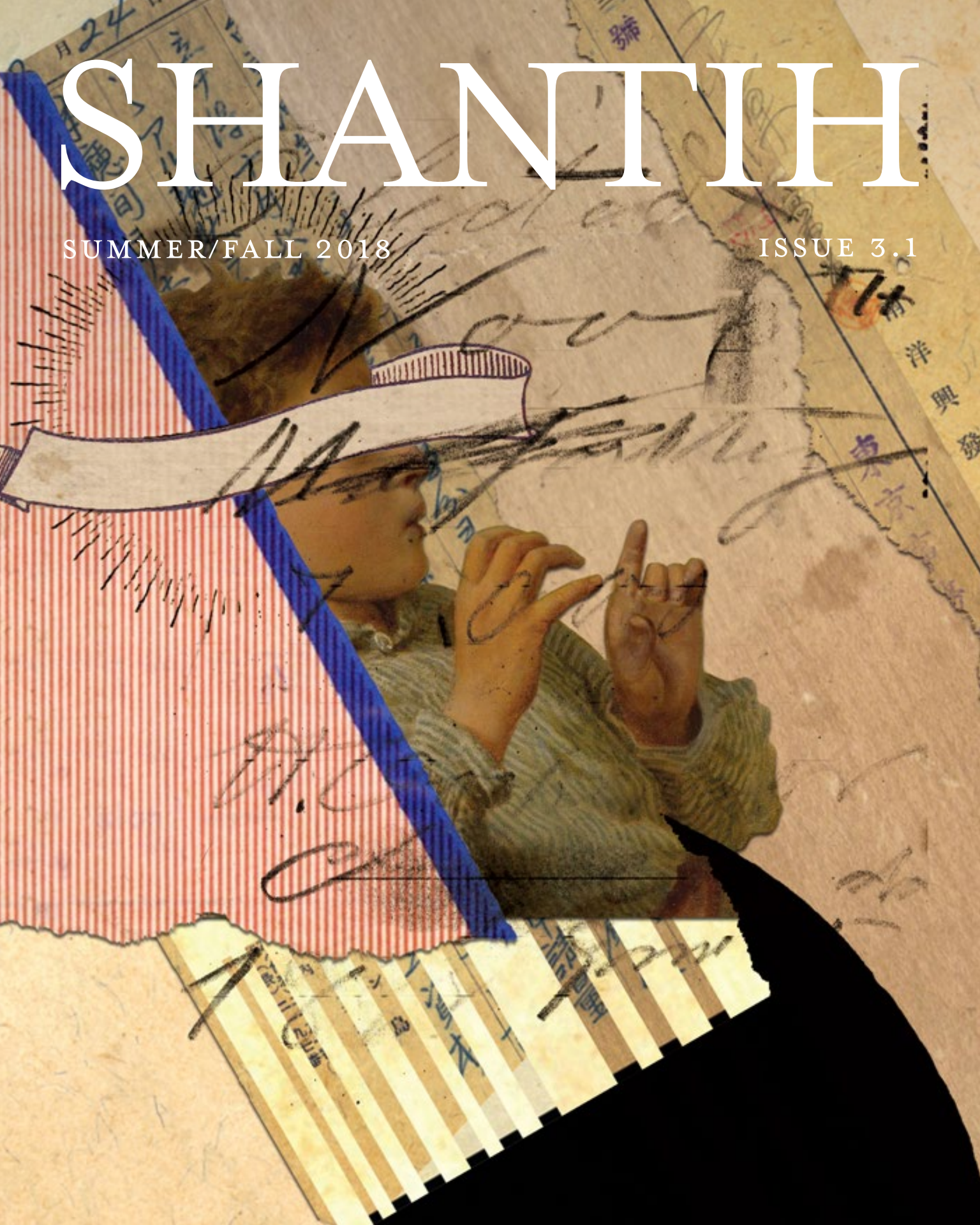


SHANTIH

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OUT OF NOWHERE

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ANDREW MILLER

Amorphous, black and white, twice the size of a broad-brimmed hat, the specter hovered several inches above the ground, rotated like an airport beacon. It wobbled along the forest edge, brushed aside bracken ferns, floated over granite outcrops, slid past stumps, paused as if to sniff and taste. Then it swerved toward the grape arbor, began to suck up mushrooms, worms, grubs, and salamanders, made an odd, murmur-murmur, chirp-chirp noise like a raft of baby chicks caught in ebb tide. The apparition changed course again, trembled, spun toward our house. What if this thing oozed into the crawl space, took up residence beneath our bedroom, sought spiders and centipedes, muttered and twittered all through the night?

Kathryn leaned forward, squinted through the dim light.

“What in hell is that?”

When the phantom cloud first appeared, blue jays ceased their chatter, a pair of grey squirrels quit their gossiping and fled. All we could hear was the somber hoot-hoot of a faraway barred owl, the distant lamentations of a dove.

As we watched, a mother skunk ushered her brood on an exploratory odyssey through our garden and yard. The kits stuck to mom like rivets. The black and white surfeit was so tight we couldn't tell whether it contained six or seven. We strained our necks, took pictures, and when the sun slipped beneath the horizon and we were certain that the skunk family wasn't headed for the crawlspace, we went inside.

I had just settled on the couch and opened a book when Kathryn called from the kitchen.

“Better check the have-a-hart trap. I think you've caught a skunk.”

I had forgotten about the mainstay of my low-tech arsenal to rid the property of red and gray squirrels. These creatures have a penchant for cultivated strawberries, and later in the season, concord grapes. Although my friends had told me otherwise, I had much success with this method and had relocated about a dozen in the last couple of weeks. The mini-prison was less

than shoebox-sized, just right for squirrels, too large for mice, too small for raccoons and cats. I knew that mother skunk wouldn't fit, but the wire box could accommodate one of her squirrel-sized babies. While not as ominous as *The Blob* or *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, this could be serious. No one wants to get between mother and young, especially not *Mephitis mephitis*.

I needed to proceed with caution. Chemical weaponry might be deployed. I grabbed a flashlight and slipped outside.

Charles Darwin, in *Voyage of the Beagle*, reported that skunks feared 'neither dog nor man,' and their smell could be perceived at one league (about three and a half miles). These mammals have the perfect defensive weapon and are well-advertised with eye-catching black and white stripes. Their chemical blast doesn't kill but leaves such a searing memory that repeat encounters are rare. Forty million years of natural selection produced a mammalian group that is docile and self-assured, confident that their chemical arsenal is just a tail snap away. These animals are not aggressive and make good pets. Why bother with claws and teeth when it's possible to knock out an adversary from ten feet?

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Does an overpowering arsenal, well-advertised, act as a deterrent in such a way that future generations evolve to be insouciant? Kenneth Waltz, author of *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better*, said yes. He noted that the world has enjoyed more years of world peace (lack of a major war) since 1945 than was known in the entire 20th century. That was the year that the United States dropped a pair of atomic bombs on Japan. There have been notable close calls and accidents, some due to mechanical failures, some not. Regardless, the consequences of launching a nuclear missile with many times the destructive force of an atomic bomb are inconceivable. By comparison, effects of sending in troops with conventional weapons, waging cyber skirmishes, or tightening economic nooses are minor. Heads of state can be stupid, evil, petty, but like most of us they tend to do things only when think they can get away with them. When a skunk is alarmed it flexes his tail; when a chief is challenged, he puffs up and struts his nuclear buttons.

Once outside, I realized that as Kathryn suspected, one baby was trapped inside. But the others—my pulse quickened, my knees trembled—swarmed all over the trap, sniffing, chirping, clawing at the wire mesh. My only option was to slide the metal door open and free the little guy without delay. Easy enough with a red squirrel in full sunlight, but skunk extraction in dim light under the watchful eyes of mother and siblings could be dicey.

The challenge was to remove baby without any chance of misguided chemical retaliation from an anxious Mom. The solution was simple: figure out a way to lure the family away, then while they were otherwise occupied, release Junior from Have-A-Heart Jail. I asked Kathryn to spread peanut butter on a handful of crackers. Being careful not to make any sudden moves, I arranged the pile of skunk-attractors on a spruce stump some distance away.

Once the bait was in place, they abandoned the imprisoned one and dashed to the stump. I crept back to baby, dropped to my knees. But when skunk family heard me fiddling with the metal door, they returned en masse. They didn't just sit on their haunches and watch me struggle with the hasp, they gyrated around my ankles, climbed over my legs, nibbled my pants, nosed my hands and arms. Heart pounding, knowing Kathryn would never tire of retelling this story if my plan went south, I pressed on, managed to snap open the door. Baby jumped out, and amidst much chirping and murmuring, rejoined his family. Relieved, I took a step back, watched them touch noses and exchange licks. Being careful not to make noise, I eased toward the house.

I was half way to the deck when my wife called, "You've got company!"

I stopped, looked down. The entire family was at my feet. They nosed my ankles, rubbed against my pant legs, scooted back and forth over my shoes. I was the pied-piper of skunks. Had they imprinted on me, would they stick with me forever like ducks did with Konrad Lorenz? They swirled around my ankles until I reached the deck, then scampered back to the crackers. A few minutes later, mother and young drifted into the forest.

We never saw another rotating disk of skunks. I often think of them, marvel at

how natural selection shaped their defenses and behavior. Our visitors were as sociable and curious as a basketful of kittens. It appears that humanity, now replete with nuclear weapons, has not risen to the level of the skunk. Of course, from an evolutionary standpoint, they've had an enormous head start.

No matter, I remain an optimist. Although we humans have ups and downs, our trajectory is skyward.

END

AUTHORS



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Andrew Miller retired from a career that included university teaching and research in endangered species and aquatic habitat restoration. Now he has time to pursue his long-held interest in creative writing. Recent work has appeared in: *Literally Stories*, *Foliolate Oak Literary Magazine*, *The Fair Observer*, *Gravel: A Literary Journal*, *Fiction on the Web*, and *Microfiction Monday Magazine*.



KELLY NEAL

Kelly Neal lives, teaches, and writes in central Texas. He received degrees in literature from the University of Texas, and the Bread Loaf School of English. After 25 years of only sharing his poetry with a small sampling of friends, he has had poems published over the last couple of years by *The Axe Factory*, *A Liberation*, *roguepoetry* review 2015, *figrootpress*, and *Viewfinder Literary Magazine*. Kelly is currently finishing a project based upon the tarot, "Arcana," with his sister Donna Neal, a digital artist and painter.



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James B. Nicola's poems have appeared stateside in the *Antioch*, *Southwest and Atlanta Reviews*, *Rattle*, *Tar River*, and *Poetry East*, and in many journals in Europe and Canada. He is the featured poet in the current issue of *Westward Quarterly*, having once received the same honor from *New Formalist*. A Yale graduate, he won a Dana Literary Award, a Willow Review award, a People's Choice award (from *Storyteller*), and four Pushcart nominations. His nonfiction book, *Playing the Audience*, won a Choice award. His poetry collections are *Manhattan Plaza* (2014), *Stage to Page: Poems from the Theater* (2016), *Wind in the Cave* (2017), and *Out of Nothing: Poems of Art and Artists* (2018).



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Vivian Faith Prescott was born and raised in Wrangell, a community on a small island in southeast Alaska. She lives in Wrangell at her family's fishcamp. She has an MFA from the University of Alaska and a Ph.D. in Cross Cultural Studies from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Cirque*, *Yellow Medicine Review* and elsewhere. She is the author of a full-length poetry collection *The Hide of My Tongue* (Plain View Press) and four chapbooks.



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Maggie Rosen lives in Silver Spring, Maryland. Her poems have been published in *Little Patuxent Review*, *Waccamaw*, *Cider Press Review*, *RiverLit*, *Blood Lotus*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Barely South*, and *Conclave*, among other publications. Her chapbook, *The Deliberate Speed of Ghosts*, was published in 2016 by Red Bird Chapbooks. See more at maggierosen.com.