlit sun, cicadas sing their yesses.

David Montgomery visited this site. His father survived the chaos of war, while many others did not. No chaos now, only order in the ranks among wild flowers that grow between the rows of white stone crosses. All is peaceful and serene.

I stop momentarily to read the headstone of one Arthur Owens: born 1912, London; died 1943, Crete.

The port of Souda lies directly ahead across the silent waters. Behind the grain elevator that rises like a monolith, the Aek Line ferry points to the evening sailing, the map of Crete on its funnel. Far on the horizon, adding darker tones to distant grey, the bulk of Cape Drapano thrusts itself out at the sea. Along the Akrotiri shore, destroyers huddle together as though in deliberation.

Overhead, a single jet fighter banks against the infinite blue of the sky, insinuating itself, if only for seconds, into the song of the ubiquitous cicadas.

Out of my memory, large plumes of smoke pile high into the sky and drift on impassioned winds across the port facilities towards the mountains. Troop ships fill the port, German Stukas fill the sky. The bay bubbles with hundreds of small volcanoes. The din increases.

I hear Montgomery's voice edged with controlled hysteria from some night out of last winter: "Feature an aircraft carrier of the Mediterranean Fleet, five thousand men, fifty blocks long, half the size of Chania, equipped to reduce to rubble the same number of city blocks multiplied by one thousand, a city thirty times the size of Chania, five thousand men trained to annihilate millions." And then that same voice from some other night when war itself was not the principal theme, but something touching on the human psyche: "All the myths contain all the truth; abstract and concrete, everything accounted for, everything human and inhuman, the bestial and the sublime; even the nucleus of the atomic bomb -- the formula, etched on the sword of Ares and later refined by philosophers, alchemists, and brilliant bastard sons." Gods beat up on gods; conquering nations build their monuments on the sites of former temples, mosques, and churches. In Spain and Portugal, all over Europe and Africa, in North and South America, all over the world. Our belief, much greater than yours, our god, mightier -- men out of the shadows and out of the skies, secret, rote men who invoke the name of the divine to sanction their terror.

I walk back through the graves, through the gate, into the cool of the groves.

\*

*The Fall of Crete* intrigues me. I am engrossed in a chapter that describes the aftermath to the massive and miraculous evacuation along the South coast of defeated forces whose intentions had been to defend Crete against Nazi invasion. Place names like Chania and Souda are familiar, others less so.

Pages flutter as warm *Meltemi* winds pick up.

Over the edge of my book, the water of the old Venetian harbour glistens. Taverna awnings flap rhythmically. Hotel and pension facades shade their eyes. Evident everywhere is the juxtaposition of past and present. Roofs tell the story of progress since the war, the new affluence, where tiles dislodged by bombs and wind slide against the clean and functional. Shutters, dilapidated, askew, wearing the saddened expression of neglect, look enviously at their hotel neighbours. Balconies hang precariously, unattended, unsupported by rusting wrought iron. Near the Hotel King Kydon, itself a relic from former times, an suzo joint begins to metamorphose into what will be another sick bar. Below, a red scooter with worn tires and bandaged fenders, a mark of advancement in its day over mules and donkeys, competes for space with sleek techno machines that could launch a man at the moon.

And then as if on schedule, two screaming jets slice through the sky above sunintanned Old Port faces, only seconds away from the peaks of the Lefka Ori, only a thrust away from their daily dip in the sea. The cat under my table hesitates, retreats. When the quiet settles in again, I hear echoes of David Montgomery, friend and mentor, gone now on his itinerant way, as he begins to lecture me about the amortization of Greece, by which he means the colonization of a have-not nation striving with all its might to have, and how the *Pax Americana* resembles the *Pax Romana*. *Meltemi* winds shut the voice down. The cat reappears and cooies up to my leg.

Kapitano comes by and expresses his delight that tourist traffic increases daily. "Damn close to a full house," he tells me, waving a hand back towards the entrance to his Pension Ariadne, but he need not, as I have already made that determination by the night sounds and the paucity of hot water. He sits down to coffee and quotes his wife, Merope.

"After all the others, the Venetians came, then the Turks, then the Germans, then the tourists. Forever we are fighting for our identity. And now is television, like the Cyclops, but still she complains while she watches. American stuff she likes best, as sure as hell, but still she complains."

American programs: he has many captioned cleverly, and theme music, and ads for soap or krog grain rice. Then Greek jingles and live talk. Kapitano is in a splendid mood.

Beyond his voice, Aphrodite Metrakis sweeps out the entrance to the pension, bent over like a piece of animated angle iron, archetypal crone. In my imagination I see a young Heinrich TriZion in black uniform, standing at ease, waiting for orders. Perhaps a cigarette hangs from his lips, perhaps not. He grows scornful of the woman passing before him under a load of faggots.

I tell Kapitano that I plan to visit the German Cemetery at Maleme tomorrow.

"Why you do that?"

"The irony."

"Po, po, po," he says with gusto. I take it he thinks it a good thing.

"Balance," I add. "This morning I visited the British Cemetery at Souda Bay."

He angles his head in agreement, a gesture that fascinates me.

"I tell you another story, not from my wife this one, but old Aphrodite. A German officer, silvered-headed and wrinkle-browed, returns to around Maleme. An old village woman recognizes him. She tells other old women in the village of his return, and they bring to him wine and olives and cheese. Also flowers. When they leave, he hangs himself in his rented apartment."

"I suppose he found their generosity and forgiveness insufferable."

"I do not believe this. Pass the salt!"

After a few moments of silence, I ask him about Ramona Rhiamakis and her activities with the Cretan underground during the war. Also about the Heinrich TriZion connection.

"Yes, yes, Ramona. No way this is a Greek name. It comes, you see, from her story. A different story, believe you me, this one brings tears to your eyes. Another day I tell you what I think happened between them in those tragic times."

When I ask about the more recent animosity between TriZion and Montgomery, Kapitano shrugs, but then suggests it has something to do with political philosophies. He does not elaborate. Before he leaves I ask him where the beautiful music comes from these nights, and he waves his right arm over the pavement and up Angolou Street. He could mean the Pension Ariadne, or Erato's Music Bar next door, or the foothills of the Lefka Ori, or all of Crete.

\*

Reaching the entrance to the German cemetery, I turn and look back down toward the sea: to the west, the stark and massive backbone of Rodopou; to the east beyond the city shape, Akrotiri; in the foreground, the Bay of Chania; the Maleme airstrip down below. The sound of a twin prop circling around over the area, like a ghost plane to me, which at one moment is there and then is not.

A rock walk leads up to the graves. I do not get the impression of a cemetery, for initially I think I am visiting a memorial, where the fallen are simply commemorated collectively, a mass grave so to speak, but upon closer inspection of the head stones, I grow more conscious of the loss of individual lives. The gravestones recognize two soldiers or airmen, some named, some not.

A young family ambles through the rows ahead of me. Two little girls, the youngest barely three, chase a cat, then stop and pick up the flowers that somebody placed on one of the graves, and run back to show their mother. The father intercepts them. He returns their prize to where it lay, offering little in the way of explanation. The little one cries.

In passing that grave, I note only one name chiselled in stone: Lieutenant F.D. Wunderlich. In the surrounding air, the incessant song of the cicadas.

I find my way to a taverna just off the main Chania to Kissamos road, where I talk briefly with two young Germans over a beer. One tells me he has visited Canada; the other says he plans to go. We talk mostly about sports. Eventually they leave, heading west in their rented convertible. Nice guys.

Somewhere in my sight: Golden Eagle plummeting.

I hear Montgomery's dissenting voice again, and I know that I, too, might have succumbed easily to indoctrination at the age of eighteen or twelve or six.

Propaganda, like romantic idealism, has appealing voices. Then what TriZion said comes back to me: "Montgomery's anti-American sentiments were just cover, part of his style, a set of put-on attitudes fitted to anti-NATO, anti-missile base, anti-USA opinions rampant in many quarters of the Cretan population. A deception in response to graffiti and demonstrations." TriZion would have known of such plots, and the adoption of such attitudes, his own designs and deceptions going back a few decades, going back to when he had been eighteen.

Waiting for the bus to take me back to Chania, I watch a couple of vacationers parasailing over the beaches and the sea, technicolour shoos blowing out behind great power boats. And then in reverse I hear the drone of myriad aircraft in formation coming over the horizon. The sky fills with mushrooms. In the distance, a mushroom cloud rises.

Behind me, the chirring of the cicadas stops, then picks up again more frenzied than before.



The Remarkable Bushes

Kimberly Fehr

Dear Mr. Pakenham:

If a book can change a life, Mr. Pakenham, yours changed mine.

I know it sounds strange when I say my hand found the book by fate, that it was the smooth, silky sheen of the book jacket that first enticed me to what it turned out to be the second-hand book store. If you could tell me what kind of paper they used, I would be most grateful. The sensation was so subtle, the ritual picture on the front of the book, which vividly would not have attracted me at the time, when I was more interested in reading about space aliens in *Alienware* or the *Immortal* history of Harley Davidson. But here was a postcard, upon some of the fine, clinging to the earth with its thousand branches. A message of love that filled the front cover of your book.

The book fits so nicely on my hands! I could hardly imagine anyone could part with it. But PLEASE don't think people are hooking your book as common fodder of second-hand bookstores. I am a frequenter of such venues and this is the first time I have seen *The Remarkable Bushes* - truly a rare find. When I grabbed it, I found I could have bought it for half its cover price. - \$100. Shameful really, and even worth the expensive paper, or the cost of shipping. It is a travesty, Mr. Pakenham, that such an important work is never out of the store where they sit. Even in the first few weeks I held *The Remarkable Bushes* in my hand, I could feel this book had been loved. Mr. Pakenham, beyond the inscription inside (which you've constrained to censure: "To Stephanie, a small piece of Africa for you to hold on to. I hope this reminds you of those Love Mice.")

She must have died, Mr. Pakenham, to part with a gift such as this. I can think of no other explanation. And I am grateful, otherwise I may have forever remained ignorant of the march of the bushah tree.

Just in case you are wondering, I myself am not in the habit of writing to writers, but you have to know what you have done.

Your front cover was a treat from Mars, a gracefully vented-alphabetized tree. A key man on a bushah grew such to the gurgling boom. It seemed that any second, one of the trees that the branches would swing down and lift the man up, something like inside for reasons yet. You must understand, I had never heard of, never seen a bushah. I didn't even see trees. I traveled on airplanes about life on the dark continent. Despite all this, the book was sacred to my hand.

I flipped pages looking for a reason to put it down, but each revealed more reasons to hold it tighter. Bushahs of every lineage materialize on some page even as an individual bushah meeting by one Mr. P. Pakenham, ultimately in the dark room - the bellows of which hold me to believe I have never really seen a sunset. The sun is not a sun, but a shadow. It is mine. I've never seen it. The sun, who knows what it might look like from another angle, who knows what I don't know. There must be a bushah beyond my world, so fantastic that if you had provided the photographs as evidence, I would not have believed the trees were real but a product of your unshakable imagination.

I couldn't put your book down so I took it to the counter and got down my money. Your book has ruined me, Mr. Pakenham.

You must know better than anyone what kind of logistical problem this poses to my life. You said that an encounter with the distribution bushah in South Africa was the "start of a dangerous love affair with bushahs." You said you "needed the old-centred of a world not to let them take over."

Well, Mr. Pakenham, would it not have been better for everybody if you had kept your dangerous bushah liaison to yourself instead of writing a book and spreading the contagion across the world?

When I picked up your book, I was already well on my way to my business degree, nearly done with my second of three years which certainly would have led to me eventually job as a financial analyst. I would have worked for two years and then come to think that one of the top jobs in the country, eventually rising to the upper echelon of the corporate ladder where my leadership skills would be called upon to oversee funds and operations and to finally manage even as the patriarch that I am. Instead, I sit in coffee shops, interrupted by pictures of bushahs, when I should be at my desk applying my Principles of Macroeconomics. But what could I tell my Friends, Ben and Justin, Josiah and Martin? How could I explain that I haven't prepared notes for my study group because, frankly, unimpeachably, I just don't care. How can I turn my mind to thoughts of national income distribution and monetary fiscal policies when there's a wooden elephant in the room?

This is an ordinary preoccupation. I fall asleep dreaming I am needed in the trunk of a bushah tree like the *Shambhala* you show dreaming after the hour, safeguarded by the cryptic and dark of the bushah trunk, a place for evildoers. I avoid dreaming I am reading for the bushah book, who also, dangling from the tree on some thread not two feet long. In my dream I want the avatars, think the juice from a bushah root, look in the shade of an insect. Only I can't reach the bushah, Mr. Pakenham.

Not from here.

Sincerely,  
Jacob J. MacKenney

Dear Mr. Pakenham,

I'd have you know I may well be flunking my exams because of your book, *The Remarkable Bushes*, which slipped into my hands two weeks before I entered the economics gemnasium where doc after doc create avenues of thought. Not unlike the great avenues of bushah after bushah to Madagascar great collection of trees surrounding the sun. How is it they pull so much weight out of the sun, when I, with everything I need to get out and drink and give, have not made nearly as much of what I have as the bushahs (coming from their little groves, providing sustenance where nothing else can, you are right) till the tree overtakeable, Mr. Pakenham.

I feel very small, Mr. Pakenham, in this large gemnasium. I am dwarfed by high ceilings, I don't among others. I see my friends across the sea of people, where they walk, worry and rush on their toes, and so all over lost. What does this mean? Even as I sit down to write my exams, I realize I don't think I'll be writing my life, or writing the book you show about the years go by. I want the bright blue, open sky. I want to walk hand-in-hand in the yellow sand among trees of bushahs.

But for now, my only hope of passing is the slight chance my professor will be impressed by my analysis of the principles of macroeconomics in relation to the bushah *Kenana* economy in *Kenaga*. Not exactly something we covered in class, but perhaps worth a few extra points, and certainly deserving bonus points for originality. At least, that is what I hope.

I am young but believe enough already to be worried about growing old the wrong way. Not all bushahs grow straight, all trees grow tall.

You said that when a bushah tree gets old enough it becomes hollow to help the secret of its age. And some bushahs live a thousand years, bearing witness to countless eras. In *Kenaga*, you showed a hollow tree where prisoners were chained inside before their trial. Like a hovel's wisp, with messages from prisoners past etched into grey, rotted bark, the bushah teaches prisoners to.

Prisoners like me.

I want to see a bushah, Mr. Pakenham.

Sincerely,  
Jacob J. MacKenney

Dear Mr. Pakenham,

After reading your book I began to notice something different around me. Not that anything had changed, just that I could finally see it.

I couldn't put your book down until I read it. I love it, really, although you say that's not the case. But it didn't matter, because I didn't even make it past the threshold of my parents' house before the single eye of the thick floor in my room, kept me there, awaiting my life. I felt I was walking straight through a vortex into another time, but the manufactured world. How had I walked by before, not noticing it there watching me my entire life, my older by far with bone-smooth skin, growing as I grew. My hands patted over the cold, damp tree. All the leaves were gone, cooled away, but even in this winter I felt life inside it.

I had assumed trees to be mere inanimate objects, decoration if you like, something to be maintained by gardeners and admired by ladies in botanical gardens. Here was one, so quietly alive and reaching for the sun as me.

I looked beyond the book for a moment and saw another, the Pacific shore fir, its scarlet bark etched with ancient, falling stories.

And so I continued to the bus stop, or more that by the time I got there the bus was long gone, and by the time I reached the university there was no point in attending the Principles of Macroeconomics class which was almost over, not when there were so many sleeping trees on campus that I had never really seen. Each one stepped me in my path, differently and steadily functioning. Before I might have almost unconsciously admitted the absurdity of a spirit or the fine materialization of a god's leg. Now I was I almost nothing except for the trees.

Not bushahs to be sure, but have you ever seen the western red cedars that grow 200 feet high, dwarfing your bushahs, Mr. Pakenham? Or the monkey puzzle tree, which seems to be a sphinxian monster of a thousand, prickly thorns, smokes, hanging down and reaching out, about to come to life?

I'm guessing they were always here, but how is it I never noticed?

Now I have a new problem. Walking down the street has become almost impossible. Collections are everywhere: the peeling stems of the cedars, the armadillo-like burber of the filix species, the bone-smooth birch, the deep grooves of the *Pandanus* pine.

I admit when I graduated high school with stellar math scores and an impressive score on a graduate test that had my own and the other times that someone who was wrong (right) there was nothing else I wanted to do. But that's because I wasn't aware there was anything else I could do. My nervous of the world, for 20 years (over since I was old enough), I'd heard how a career in finance was the pinnacle of success. I would be a player with the big bucks, king of the world and of men, which even now has its appeal because there is a plane ticket to Madagascar would be more pretty cool.

But there are other ways to Madagascar.

All it took was a field of bushahs reaching their twisted arms to the misshape sky and I was found.

My father doesn't appear of my new bushah world of biology and environmental studies but he doesn't know about it yet. By the time he finds out (hopefully not until graduation), I will have passed the point of no return, having not attended a business course for two years.

I can only hope that by then he will understand.

Yours truly,  
Jacob J. MacKenney

Dear Mr. Pakenham:

You have not responded to any of my letters. Never mind. This will be my last. What about the normal (supposed) bushah book that takes root in my mind growing into something strange and wonderful and you are responsible for that.

At first it was just the fact that fascinated me and drove me back to that second-hand book store where I bought every reasonable book on trees of the Pacific Northwest. While I was there, I collected covers and weighed business methods that were taking up valuable shelf space in my room. At the time I noticed the nearby space of books on flowers, and birds, and insects and mushrooms and such second series fascinating then. But I'd figured there's a library of books, books of the life that surrounds us, the life that sustains us, brings us up and keeps us whole.

As I walked home, again, something had changed. It was just the bushah that fascinated or the shape of the tree but the sense of the tree.

A truly wonderful thing, Mr. Pakenham. I can feel the trees, Mr. Pakenham.

I'm telling you, Mr. Pakenham, because there's no one else who would understand, not just yet. I tried to explain to my friend but just the simple thing about your wonderful book but it merged into a conversation about why he should not, under any circumstances, let my father know that I dropped all of my business classes. This he would understand, even if his mind I've never been after as a bushah. His eyes were full of questions, and then looking in the background, I saw just a hint of awe.

I'm not crazy, Mr. Pakenham. I'm just beginning to understand that in an magical world that inexplicably exists between bushes and monkey puzzles, anything is possible.

Some of the trees were healthy and robust, but others were plagued by pathogens, under attack by forces we hardly see. Rooted to the ground, they are trapped by the laws, reflected by shade, combined with or without, and still some overcome it all and grow to impossible heights.

Some days poison rain falls from the sky. Sometimes it can help their predicament by drenching an insular, suspicious tangle of struggling 's, but even then I'd be there for the 200 year life, the way we do.

I have no words to thank you, Mr. Pakenham. And if all because of your book, *The Remarkable Bushes*, I'm sorry not everyone knew your book as much as I do, that it doesn't always get the respect it deserves, because it is such a wonderful thing to explain the essence of the world like that and send it halfway around the globe to my bedroom.

Sincerely yours, Mr. Pakenham, I will go to Africa and touch a bushah. Then it will tell me all of its secrets, and perhaps yours too.

Yours truly,  
Jacob J. MacKenney

<sup>3</sup> *The Remarkable Bushes* is a book written by Thomas Pakenham.



NON-FICTION



## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

Small Lives: November, 2009  
Gwendolyn Chappell

My family lives on eighty acres of sand, much of it sculpted into dunes and hollows by the wind. All of the land is marginal. In an area where most of the soil is light and unsuitable for agriculture, our land is the sandiest and the hilliest, a fact in which we take great pride. But the sand hills are fragile, easily destroyed. On the road just north of our lane, the graders bulldozed their way through the highest hill on our land, leaving a cut bank on either side. Every year, the sides collapse a little more, exposing fresh cliffs for bank swallows to drill their nests. Strangers drive by, pausing long enough to shovel bucketfuls of the pure yellow sand into the backs of their trucks, perhaps for cement or their children's sandboxes, contributing to the collapse of the hill. And every year, a little more of nature's Aeolian sculpture is eroded.

not  
previous  
versions  
printer friendly

It would be easy to lose these hills. Only the vegetation – trembling aspen, chokecherry, wild rose, creeping juniper, bearberry, crocuses, buttercups, buffalo bean, native grasses – keeps the sand stabilized. On south facing slopes, cacti and ant colonies thrive. The lane to the house from the road is just a trail through the prairie, worn down with years of driving. We've considered building the lane higher, but it's a gamble: Would the grasses and shrubs secure the land before the wind redistributes the soil?

The stability of the land was among our concerns when we considered moving the chokecherry bushes in front of the walk-out basement of our two-story house. Ever since we moved in, twenty-one years ago, the chokecherries had been growing taller until they were the largest chokecherry bushes I've ever seen, about twenty feet high, big enough to be called trees instead of shrubs, at least by my prairie girl standards. The berries were mostly out of reach of earthbound humans, but the birds enjoyed them, and we enjoyed the black-capped chickadees and bohemian waxwings that feasted on the berries all winter. In summer, the trees sheltered birds' nests. For several years, we enjoyed the bright yellow "canaries" – gold finches or possibly yellow warblers – until the cats caught and killed one of the astonishingly beautiful creatures. I was disgruntled, wondering why the cats could catch and kill such a lovely songbird, yet could do nothing about the scores of mice who regularly invaded our home. I was somewhat consoled when bluebirds chose the chokecherry bushes to build their nest, and I really hoped the cats would focus more on mice and forget about the birds.

As the bushes grew taller, they not only shaded the basement level of the house but limited our view from the main floor deck. At night, the chokecherry trees were a mysterious, brooding presence filled with darker shadows and mysteries. More than once, as we drove up in my husband's truck and parked between the house and bushes, we glimpsed some small creature's movement in the headlights. On moonless nights, while walking the pitch-black path from the truck to the house, we'd peer blindly at the ground, fearful of encountering a porcupine or a skunk.

One night, we arrived home to find Gemma, our border collie, German shepherd, and lab mutt, barking and circling the bushes. Clearly, something was in there. Fortunately, the acrid stench of skunk was absent. Nervously, I took a flashlight and went to see what it was: a porcupine, twisting back and forth to present its quills to the dog. I was able to catch several glimpses of its brown eyes in its lighter brown face while it spun, surprisingly quickly, to keep its vulnerable head away from Gemma. It noted my presence, but identified Gemma as more dangerous. After a few moments, I was able to coax the dog into the house, where we counted the number of quills in the dog's muzzle – only twelve, this time, down from the record thirty-six – and made arrangements to take her to the vet to have them removed. Meanwhile, the porcupine waddled off into the dark as quickly as its ambling pace allowed.

More often, we'd encounter a toad unsuccessfully trying to hide in the stones of the walkway. We speculated that possibly it was drinking water from the dog's dish, or perhaps it had found a way to dig beneath the wood frame of the house into the earthen subbasement, living in the damp soil beneath the house. We'd leave the toad alone, wondering at its ability to survive in the sand hills; its ability to survive the hot, dry days; its repeated appearance as we drove up at night. We wondered how it survived the winter, and how it reproduced in this dry, porous land where, even after the heaviest downpour, the puddles disappeared within an hour or two.

However the toads were surviving, it seemed likely the chokecherry bushes and the cool moist shade underneath their branches had something to do with it, just as they provided food and refuge for the birds. So when we realized that renovations to the house would require rooting out the bushes, we hesitated. We were concerned about the wildlife, but our house was in desperate need of repair. The roof had been missing shingles for years; the twenty-five-year-old cedar siding – warped, dried, and brittle – was a definite fire hazard; the deck was falling away from the side of the house, and the floor of the deck was rotted through.

When I first noticed the deck getting soft, I warned my husband that the deck was rotting and need replacement. It was eight feet above the ground, so a fall could be dangerous. Unwilling to accept my evaluation without confirming evidence, he immediately went directly to the area I'd indicated and tested it by stepping on it. Now, you must understand that my husband is a large man – six feet two inches tall, well over two hundred pounds, with a size 11, triple E foot. But not even those snowshoes could keep him from falling through the rotten particle board of the deck. Fortunately, he only fell to his mid-calf before he was able to stop himself, suffering nothing more than a scraped shin and a bit of embarrassment. He admitted that perhaps I was right, the deck was getting soft in places.

The next time he went through the deck, I was folding clothes on the second floor, and our sixteen-year-old son Alex was playing computer games on the main floor. Suddenly, I heard a large crash. "All right, everybody?" I called, expecting a holler back with an explanation that Gemma or one of the cats had knocked over a flower pot or some such minor incident. Instead, silence. I hurried down the stairs and onto the deck in time to see Alex hauling his dad from a thigh deep hole in the deck. More scrapes, this time, and I imagine quite a bit more embarrassment.

I missed the next occasion – only Alex's enthusiastic report that "Dad fell through the deck again!" and an overturned chair guarding a new hole in the deck provided evidence of this episode. Alex had been underneath the deck, putting water in the dog's dish, when he was startled by the sudden appearance of his dad's foot plummeting towards him. Fortunately, neither son nor father was injured. After that, my husband never strayed from the plywood he laid over most of the deck, and constantly reminded the rest of us to stay on the plywood. Oddly, no one else ever fell through the deck.

Finally, reluctantly, we refinanced the house and found a work crew, and started the lengthy process of repairs, beginning with removing the rotting deck. But the workmen needed more room to bring in their equipment and we needed room to manoeuvre past the new stairs, so we decided, reluctantly, that the chokecherry trees would have to go. I was grateful that the bluebirds had found another location for their nest that year, and grateful, too, that it was already August, past breeding, so the nests, if any were in the bushes, would be empty.

And so the chokecherries were removed, along with another ten or twenty feet of the sand mound – calling it a hill would be an exaggeration – behind them. I agonized about moving the chokecherry trees, fearing I was making a mistake, that we'd regret their loss. Perhaps not only was I killing the trees, I would also be losing the land they had stabilized. I worried about our toad, our mysterious little visitor. I asked the workmen if they'd seen any sign of it, something hopping, perhaps a body, but they said "No." They even managed to look faintly concerned, as if the fate of one small wild creature, not even a mammal, mattered to them. Or perhaps they were more concerned about my sanity.

Today, though, my daughter and I found the flattened body of the toad, legs stretched behind it, caught in mid-stride by a tire on the little used bumpy lane on the far side of the embankment. We had been forced to use this approach when the workmen's equipment blocked the main lane. Somehow we'd caught the toad with the tire; probably my tire, my fault, because I'd driven there last. So the toad that had managed to survive years in this arid, fragile desert was undone by the destruction of the chokecherry trees and by a truck driving unexpectedly on a usually abandoned path.

Maybe it's not the same toad. Over the years, I've seen many perfect little toad shapes, sometimes on the gravel roads of the country, sometimes on the pavement of the city. But this time, because we removed the chokecherries, moved the hill back, transformed the landscape – this time, I felt responsible, aware that I demolished a habitat for my own gratification, for my own convenience, for the preservation of my house, inflicting my will on the landscape, and disregarding the small lives that depend on the chokecherry bushes and the habitat in general.

Perhaps the toad's death is not my fault. Perhaps someone else ran over it, or perhaps it died first and was later flattened by a vehicle. Perhaps it was not on its way to the house at all. Perhaps I am assuming responsibility for events beyond my control, beyond any human's control. But better to acknowledge the possibility, to note the passing of one small life, unremarkable in so many ways, just as our own lives are unremarkable in so many ways, but precious nonetheless.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

Where a tadpole breaks the skin of the water

Susan Lemprière

[next](#)  
[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

When the heat descends, my mother shuts the windows and draws the blinds mid-morning. She gets headaches, so she lies on the couch with a cold, wet facecloth over her forehead. Sometimes she covers her whole face and neck, like a shroud. She lies motionless and straight, and the rooms of the house echo silence. Except for the flies, which buzz and loop around the kitchen. All summer, my mother wages war on the flies. They have been crawling around in the manure pile, so we mustn't let them walk on our food or dishes. She hangs two flypaper strips, one at each end of the fluorescent light tubes above the kitchen table. I eat my sandwich of fish paste watching a fly trapped on the sticky tape. He is upside down, his back glued to the paper, arms and legs crazily punching the air, head straining upwards. He must be screaming in rage. One antennae is bent back, its black tip frozen in the glue. His wings are a crumpled mess. At first the dangling fly tapes are beautiful: glistening amber bands coiling down like garlands, swinging gently in the breeze of an opening door or passing body. But in a few days, they become cemeteries.

The pond across the road from our house is almost perfectly round, with edges that slope gently down to the water. Shrubby willows and dogwoods dot its edge. There is a little ribbon of trail through the bushes to the pond, a jumble of scratchy paw prints where animals bend down to drink. I lie beside the pond and listen. I hear rustles: a snake sliding through the grass toward the pond to catch a frog, a song sparrow brushing against the leaves of the willow. Splashes: a frog jumping off a floating leaf, a turtle sliding off its basking perch on the bank. Gurgles: a red-winged blackbird protesting from his perch in the elderberry bush. Whispers: the wind flowing, a cattail waving, a daisy stretching out a new petal, a frog wrapping his tongue around a fly, a goldfinch sitting down on her cup of eggs, a monarch caterpillar climbing up a milkweed stalk. I turn my head to see little rings sliding out from a pinpoint where a tadpole breaks the skin of the water.

The sun pours through the skin of my eyes to the back of my skull. The grass pokes my bare legs and arms, pricking through my T-shirt and shorts. The heat from above and the coolness from below meet in the middle of me, in the web of my bones. I see the bones of the dead cat in the ditch down the road, the hollow-eyed skull floating above the arch of ribs, the tail a string of delicate winged bones. One of our dozens of cats flung into the ditch by a passing truck. The bones of my father lying in his grave in the cemetery up the road. Would he still have bones after seven years in the ground? Or would he and the box they laid him in be dust now? Mixed with the soil and spread into the surrounding fields where the corn grows. Fed the lilacs at the back of the cemetery where I play with my brother.

In our house, time is constantly measured by the clocks my mother places in every room. As markers to keep her on the path of the day. It doesn't work. Six o'clock, suppertime. I fall asleep at the kitchen table, waiting. Ten o'clock: I wake up and the bright fluorescent light pierces my eyes; my mother is asleep on the couch and my brother has gone up to bed.

My mother chases time. Nine o'clock in the evening. All day my mother has been getting ready to go into town to the grocery store. Washing her underwear, hanging it out on the line, feeding the cats, counting the cats, rinsing the dishes, making lists, checking her clothes, checking the cats, rinsing the dishes, making lists... We get there ten minutes before the store closes and rush madly around trying to get everything we need.

Often, time goes by so slowly that I want to grab it and squeeze it into the width of a dime, like when my brother and I are waiting at school for my mother to pick us up and take us to the dentist. The janitor asks: Are you still here? When are your parents coming? I have to close up now. School was finished an hour ago! Or when it takes an hour to get to town because my mother is driving along our road at ten mph, whimpering about the patches of lethal black ice that the car could hit. How we could spin out of control and all die. When all my brother and I see on the road is patches of bare black pavement and snow.

I drag a metal rectangular tub from the driving shed around to the back porch. I make long trips to the pond across the road, hauling back pails of murky water containing the seeds of life. I scoop up water and plants and sediment. At first everything is jumbled up in a mush and I worry that I have killed everything. But order returns and my pond blossoms. Whirligig beetles turn in endless, dizzying circles on the surface. A caddisfly larva drags itself across the rock on the bottom, poking its head out its tubular house covered with shaggy brown plant bits. Ferocious insects with squashed bodies and big jaws crawl in the weeds. They will become blue dragonflies with lacy wings that patrol the pond and embrace, their bodies curving into the shape of a heart.

Then, one day, there is a row of tiny baby toads, delicate and glistening. Five of them, sitting on the plants lining the wall of the metal tub. One still has a tail stump from its tadpole days. I can already see the beginnings of toadness – little golden speckles pushing up into bumps. Not yet like Big Toad, who looks like her skin is bubbling. Whose old lady's skin feels soft and powdery when I gently pick her up to say hello. At first, I think Big Toad is their mother. But she lives under our back porch, far from the pond across the road which gave life to my pond. I am sure Big Toad would not make the journey around the side of our house guarded by cats, across the treacherous road rumbled with tractors, through the grassy field dotted with gaping groundhog holes. I am sure Big Toad spends her days in the little hollow her body has imprinted in the earth, underneath the back porch that vibrates with running feet and slamming screen door. Catching insects that carelessly wander in out of the sun.

I prop pieces of board against the edge of the tank to make a ramp for the baby toads, to help them off into the world. In a few days, they have all left.

I come out into a faded lilac evening to see my pond. A storm is coming; the air is heavy and soft. The wind is swaying the trees. I know that tomorrow morning the air will be clean and fresh after the storm, that my mother will delay sealing up the house. The rain will trickle off the roof, droplets will glisten on the window screens, and boughs of spires will arch to the ground. It is welcome, this first rain in over two weeks. The Earth is cracking, the plants drooping. Even the corn is starting to turn brown. Our well is almost dry so we cannot have our weekly bath, just a sponge wipe. And absolutely no using the washing machine. I don't mind because I love the imprint of outside on my skin. The smell of sun and grass. I wear the same shorts for weeks, only changing when we go to town. The souls of my feet are hardened like hooves from running around barefoot, toes splayed wide without the prison of shoes.

I peer down into my pond using a flashlight. I see a stick insect hiding in the rounded shadows of the plants. It holds something in its long pin arms, shifts its body slightly to the left, and releases it. The twisted corpse drifts slowly down to the bottom of the tub. A sleeping water strider wakes up and slides across the leaf onto the skin of the water. The stick insect, startled, floats down her stem and into the shadows. The water strider circles around the plants poking above the surface. I watch the life in my pond as the grey sky turns to black and stars sprinkle across the water. Until raindrops ping on the water, making it tremble, then on the back of my neck, making it tingle. I look up. The trees are flailing ghosts, clouds hide the stars, and many hours have passed.

I go down to the other pond back of our house. A stream winds through the field beside our house, down to the woods where it opens up into a pond, first soggy and full of plants and leeches, then deeper with a mirror surface. In the spring, the forest around glows with white trilliums, and white bloodroot that pokes out of leaves shaped like cupped hands. Close to the pond are clumps of ancient cedars with thick trunks and intertwining branches. In the winter, chickadees huddle in the branches against the piercing cold; once I find a dead one lying in the powdery snow, its body hard like a marble. But in the summer, it is cool. I lie down in the lap of the cedars, my cheek against the pillow of moss. The wave of time flows by. Sometimes I fall asleep and wake up feeling that absolutely no time at all has passed while I was away. I look around and see a crowd of plants, pond and sky, their details clear and bright. Other times, I wake up and look around and see empty, blurred shapes drained of life, and hunger gnaws at my stomach.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





Patience, Hope, and Other Deadly Virtues

Margaret Thompson

read previous contents online if you'd like

Grandma was a Primitive Methodist. As a child, I was oblivious to such distinctions, but when I did find out, and connected her with the graceless yellow brick chapel with its mean windows set too high and its plain wooden door shut firmly as a disapproving mouth, I understood at last why Sundays in her company had such a penitential quality.

In Grandma's eyes, Sunday was the day of rest, entombed in Biblical precedent. I am certain Jehovah deserved His day off no more than my grandmother did after caring for a husband and seven children, most of whom were farm workers who rose at dawn and came home with frightening appetites and filthy clothes, but I do wonder if boredom was His creation or hers. Church attendance, a quid pro quo for this one free day, became impossible for my grandmother, but the ghost of spiritual obligations lingered on, turning rest into an enforced idleness that was affliction for a seven-year-old. Grandma frowned on any activity that smacked of entertainment. In her company, nobody knitted or sewed; the radio was silent; novels and magazines stayed unopened. For my part, toys were put away, and even pencils and paper lay fallow.

There was no escape. Just as firmly as she believed that Sunday should be a kind of desert, she insisted that it was a day for the family to spend together, preferably as satellites orbiting her maternal sun. Consequently, I remember long hours of desultory conversation that fluttered above my head, somewhere in the region of the ticking of the clock, while I learned by heart the contents of my grandmother's room.

She had tuftets of dark brown leather like miniature ottomans, called pouffes – a misleadingly airy name, for they were uncomfortably hard. I would sit on one of these and stare into a china cabinet like a museum case which filled one corner. She had dainty porcelain cups and saucers with gold rims, and brass belts in the shape of crinolined ladies. There were faded sepia photographs in silver frames, one of my father, much younger, with hair. Pride of place went to a large shell festooned with brass wire twisted to resemble rope, and a shiny brass anchor. The shell was iridescent with mother of pearl, and I was fascinated by the voluptuous curves of its everted lips and its secret creamy depths. On rare occasions, I was permitted to hold this treasure and listen to the sea, and then I would clasp it to my ear, relishing its coolness against my skin as the distant surf sighed in my head.

Grandma had two large paintings, also. I didn't know anyone else who had actual paintings and felt a certain awe in the presence of Art. I would gaze from one to the other, trying to decide which was my favourite. They hung either side of the fireplace, forbiddingly symmetrical. Each portrayed the head and shoulders of a young woman; these ladies had abundant wavy hair in clouds about their faces, the sort of hair I knew instinctively would be called tresses, and which I recognize now as a pale Pre-Raphaelite imitation. They had complexions creamy as magnolia petals and soulful eyes which gazed off yearningly to their right. The one on the left, whom I preferred because she was a brunette and smouldered rather, was called Patience. The other, I remember, was Hope.

The only other diversion Grandma condoned was reading of a strictly improving nature. She gave me a book once which I did read, for I have always been omnivorous as far as the written word is concerned and could not be put off even by sanctimonious Victorian morality. I cannot remember a single word of it, not even the title, but I treasured it for a long time for reasons that would probably have scandalized her.

It was old, made in the days when bookbinding was an art. The pages had the thinnest gilt edging, so that the book seemed to be made of a solid gold bar when it was closed. It also had two coloured plates, one of a deep red rose, and one of a yellow rose, and these were covered by special pages of tissue paper. A silk ribbon attached to the spine served as a built-in bookmark. I enjoyed the smell of its leather binding, and the satiny gilt, and the reverential care with which one had to lift the tissue pages to reveal the roses, all purely sensual pleasures which were educational, but not necessarily improving.

These Sunday visits often culminated in tea. For some reason it was always summer and hot. We would sit around the table and eat thin bread and butter, the bread already at least a day old and drying. There was no hope of canned peaches or cake before the bread had been consumed. The only thing to wash it down was tea, which I did not enjoy. My grandmother's was especially grim as she had no refrigerator, and the milk from the little jug with its tiny bead-freighted cover would either slither into the cups in soft lumps like blood clots, or crack as soon as the hot tea hit it. No amount of stirring or surreptitious fishing expeditions with the spoon could eliminate the white flecks floating on the surface. The only compensation was Grandma's cups, which were square and intriguing. Deciding which part of the rim to drink from made an interesting diversion.

I was never quite sure why the Sunday afternoon car ride received my grandmother's seal of approval. Maybe her own life had become so circumscribed by that time that she adjusted her principles for the sake of variety. Even so, it was never a casual or relaxed affair, and certainly no fun.

After Sunday lunch, which was enormous – my aunt always seemed to be exempted from rest of any kind, I noticed – we would put on our Sunday best. For me this meant a dress, probably with a scratchy collar, and probably pink. My uncle, who looked comfortable wearing his butcher's apron or stumping about in gumboots inspecting his pigs, would appear in a dark suit with a waistcoat, throttled by a stiff collar, and stow everyone away in the big cars, from Grandma, square and solid in navy blue with a severe hat skewed to her head with a long silver hatpin, to my cousin's three small children, all younger than me. Four generations on the move; no wonder the outings took on the nature of ritual.

Armed with a large handbag and boxes of sweets, my aunt would be the last one in, and we would set off. In convoy, we would drive sedately on a circular tour of much of Norfolk and Cambridgeshire, not actually going anywhere, just covering the miles through the fens, through the yellow brick villages, past the dikes and cuts, past the endless fields of sugar beet, through the deserted sleepy market towns. The cars were always too hot and smelled of leather and vinyl, the telegraph poles looped past every few seconds, and nausea would begin its slow greasy climb into my mouth. At this point my aunt would open the box of candies, sugar-encrusted jellies in vivid colours with centres that oozed gummy and tasted of cheap perfume. To boredom I added my fear of being sick.

If God was on my side, we would stop somewhere so that I could reel out into the fresh air and recover a little. The usual reason for a halt was a picnic, which sounds like fun, but invariably the site chosen was not a lush meadow beneath noble trees, but a disused airfield. The area was full of them. During the war they had launched wave after wave of bombers on raids across the North Sea. Now they were abandoned and forlorn. The Quonset huts and hangars slowly sagged, and the runways crumbled, weeds shouldering their way between the cracks. Here we perched uncomfortably among gorse bushes on frail folding stools or deck chairs and consumed dry sandwiches and cake, metallic tea out of Thermoses, or bright orange pop. Ants and wasps converged on us, and sand mysteriously penetrated sandwich fillings and stuck to the raisins in the heavy fruit cake.

Then it was back to the cars, hermetically sealed in the sun, and the interminable return. Orange pop and fruit cake rolled in my stomach, and the ghost of the jelly sweets fought queasily for control with the smell of vinyl upholstery and exhaust. By the time we got back, I would be green.

Looking back on those distant Sundays, I am amazed how absolute my grandmother's power was. It was easy to explain during her life: she was always the ruler of her household rather than my grandfather, whom I remember as a tiny old man with a white moustache, sitting by the fire holding out a Fry's chocolate bar to my four-year-old self. Dutiful sons and daughters saw to her comfort and gave consideration to her wishes and preferences and ignored their own as a matter of course. By the time she died at the age of ninety-six, still as sharp as the proverbial tack, this behaviour was so ingrained as to preclude even the thought of any alternative. For years after her death, the ritual car rides persisted; the long shadow of her Puritanism still darkened the Sunday wastelands of ennui and distress.

I am a grandmother myself now, but not, I think, in her mould. Grandma has become a shadow figure existing only in the memories of a ruthlessly diminishing group of my older relatives. Yet I sense her survival in my habit of completing the distasteful task before tackling the enjoyable one, in my bewildered reaction to the modern assumption that everything should be fun and easy, in a certain critical asperity, backhandedly in my desertion of organized religion, and in my horror of imposing on others. With hindsight, I can see that those distant Sundays with Grandma when boredom settled on me like dust contained the sort of life-lesson that marks the divide between child and adult. She taught me very early to identify with the soulful yearning of Patience. Hope was always an also-ran.





REVIEWS



## the fieldstone review

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)

*A Crowbar in the Buddhist Garden: Writing from Prison* by Stephen Reid

Kelley Tish Baker

[previous](#)  
[contents](#)  
[printer friendly](#)

*A Crowbar in the Buddhist Garden: Writing from Prison*. Stephen Reid.  
Saskatoon: Thistle-down Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-927068-03-8. List  
Price \$ 18.65.

Stephen Reid is a man who struggles to feel at home in the world. Early in this slim volume of essays reflecting on his life as one of Canada's most notorious — and notoriously recidivist — criminals, he describes himself as being plagued with "a sense that I am as separate from this world as a switchblade knife."

Small wonder; most of Reid's sixty-three years have been spent in some of the toughest maximum security prisons in Canada and the US, and much of that time has been spent in solitary confinement. Even when not physically removed from society, it seems Reid could at best only occupy its margins. He has endured a childhood of sexual abuse; all-consuming addictions to morphine, heroin, and cocaine; and a fugitive existence of assumed identities and always looking over your shoulder.

The bulk of Reid's criminal activity was carried out in the 1970s and '80s when he was part of the infamous Stopwatch Gang, the most successful bank robbers in North American history. The three-member team were so dubbed because they were able to pull off precision bank and armoured vehicle heists in under two minutes — the stopwatch one of them would wear around his neck a reminder to keep things moving. They prided themselves on never firing a shot or harming a single bank patron or employee. All told, the gang stole about \$15 million dollars, racked up nine escapes, and made the Most Wanted list in two countries.

Currently Reid is serving his third life sentence, for a cocaine-fuelled solo hold-up gone wrong in Victoria in 1999. Desperate to pay back a \$90,000 drug debt due the next day, Reid's attempt was a cock-up from its drug-addled conception to its ignominious denouement in the apartment of a senior couple he'd taken hostage. As he notes wryly (one of many surprising flashes of humour), he spent four and a half minutes in the bank, "long enough to apply for a loan." This latest incarceration is surely the hardest to bear. It comes after thirteen years of "a publicly redeemed life," which saw Reid become a father and work and volunteer in various capacities for prisoner rehabilitation and reintegration.

In the prologue, Reid looks over the dark, frigid waters of the Juan de Fuca Strait off Vancouver Island, his view from the rocky peninsula that is the site of the William Head Institute. He tells us the area was where the pre-contact Scia'new would send wrongdoers, not to punish them but so they could "find a new direction." This question of the purpose of incarceration — is it to pay a debt to society or to find a way back into it? — is one Reid will loop back to periodically throughout the eighteen essays, but always with a light touch. He's never polemical and never self-pitying. Indeed, he declares he's not looking for sympathy, "not even from myself."

What he is looking for is a way to take full moral responsibility for his crime, but in a way that goes beyond merely accepting culpability. Reid wants nothing less than full restoration, no matter the price: "I am determined to go wherever I have to go, to take it as deep as it is deep, to do whatever it is I have to do to become whole, to never commit another offence, to never again get addicted." It is this painful and courageous journey to which we are privileged to bear witness, in spare, philosophical, and often disturbing prose. Over eighteen essays, most of them brief, Reid brings his incisive intelligence to such topics as the paucity of quality prison literature in Canada, the brutality of the US prisoner transfer system, the salvation of prison libraries, and the accounts of wrecked lives he hears while in the Intensive Therapy Violent Offender Program.

The heart of the book, and its longest essay, is simply titled "Junkie." It is a devastating account of the double betrayal of innocence perpetrated on Reid by the local doctor of the small Ontario town he grew up in. For years, starting when Reid was 11, the doctor would ply him with shots of morphine and then abuse him. At 14, Reid finally left town. But the psychological effects of his defilement and "the lie that the key to the gates of paradise was a filled syringe" would haunt him for decades to come.

Not once does Reid blame his criminality on his scarred childhood and the addictions it bred. Nor does he feign ignorance that there is any link:

Prisons are about addictions. Most prisoners are casualties of their own habits. They have all created victims — sometimes in cruel and callous ways — but almost to a man they have first practised that cruelty on themselves. Prison provides the loneliness that fuels addiction. It is the slaughterhouse for addicts, and all are eventually delivered to its gates.

Surprisingly, Reid's opinion of Corrections Canada is somewhat positive — though one wonders if the book was written taking into account the Harper government's recent transformative and retrogressive omnibus crime bill. He commends initiatives on Aboriginal inmates' culture, prisoners' voting rights, behaviour therapy, and library programs. No doubt compared to the US system, Canada's comes off as eminently enlightened. Yet the old tension between the proper role of "corrections" is still apparent, witness this absurdity: a young Native offender Reid knows wanted to make financial restitution to his victim but was turned down by Corrections Canada because there is no official process to do so without a court order.

Although the word "Buddhist" is in the title, the specific references to Buddhism are few and fleeting in the book. But it's clear that Reid has benefited from more than a passing acquaintanceship with the Buddha's teachings on equanimity — the ability to find emotional balance no matter what your internal or external milieus — as the only true path to freedom.

The epilogue finds Reid once again on that rocky peninsula. He recounts some of the more memorable escape attempts into the powerful Pacific Ocean below him, many ingenious, all of them unsuccessful. Then he describes the October day he was raking leaves in the prison garden when he came across something half-buried: "a small dirt-and-rust encrusted crowbar." Holding it, he realizes the tool is from the most recent escape attempt, a few years previous. It had been smuggled in, used to pry open the wire fence of the exercise yard, then tossed to where it lay until Reid found it. After a moment of hesitation, Reid decides to bury it. Over time the spot becomes his refuge, a place he can "cultivate a vacuum, a place of stillness and safety where nothing moves and no one gets hurt." It turns out the only true escape is internal.

[home](#) [current issue](#) [past issues](#) [events](#) [editors](#) [contributors](#) [submissions](#) [contact](#) [links](#)





CONTRIBUTORS



1. **Introduction**  
The purpose of this document is to provide a comprehensive overview of the project's objectives, scope, and deliverables. It serves as a guide for all stakeholders involved in the project.

2. **Objectives**  
The primary objectives of this project are to develop a robust system that meets the needs of our users and to ensure that the system is scalable and secure.

3. **Scope**  
The scope of the project includes the design, development, testing, and deployment of the system. It also includes the documentation of the system and the training of users.

4. **Deliverables**  
The deliverables of the project are the system software, the user manual, and the training materials. These deliverables will be provided to the client upon completion of the project.

5. **Timeline**  
The project is scheduled to start on [start date] and is expected to be completed by [end date]. The timeline is subject to change based on the progress of the project.

6. **Resources**  
The resources required for the project include a team of developers, testers, and project managers. The project budget is estimated to be [budget amount].

7. **Risks**  
The risks associated with the project include the possibility of delays, budget overruns, and the failure to meet the project objectives. These risks will be monitored and managed throughout the project.

8. **Conclusion**  
This document provides a clear and concise overview of the project. It is intended to be used as a reference for all project-related activities.

