Stonecrop Review

A JOURNAL OF URBAN NATURE WRITING, ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

ISSUE 3: SKY

CONTRIBUTORS

Writers & Editors

Naomi Racz

Holly McKelvey

Stephenie Frederick

Kate Harrison

Padmini Krishnan

Ivana Svobodová

Lin Rose

Nadia Mikail

Susan Fuchtman

Joanna Brichetto

Jennifer Clark

Simone Martel

Lynette S. Hoag

Jon Stone

Swati Singh

Lew Forester

Kerenza Ryan

Marc Nieson

Photographers & Artists

Serge Lecomte

Felix Mataitis

Rana Voss

Jessi Eoin

Roger Camp

Holly McKelvey

Sky Cover Images

Untitled (front cover) and *What do the pilots in the sky do on the coldest mornings of July?* (back cover) by Felix Mataitis

SOCIAL MEDIA @stonecrop.review
CONTACT stonecrop.review@gmail.com
WEBSITE www.stonecropreview.com

A Note from the Editors

When we settled on the theme "Sky" for Issue 3, we had no idea that the world was heading toward a pandemic. As we chose the final line up and the lockdown restrictions intensified, many of the pieces you see here seemed to speak to the times, perhaps none more so than Kate Harrison's "Slivers." In her short nonfiction piece, we are taken on a tour of her flat and of the three slivers of sky it offers views of. Just three slivers, yet each sliver is intimately known and cherished. Many of our readers will have spent the majority of the last two months at home and glimpses of the sky—and the light that it casts— have been a source of comfort and of connection to the wider world.

Meanwhile, many disabled and chronically ill folks have been reminding us that lockdown is what their lives have always looked like. We're honoured to have another piece by illustrator Jessi Eoin ("Morning Stream"), showing us how a disabled artist can remain connected to nature from home. And Kerenza Ryan's nonfiction piece—"Hope in the Dark"—about her experience with schizophrenia and the role that urban stargazing played in her recovery puts our current experience in perspective: *When you are locked up, truly locked up, every chance you get to see the sky—real or not—you cherish.*

We received many submissions about sunrises and sunsets, but we found ourselves shying away from those themes. Perhaps the metaphors inherent in them are simply too played out at this point. Instead, we were drawn to pieces about the night sky. Kerenza Ryan's piece finds company with poems and nonfiction pieces about light pollution, the moon landing, and an encounter with grief and hope on a starry mountainside.

Our winged friends also feature, and, as Emily Dickenson famously wrote: *"Hope" is the thing with feathers.* Perhaps that is the feeling, more than anything, that I would like readers to take away from this issue: hope. Hope in the stars, hope in the clouds, hope in the connection that this pandemic, counter-intuitively, has fostered.

Happy reading!

Naomi Racz | Editor

“

Over the course of Stonecrop Review's first two issues, we included stories, art and photography on a broad range of urban nature topics and inserted a themed section in the middle: “Overgrown” in the first issue, and “Roots/Routes” in the second. This time, after seeing what a rich selection of themed submissions we received for the first two issues, we decided to theme the entire third issue: “Sky”. This decision was made months ago, long before we'd even finished Issue 2; we of course had no idea that a global pandemic would be waiting for us in 2020, which would completely reframe the context in which this issue would be read. And yet the pieces shared here resonate unexpectedly powerfully in this strange new reality. The sky, as Naomi has so beautifully conveyed in her editor's letter, has provided a vital link between our homes, where many of us are and have been during lockdown, and the outside world; together, the pieces in this issue offer a powerful ode to those slivers of sky we've been glimpsing from our windows.

I'd like to use this space to cast especial light on the visuals in this issue. Serge Lecomte's paintings whisk us upwards and invite us to imagine flight; Felix Mataitis' photo essay reminds us of the powerful beauty of urban skies and the way that light plays in them throughout the day. Meanwhile, Rana Voss' Illustrations capture a world in which birds rule empty streets—a reality for many cities during the past few months, as people have stayed home and nature has crept into urban spaces. Jessi Eoin's “Morning Stream” reminds us of how we can maintain a connection to nature while working from home (and has inspired me to obtain a few more houseplants!). Roger Camp's photograph of street art in Yerevan, Armenia, meanwhile, offers a juxtaposition of the whimsical (a “Stairway to the Sky”) with the mundane (an air conditioning unit), capturing the tension of imagination and reality.

What feels especially powerful about these visuals is that although people are absent from them, we nevertheless see strong narratives of human lives, for instance in the computer and artwork on Jessi's desk, or in the discarded television upon which Rana's dove perches. While the absence of people echoes the views we've had from our windows or our walks in past months, as urban streets have been disconcertingly empty, it is also an important reminder to look for the threads of human narrative woven through these spaces—and an invitation to look skyward.

In adding my own touches of artwork to the pages of this issue, I tried to remain true to this theme; scenes that are largely devoid of people, yet which tell human stories, capture human landscapes, and look up. A red chaise lounge chair looks out at Chicago high rises and over Lake Michigan in Lynette S. Hoag's “The Polychromatic Sky”. Bats flit through suburban skies above the hum of insects in “Same Bat-Time” by Joanna Brichetto. In Jon Stone's “The Castle of Ayre”, clouds take form fleetingly to paint shapes of crumbling fortresses. And as a young boy floats in an empty pool in Marc Nieson's “Moonstruck”, we follow his gaze upwards, moonwards.

So as you peruse the following pages, I invite you to look both for echoes of your own experience during the pandemic in the last months, to find those narratives that are carrying us through this—and, most importantly, to look out and up.

Enjoy.

Holly McKelvey | Illustrator

STONECROP REVIEW

ISSUE 3: SKY

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READERS CORNER

Slivers

Kate Harrison

Kate Harrison is an editor based in London, UK. She is from Letchworth, the world's first garden city, a place built on the principles of bringing the best aspects of town and country, urban and nature, together. This is her first piece of personal nonfiction.

The flat that we live in contains three slivers of sky. Each sliver is no bigger than my outstretched hand.

I wake up to the sliver in my bedroom, which contains the crowns of two sycamore trees: one young sycamore with straight branches, pruned and looked after by the neighbour, the other, tall and gnarly, covered in ivy.

This sliver determines the speed of the day—blue sky and it's up and out, or, at the right time of year, staying down to bask in the warm rays flooding in. Grey and it's slow. Grey, my school art teacher told me, isn't a colour. When you take enough time to really look, a grey cloud is purple, red, yellow, blue. I try to remember this on days when the grey feels heavy.

Twice I've been fortunate enough to see a V of geese cross this bedroom sliver, making their way to the wetlands that lie on the other side of the railway line—the railway line that lies underneath this view and sends up a soft rumble every fifteen minutes. Planes cut above too. Once, I passed

through this sliver myself, on a flight, and caught a glimpse of our tiny patch from above.

The murmur of trains and planes is pierced by the squawks of parakeets, the tweeting of sparrows and tits, the occasional wren song, the shrill of swifts in the summer, and the wild repertoire of starlings. My favourite bird sound is the tuneless chatter of goldfinches; they flit by without ever landing—tiny, busy and raucous.

Morning ablutions take place under the bathroom sliver, with the gnarly sycamore. If I'm up early enough, I'm joined by a wood pigeon who sits on a branch of the old tree. Magpies, squirrels, great tits and blue tits join the pigeon in the tall canopy. This is the best sliver to see the sunrise, especially in the winter when the sun sits low and deepens the colours in the sky.

The final sliver is the smallest, a thumbnail visible from the west-facing window in the lounge. This sliver, surrounded by the tall buildings across the road, is most tantalising when it's burning orange from the setting sun. Sometimes I think every resident in the city should have the right to an unbroken view of the sunset, the same way it should be easy for every person to get to a park or be among trees.

Our neighbour tells us she bought her flat ten years ago, when there was a view over the marshes and the sky stretched right across to Essex. Since then, flats have gone up between our houses and the railway line, closing off the horizon from our windows. Two of those flats now lie empty, their own slivers of sky left unseen.

A Parched City

Padmini Krishnan

Padmini Krishnan writes free verse poetry, haiku, haibun and short stories. Her works have appeared in *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, *Breadcrumbs*, *Bleached Butterfly*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Wales Haiku Journal*, *The Heron's Nest* and others.

Tiny droplets sneak

out of the dark sky,

giving hope to thousands

in the city of drought.

I look out of my balcony,

my parched tongue caressing

my dry lips.

The trickling drops of water

miss my lips only to tease

the cracked earth below.

The sky changes its intentions,

pushes back dark clouds

and brings forth its white and blue colours.

I catch the gaze of a tiny sparrow

who squeaks faintly and disappears

behind the thirsty branches.

One Umbrella & Braving the Storm

RIGHT: *One Umbrella*

NEXT PAGE, LEFT: *Braving the Storm*

Serge Lecomte

Serge Lecomte was born in Belgium. He came to the States where he spent his teens in South Philly and then Brooklyn. After graduating from Tilden HS, he worked for New York Life Insurance Company. He joined the Medical Corps in the Air Force and was sent to Selma, Alabama during the civil rights movement. There he was a crewmember on helicopter rescue. He received a B.A. in Russian Studies from the University of Alabama, and earned an M.A. and Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University in Russian Literature with a minor in French Literature. He worked as a Green Beret language instructor at Fort Bragg, NC from 1975-78. In 1988 he received a B.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Spanish Literature. He worked as a language teacher at the University of Alaska (1978-1997).

He was the poetry editor for Paper Radio for several years. He worked as a house builder, pipefitter, orderly in a hospital, gardener, landscaper, driller for an assaying company, bartender in one of Fairbanks' worst bars, and other jobs. He resided on the Kenai Peninsula, Alaska for 15 years and recently moved to Bellingham, WA.

Traces

Ivana Svobodová

Ivana Svobodová lives near Olomouc, Czech Republic, where she studied English and Dutch. She writes poems and short stories while working as a freelance translator and an English teacher. She enjoys hiking, travelling, and wood-carving – her most ambitious project has been a puppet armadillo made of limewood.

The streets follow

the curves and whims of the dried out creek

as they flow towards the square.

The town hall tower

is a lost child in a large green hat.

It waits awkwardly

under the scaffolding;

its dark roof beams

a secret forest lying low

under the winter clouds.

The sand beneath the pavement

still calls to the river, mussels, and reeds;

the chessboard of the car park

remembers the voices, the shuffle of feet

in the long-gone synagogue.

The brick walls

with teeth full of weeds and nests,

withdraw to let the town grow, run,

and tickle the sky with aerials, comb it with wires.

Until next time,

when a new creek decides to follow

the curves and whims of the old streets,

and the forest creeps back

through the town that lets it grow, run,

and reach up towards the cheers of jays.

Under the Dome

Lin Rose

Lin Rose is a writer near Seattle, happily retired and eager to inform, entertain, and inspire. She's been published in 2019 *Beautiful Cadaver Project Pittsburgh Anthology* (women over 40 write on aging), and in *Shooter Literary Magazine*, published in the UK.

It was midday on Christmas Eve and my heavy breathing broke Mt. Rainier's frosty silence as I kicked steps in the crusted snow. The loaded pack on my back slowed me down. Udo, my German shepherd, ran circles around me—*Can't you go a little faster?* I made a mental note to get him saddlebags.

Widowed at twenty-nine, I still found holidays unbearable, even though it had been three years since the car wreck that killed my husband. The bustle of frantic shoppers, saccharine music, colored lights, and strained gaiety overwhelmed me. Seattle, compared to San Francisco, Chicago, or New York, is pretty mellow, with all its parks and evergreens offsetting concrete and glass. But you still can't see the night sky for all the lights bouncing off the low ceiling of cloud cover. The suffocating effect was just too much for me. I resolved to find a private sense of meaning for the season, something more spiritual. Mt. Rainier towered on the skyline and was only a short drive south of the city, so I packed my car, put Udo in the back, and headed out.

Half a day of slogging steeply upward through snow brought me to a spot above the tree line. Relieved to have kicked the last of many steps, I dropped my pack onto the frozen surface and leveled a platform for my tent. As I unfolded the tent poles, the 14,000-foot volcano towered above me, its summit obscured by the hunched shoulder of an enormous sloping snowfield. How could such a massive pile of snow and ice remain frozen like this when its interior was bubbling, boiling, molten rock? In the numbness of grief after Jim's death, in the

meaninglessness of trying to return to regular living, I too seemed frozen on the outside, roiling on the inside. Dormant. But wanting to come back to life.

I sat in the tent's doorway and gazed at a small patch of wind-blasted alpine firs, while water came to a boil on my tiny stove. All was silent except for the hissing *phfft phftt phftt* of the flame, whose heat contrasted sharply with the cold air on my cheeks. My senses were in overdrive, creating an internal focus that made my presence on the mountain feel enormous, like being the center of the universe. But when my attention shifted beyond my body to the snowfield that sloped above me into limitless space, I felt dwarfed. I was merely a speck, nothing more than a gnat caught in the spider's web of Creation. Yet, somewhere between these two extremes, I felt in sync with something larger than the rudderless self that had my full attention back home. Here, each moment felt meaningful, and my agitated mind quieted to a natural contentment. Being alive was purpose enough.

A gray camp-robber jay interrupted my reverie with two beats of its wings as it departed a branch behind me. I watched it glide gracefully to tree tops below. My dinner of blanched broccoli, carrots, and water chestnuts with sliced turkey and a chunk of cranberry jelly was minutes away. I loved that the cool temperatures of snow camping made carrying fresh food possible.

The temperature began to drop as dusk approached, changing the rustle of my clothing from crisp to brittle. When I lit my candle lantern and hung it from a loop in the ceiling, it made the tent's blue nylon glow. I turned off the stove and splashed a little hot water into Udo's bowl of dog food. Bubbling pot in hand, I ducked under the dome and zipped the door shut behind me.

Sitting cross-legged on my fluffy down sleeping bag, I lifted the pot's lid, flipped it over to serve as a plate,

and dropped an herbal tea bag into the cooking water to turn it into a hot drink. A steamy cloud of fragrance enveloped me as I savored every bite of my dinner and listened to Udo crunching on his dog food. Deep satisfaction swept over me and my heart filled with peace. This was the sense of aliveness I had come for.

When I pulled back the tent's door flap, I saw that disappearing daylight had left an amber and green afterglow that hovered above the horizon's sawtooth peaks. Udo slid inside on his belly and curled up beside me, his long legs tucked beneath him. Our body heat quickly warmed the tent's small space and made it cozy. I stroked his velvety ears and the shiny black saddle of his back, then pulled out my journal to capture the day's highlights.

The descent of darkness reminded me that one of the pleasures of camping out is surrendering to the rhythm of nature—going to bed at dusk, waking up at dawn, being attuned to circadian cycles. But before bed, Udo and I both needed a quick break outside. I strapped on my headlamp and fleece hat, cinched my parka's padded hood around my face, and unzipped the tent door.

A blazing full moon, and its reflection off the snow, hit me full in the face. I certainly didn't need my headlamp. As I emerged from my tent's dome into the much larger dome of dark sky pulsing with uncountable stars, I felt like a butterfly leaving its chrysalis. All along the horizon the sky's blackness collided with glimmering whiteness.

Udo ran ahead up the slope, prancing with delight. *Woof woof woof!* His barks faded into the silence without an echo. I grabbed my ice axe and crunched along behind him, gaping at the beauty around me. A carpet of clouds below the mountain was dotted with pools of city lights.

When I turned and looked back at my tent, the glowing dome against a backdrop of tall, skinny firs made my breath catch. I wished Jim could share this wondrous sight. I wanted to hold his hand or encircle his waist with my arm. But in the stillness I realized that I was enough. I could see, do, and be, all on my own. My loneliness had shifted. Though companionship would always be welcome, I would no longer feel obliged to turn to someone else to validate my experience. Tragedy was not the end of hope. Loss of one life was inspiring intensification of another. Though life had shown me its temporary side, it was now letting me touch the place deep inside that doesn't change.

A new confidence traveled back with me to the city. Seattle's gray cloud cover would never be the same—now that I knew what was above it.

Photo Collection

Felix Mataitis

Felix is a Uruguayan photographer and film student from Montevideo.

His photography focuses on the everyday moments. Mainly devoted to street photography in his country, Félix continues looking for a critical view of society and the beauty of people in their wild states, all with his 12xp Zenit analog camera.

ABOVE: *Untitled*

NEXT PAGE: *What do the pilots in the sky do on the coldest mornings of July?*

ABOVE: *Untitled*

NEXT PAGE: *Untitled*

Inside the secretive Pigeon Party

Nadia Mikail

Nadia is a full-time law student at King's College London and a part-time investigative journalist of avian corruption. Experiencing the wonders of London's grey mornings and steady drizzle for the first time, she misses the warmth of the Sarawakian sun more and more each day.

2020-02-28, Fowl News

6 p.m., a typical Wednesday, the busy, bustling neighbourhood of Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Tired humans stare ahead into nothingness as they trudge home from work. A band of pigeons swoops into an alleyway behind the temple, the last rays of golden light warm on their beaks and feathers. The humans pay no mind to the squawks, the coos, and the hisses that make up the meeting.

It could be any group of birds to them. It could be a flutter of sparrows, a chattering of starlings, or a murder of crows, but it is not. This group is made up of compact, short-necked, fleshy pigeons of various breeds that have flown in from all over the country. Silent and soft-feathered, they gather in a great crowd that darkens the sky above the alleyway. They settle onto telephone lines, pillars and barbed wire, and begin their meeting.

What is this group? Opinion is divided. Rumour has it that the pigeons are part of a cult that engages in private, grotesque sacrificial rituals. Slightly more serious speculators believe that it is a shadow government, whose decisions influence the entire community without any of us knowing. Flight traffic, our world's resources, disputes about territory: it is said that the Pigeon Party makes the final call on all of these issues, and more. How much influence does it have on Malaysia's birds?

In a rare interview, a source close to the party, spotted swooping from a pigeon meeting last Wednesday, laughed and said, "There is no such

thing." When pressed, he ruffled his feathers indignantly: "I won't entertain any such ridiculous allegations; they're simply untrue. There is no such insidious power at work." Yet why are outsiders not allowed to join this Pigeon Party? Why is there no media attention on these meetings? Why are sharp-eyed and vicious security pigeons standing over the perimeter of the alleyway?

A zebra dove, who declined to be named for this article, has researched the gathering for most of her life. "The pigeons who take part in this meeting," she said, "influence the way the country works. They have great resources because of their contact with humans, and they use delicacies—the fattest grubs, the rarest berries—as bribes to make things go their way." Her feet trembled slightly as she leaned forward to get the gravity of this matter across. "As they're unelected by us, they're exempt from criticism. The decisions of our world are not made by the leaders we elected. It's time we finally realise this."

These are serious allegations. Out of fear of retribution, our source says she will not attach her name to them until they are proven.

In the meantime, look up at the sky on a Wednesday night. You'll see a swoop of grey feathers, and then the dazzle of the setting sun will blind you slightly. When you can see again, the sky will be dusky, gentle pinks blending into soft blues, and the pigeons will be congregating.

Rana Voss

Rana Manele Voss is a young illustrator based in Kiel, Germany. Currently she studies communication design. While studying fashion design (Hochschule Hannover and Birmingham City University), she found her way into illustration and art through a short-term course called "drawing and visualisation" at the VIA University College in Viborg, Denmark.

Illustration — Rana Voss

Counting

Susan Fuchtman

Susan Fuchtman writes poetry, memoir, and short stories, with recent and forthcoming work in *Stonecrop Review*, *Flights*, *Punchnel's*, and *Plume*. She currently resides in Chicago, Illinois.

I live up, where birds fly,
and see them as they wing

their light bodies from tree
to ledge to swaying cattail

beside the road. Did you hear
about their dying?

Shiny skyscrapers, cats, cities'
encroachment over 50

years and now—25% fewer
birds. Each North American

has lost something like
24 birds in that time. I

didn't notice. It's so hard
to notice something

missing. Even time slips
through our hands like rope,

and we count it so carefully.

Same Bat-Time

Joanna Brichetto

Joanna Brichetto is a naturalist in Nashville, the hackberry-tree capital of the world. Her essays have appeared in *Brevity, Fourth Genre*, *Hippocampus*, *The Hopper*, *Flyway*, *The Common*, *City Creatures*, *The Fourth River* and other journals. She writes about everyday natural wonders amid everyday habitat loss at SidewalkNature.com and @Jo_Brichetto (Instagram).

[Nashville]

If our boy is tucked in and the sky is dry, I can ease outside ahead of the bats. They skate above the hackberries at dusk, replacing chimney swifts as if by agreement. After birds evaporate (where do they go?), two or three bats appear (where do they come from?). They loop, are joined by more bats—six, usually—and trawl lower, lower, louder; although loud is hardly the right word. Is there a term for "approaching audibility?" Through Interstate roar, street noise and heat-pump condensers, I listen for wing flaps and especially, miraculously, the *chatter*—the faintest of quick clicks, like hamster nibbles from a cage in the next room. It's echolocation, as per kindergarten science, and *I can hear it*.

"Only children and women under a certain age can hear any of the frequencies," said the bat biologist at the park program last fall, "and only three species in our area would be audible to the naked ear."

My naked ear is 50 years old. What is the "certain age" at which I go deaf to this new music? Why did I not know till now to walk outside and be still, to listen? Do other people listen? Will they listen to me if I tell them?

This must be how missionaries feel. I have good news and it is urgent.

I had never even *seen* backyard bats till recently. For over two decades my family was clueless to the existence of Little Brown (*Myotis lucifugus*) and Big Brown bats (*Eptesicus fuscus*) in our .22 acre plot. How is this possible?

In our defense, mosquitos are what flushed us indoors by dusk—Nashville has its fair share year 'round. If the Little Browns had bagged a few hundred more per night, might we have lingered long enough to notice we had *flying mammals*?

Big Browns are beetle specialists. They prefer the June bugs that thwack the window screens of lighted rooms. On one of my first Bat Watches, I heard what sounded like hailstones hitting the metal roof of the porch, but only every minute or so. Next morning, I walked the roof to find the cause: May beetle corpses, *with the middles missing*. Is the belly of a May beetle the exact size of a Big Brown bite, or do bats only aim for the meaty part and ignore the ends? Sometimes I find detached *elytra*, the lovely name for beetle wing covers, which look a lot like unlovely cockroach eggs.

I wish bats ate my cockroaches.

Our two bat species adapt pretty well to human landscape. Others aren't as lucky, but you might already know this. You might already know bats are vulnerable to habitat loss, white-nose syndrome, pesticides, herbicides, turbines, artificial lighting, outdoor cats, and climate change; as well as to fearful folk like our Aunt Bobbie who smacked a bat to death in her bedroom rather than let it exit the window it entered.

Bat Watch is a folding lawn chair next to the shed. The shed, I hope, bounces bat sound to me via however much reflection plywood affords. I fantasize about borrowing a detector like the one at the bat program. It let us see *and* hear calls, and identify species. I've identified my backyard hunters based on behavior and size, but would love to know for absolute sure. And I'd love to hear what my ears miss.

Before the sky blends to black, I see what I can't always hear. *So* much flapping. I try not to compare them to Count von Count's bouncing bat buddies on Sesame Street, but am helpless to this early memory. In real life, a hand-wing—*chiroptera*—may not look particularly efficient while in use. Bats can't glide like birds: they have to flap to stay up. Of course, the biomechanics of bat flight are fabulously efficient and complex, and I can't begin to understand the diagrams and descriptions. I do know that when a bat dips, it means dinner, because flight is interrupted when the tail membrane scoops an insect forward and up. It's like a slowpitch softball lob, but aimed at the pitcher's own mouth, and with a bug.

I'm grateful to see bats dip and rise, but bat noise is what I crave. The sounds are a limited time offer. My ears could age out of the frequencies tomorrow and the calendar of competing noises is against me. Early spring is best: no window air conditioner nextdoor, no insect song. Every year I wait for the first feeble crickets of spring, then summer's first cicada buzzsaw and katydid chorus. I still love those sounds, but now I hope for a delay—another night or two with any chance to hear bats.

Watched or not, the six bats glean our sky, and then loop above neighbors' trees: more hackberries, elm, ash, maple. Big Browns live an average of 19

years, which means the bats I see now could be kids of parents I didn't see when we moved in.

But bats in general have been here since before these fencerow trees,

since before the streetcar line,

before Federal troops marched to the Rebel redoubt up the hill,

before hunters found the salt lick by the Cumberland River,

before People.

How many .22 acre lots in this suburban grid do these particular bats—these right-now bats—scribe, sweep, simultaneous? Different yards, but "same bat-time, same bat-channel." Do my neighbors tune in? Who else looks up? Who listens? You can't love something you don't know. You can't help something you don't know.

I like to imagine the bats know me. I'm the one who grows evening primrose and moonvine to attract night pollinators, and who doesn't cut the grass till fleabane is finished. I'm the one who cannot figure where these bats sleep in warm weather or cold and who wishes for a hollow snag or at least a bat box. I'm the one who never uses outside lights; who never sprays the yard, trees, garden, eaves, or anything with poison. I'm the big, warm, breathy insect-magnet who hopes a bat will skate right here past her chair, past her hungry, human ears.

I'm the one who wants to help bats. I am the one who is helped by bats.

#

Neighborhood pig roast at confluence of Parkwood and Rose

Jennifer Clark

Jennifer Clark's most recent poetry collection, *A Beginner's Guide to Heaven*, was released in 2019 by Unsolicited Press. Her two other collections, *Johnny Appleseed: The Slice and Times of John Chapman* and *Necessary Clearings* are published by Shabda Press. She lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Her website is jenniferclarkkzoo.com.

The road closed, children gallop down an asphalt river as grownups splash chairs here and there, like colorful stepping stones.

Our spot is two skips from the Greens' old house—the Hertells' now, not far from where our neighbors who run the bridal shop—*Don't dress like her. Dress like YOU!*—sit under the shade of a maple.

The neighbors inquire about the mannequin, Gladys. (They can park their cars in the garage again, now that Gladys and her sisters are gone.) They seem pleased to know she is well. As for the wedding business, they say, it's the slow season: brides-to-be slumber in late summer.

I return to my stone on the street and talk with Jenn, Ken, John, Jen, Patti, and Greg. We laugh and drink beer, balancing pork and pasta on paper plates, daylight seeping away as the sun heads to bed, dragging behind it a blackberry sky.

Night opens and everything is clear: the shape of us formed by the same light, each carried by one stream, deposited here, where the same old stars that brambled about 15,000 years ago as woolly mammoths thundered across tundra still poke their shiny noses into conversations between neighbors.

Eventually, we wind our way home. My husband tosses his keys on the counter and turns on the TV. I go back outside and find Gladys on the patio, grooming hope in the dark.

I'm almost all here, she whispers. *Nothing stays buried forever.*

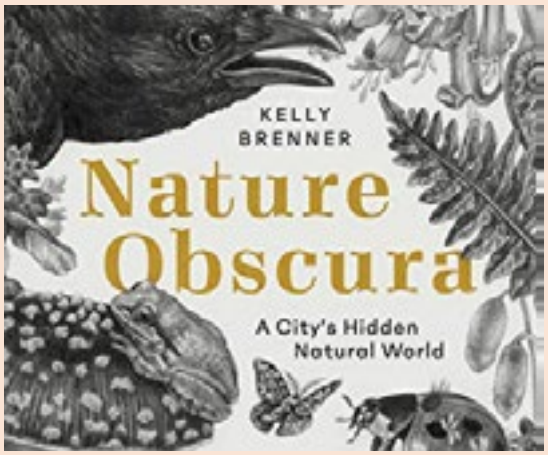
Tonight, we'll have our fill of sky.

Nature Obscura:

A City's Hidden Natural World

by Kelly Brenner

Reviewed by Naomi Racz



In *Nature Obscura*, naturalist Kelly Brenner is our guide to Seattle's animals, plants, and fungi during the four seasons. What sets *Nature Obscura* apart from other urban nature guides and diaries is the unusual array of species that Brenner explores. As she writes in the introduction, while exploring a pile of pond algae in a park she had a realisation: *Here was a challenge to unearth and discover more about the arcane natural history of cities far beyond rats and pigeons*. As fond as I am of reading about urban rats and pigeons, it was a refreshing change to learn more about tardigrades, muskrats, sticklebacks, moon snails, and *Cordyceps*.

It was also a pleasure spending time with Brenner, whose fascination with the overlooked and unloved is endearing. I found myself smiling when I read lines such as, *I happen to have a particular fondness for barnacles*. I appreciated that Brenner uses scientific terminology. In just one passage, for example, we encounter the terms *cryptobiosis*, *anhydrobiosis, cryobiosis*, and *anoxybiosis*, yet Brenner makes these terms feel accessible.

Nature Obscura has a final chapter with tips for budding urban naturalists: *Becoming an urban naturalist requires very little besides the senses you already possess. Perhaps the most important are simple curiosity and a sense of wonder.* Brenner certainly embodies that simple curiosity and sense of wonder and she makes an excellent guide to Seattle's urban wilds.

Readers Corner

Green Sanctuary

A Review of Rumer Godden's An Episode of Sparrows

Simone Martel

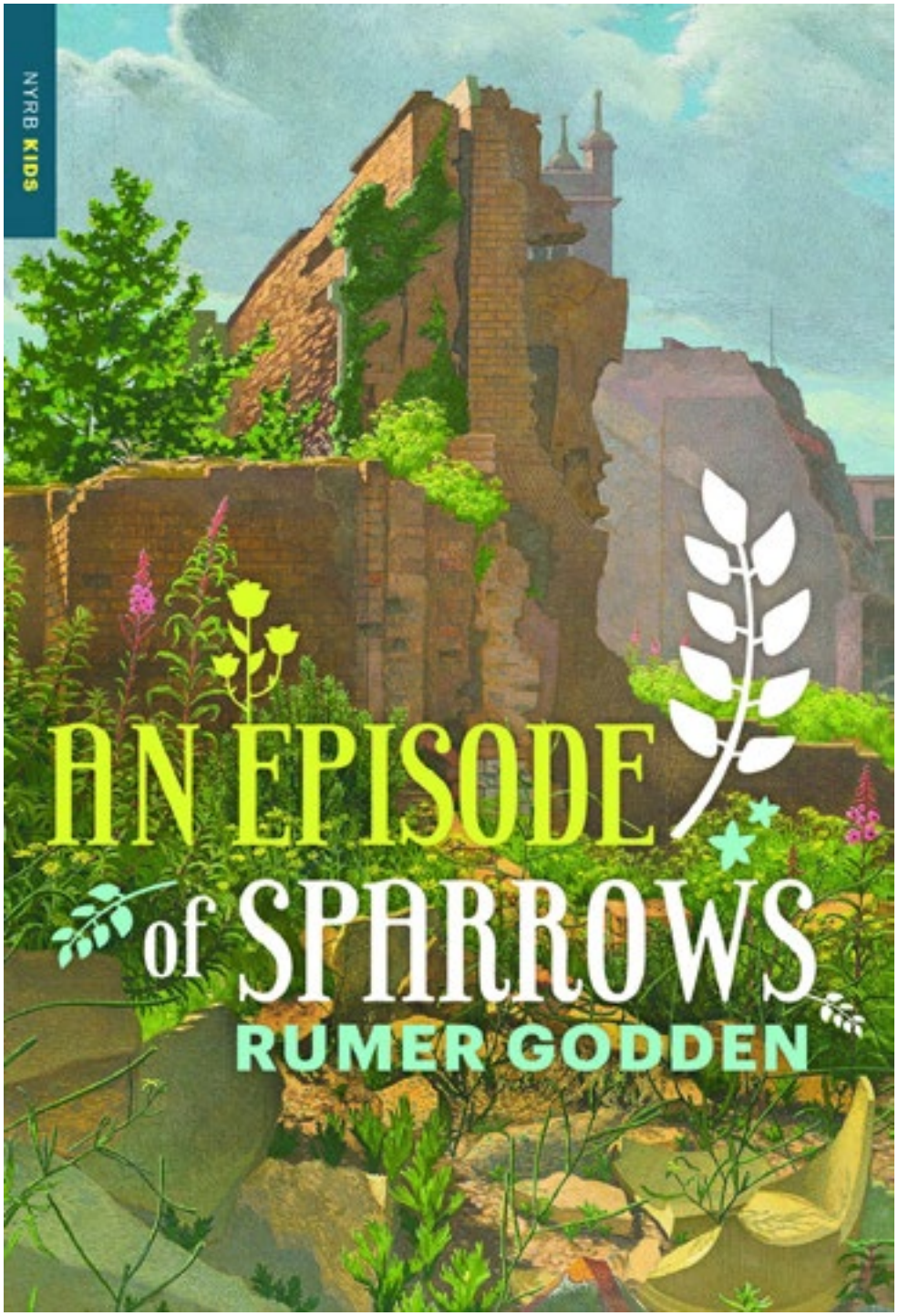
Simone Martel is the author of a novel, *A Cat Came Back*, a memoir, *The Expectant Gardener,* and a story collection, *Exile's Garden*. After studying English at U.C. Berkeley, Simone operated an organic tomato farm in the Central Valley, near Stockton. She's working on a new novel based on that experience.

When I first read Rumer Godden's *An Episode of Sparrows*, it wasn't considered a novel for children. It was just a novel. My mom was a librarian at the Oakland Public Library, and I would go with her to work on Saturdays and pluck from the shelf any book that looked interesting to me. The cover of the 1955 Viking edition, with its vulnerable but plucky pink roses behind a formidable wrought iron gate, must have intrigued me.

What I remembered of *An Episode of Sparrows*, before re-reading the book recently, was a story about a little girl creating a garden in a bombed out part of postwar London. In that rough, gritty neighborhood, the little girl tries to make something beautiful. The fact that she worked on her own and that no grownup knew about her garden particularly appealed to me. I remembered that the girl—I'd forgotten her name—hides her garden in a cleared patch of dirt and rubble and that she plants her garden from stolen packets of seeds. I also remembered that a gang of rough boys finds the garden and destroys it.

Because I grew up in Berkeley, California, I associated the creation and destruction of a garden with the stories I'd heard of the drama at People's Park in the late '60s. According to my parents, we were so close to the action that I was teargassed on my way to nursery school. I don't recall that, but I do remember hearing about how students and other volunteers made a garden—with flowers, grass and a play area—on an empty lot, and how, without warning, Governor Reagan ordered the garden razed and fenced off from the people who had planted it.

Gardens are particularly precious in an urban environment, and particularly vulnerable, I learned.



My new copy of *An Episode of Sparrows*—the title refers to the London street children, the "sparrows," — was reissued by the New York Review of Books as part of their children's book series, though I still don't think of it as a children's book. After all, Rumer Godden takes many points of view, hopping into the heads of adults as well as children. The new cover features a girl holding pansies.

Since reading the book as a child, I've become a gardener myself, so when I read *An Episode of Sparrows* again I identified with Lovejoy (that's her name) in a new way. To garden is to invite heartache and doubt. Will the seeds grow in the hard, chalky city dirt? Lovejoy hurts her fingers trying to dig with them, then bends a kitchen fork, before buying a garden fork at a pawn shop. I understood

her frustration with cheap tools, poor soil, and lack of rain. I also understood her happiness when she first sees the fuzz of green sprouting in her garden, surrounded by all that London gray.

What I had forgotten in the decades since I first read the book is that after the boys destroy Lovejoy's garden, she makes a new one in an abandoned graveyard behind a church. And one of the street boys helps her do it.

Lovejoy and the boy, Tip, arrange broken bits of gravestones, marking out beds and paths, and creating what they call an Italian Garden. Over time, they plant flowers (including pansies), grass and, eventually, a tiny standard rose. However, not much is growing in that derelict place when they start, though there is a vase with a green plant curled around it. Lovejoy knows so little about green things that she doesn't recognize the plant as ivy, but she appreciates that it is a survivor.

When I began to carve out a garden in my backyard, wild onions and blackberry vines grew there, as well as a few survivors: a California pepper tree that must predate the house, and an old single-petaled pink rose, planted, perhaps, in 1914 when the house was new, and still here despite decades of renters.

I've added a lot to my urban plot: I've dug a pond, and I've planted fruit trees and flowers. Because it's in a city, the water in the pond attracts skunks and possums. Raccoons rip up the water plants sometimes. Deer get in once in a while and eat rosebuds. That irritates me, but I don't mind sharing the cherries with the mocking birds that are building a nest on top of the pergola. Dragonflies hover over the pond looking for mosquito larvae; butterflies lay eggs in the fennel.

The first time I read *An Episode of Sparrows*, I actually threw the book to the floor when I read about the street boys stomping out the bombsite garden. Then, when my fury died down, I picked up the book and read on. Lovejoy, too, is devastated by her loss, but her garden in the bombsite was always at risk. "It was a silly place to make one," says Tip.

Then, though I'd forgotten this, Tip takes Lovejoy to the yard behind the church. When Lovejoy looks around this new, secret space: "She could see already that this was a much better place for a garden. Protected by the church, it would be safe. Lovejoy had never heard the word 'sanctuary' but she knew she had found a safe place."

As a child reading *An Episode of Sparrows*, I identified with the little girl searching for her secret place, a place where she can feel hidden and safe, though she—and her garden—may not be safe at all. Reading it again as an adult, I realized that I'm no longer looking for a safe place. In my backyard I've created my own sanctuary, a place that I share with other creatures.

Morning Stream

Jessi Eoin

Jessi Eoin is an illustrator making fat- and disabled-positive art in the occupied Lenape lands known as Brooklyn, New York. They like to create detailed pieces with traditional mediums that emphasize the naturalness and positivity of both fatness and disability. You can find more of their work at jbeoin.com.

The Polychromatic Sky

Lynette S. Hoag

Lynette S. Hoag is a freelance writer, lawyer, wife, mother and stepmother. She is married to an adrenaline junkie engineer. Together they parent his son and daughter and share one creative, energetic son, cat and Goldendoodle. She lives, loves and laughs in the eclectic, diverse community of Oak Park, Illinois.

I was born under an early-spring, country sky and spent the first eighteen years of my life living on a dirt road in the countryside of low southwest Michigan. Not just any dirt road, an official Natural Beauty Road, a road that represented outstanding native features the state wished to preserve. My dirt road had blueberry bushes, apple trees, fields of wildflowers, train tracks and long stretches of swampy woodland.

This area of low southwest Michigan is called the 'fruit belt' by its inhabitants and occasionally, politicians, but by virtually no one else. It is proud, American farm country, miles from the nearest city. Nothing obscures your view of the harvest sky, dazzling sunsets, steadfast moonrises and flocks of migratory birds in flight. At night, you can see millions of stars and the milky way with the naked eye. After eighteen years, I couldn't wait to leave it behind. I couldn't wait to trade in simple country views for a complicated urban skyscape, to trade the quiet dirt roads for the hustle and bustle of the city. Every move I made after high school was calculated to escape the country for Carl Sandburg's City of Big Shoulders: Chicago, Illinois.

When I graduated from the University of Michigan Law School, I had an incalculable number of fantasies about what my life would be like once I began to practice law in Chicago: upwardly mobile, Gen X, black girl flights of fancy. When I wasn't perusing tedious law books, I was daydreaming and scheming wistful plans for my future. Solitary country hours spent planting and weeding vegetable gardens, and wandering wildflower

fields and nature centers had honed my skill for weaving fantasies. Mind you, none of my fantasies were about practicing law with grumpy old white men day in and day out. My fantasies were about my life outside of the office. My unique fantasies were of the professional-woman-at-play type, before that idea was portrayed by TV shows like *Ally McBeal* or *Sex and the City*.

In my imagination, I would come home after a long day at work, kick off my pumps and open my single-girl fridge. There, I would find only champagne, caviar and camembert. Working long hours would limit my grocery shopping excursions to the upscale grocer located between the office and my apartment. Attired in a silk house robe, and heeled house shoes with pink feathers across the toe, I'd chat with family and friends while sitting on a red chaise lounge, idly twirling the phone cord.

"The judge granted my motion!" or "I won my first jury trial," I'd exclaim, fresh off a victorious day.

Chief among my fantasies was the desire to live in a high-rise apartment. In this fantasy, I would begin each day by peeling back the curtains of my perfectly appointed accommodations. Eye level with the birds, I would gaze out at majestic skyscrapers, glinting in the rising sun; the green-gray waters of Lake Michigan; and the indigo sky.

Not surprisingly, many of my fantasies remained just that, including my desire to live in a high-rise that looked out over the city. My first apartment in Chicago was located on Wellington Avenue, north of the city, in a low-rise building. It was a tiny, efficient, two-room rectangle, with a single window

that looked out on another apartment building. It was affordable, utilities included; and it was walking distance from the bus stop and a grocery store. A fantasy view of the skyline from my living room would have to wait three years. When I got the chance to move from the low-rise to a high-rise closer to The Loop, I was almost as excited as I was to leave the country for the city.

When the landlord opened the door of my future apartment in a high-rise on Clark Street, I could see sunlight pouring in from the enormous windows. A few steps into the apartment I could see the John Hancock building, the magnificent Chicago skyline and Lake Michigan. I took the apartment. It was on the 29th floor of a high-rise with 30 floors. My dream of waking to see the Chicago skyline and Lake Michigan every morning, eye level with the birds, was a reality at last.

The first night in my new, unfurnished apartment, I sat on the floor, attired in flannel pajamas, my feet bare, and ate a salad. Gone were my fantasies of uncomfortable silk under things, feathered high-heeled shoes and caviar for dinner. I looked out of the curtainless windows: down at the night city, and up to the night sky. Light from the stars was subsumed by the dazzling lights of the city and the moon overhead. Muffled sounds from the streets below rose to my window. The city lights and skyline at night were stunning from 29 stories in the air. The dirt road of my former country self was conclusively behind me.

That summer, I discovered that the Fourth of July fireworks were visible along the skyline of the western suburbs for hours after dark. I could see them from the roof of the building and from the window in my bedroom. I watched until the last bombastic volley subsided. In August of the same summer, I watched the Blue Angels perform a flyover as part of the annual Air and Water Show, without craning my neck. The fighter jets were easily visible from the comfort of my air-conditioned apartment. However, in the late fall and winter months, my windows to the world of the city were literally in the clouds. For weeks nothing was visible but heavy gray mists.

Nelson Algren, a renowned Chicago author, penned this about the town: "Chicago is an October sort of city even in spring." This is more than a poetic metaphor. It is a basic fact of Chicago weather. The first spring in my high-rise apartment, I discovered that though it was May, the view from my window was the same as it was in October: cloudy, misty grayness. I was unhappy to learn that for more than half the year, neither the sky nor the lake was visible from my vantage point in the air. And when the sky was visible, it wasn't blue. The gray foggy clouds of the late fall, remaining in the air until early spring, made the summer exceptional. For it was only in the summertime that I could enjoy an unobscured view of the blue Chicago sky and the city's numerous tall buildings.

I lived in that high-rise apartment on the 29th floor until I met my future husband. Remember my upwardly mobile, Gen X, black girl flights of fancy? A meet-cute was included in my imaginary city life. It was standard fare in the 1990s. The man of my

dreams and I would meet at the corner coffee shop where I read and savored coffee each Sunday. He, too, would be there every Sunday morning, sipping black coffee and reading.

"I think you dropped this," he would say as he scooped up my dog-eared copy of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat.

"Thank you," I would respond and simultaneously notice a beat-up copy of *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac sitting in his lap.

"You're welcome."

"I read *On the Road* in college," I would say.

"Wow. You're the only woman I've met who's read it. Care to join me?" Romance would ensue. Just like the movies, of course. But, more importantly, just as I had imagined it.

In real life, my future husband worked and lived within miles of me. But, our lives were parallel lines, until they crossed on an internet dating site—the modern meet-cute. I later learned the exact details of our match from the dating site:

Hi Lynette,

I looked at our matching records, Mike was a match you received on your 5th day on the service. He was your 7th match.

That's right. After more than a decade in the city, hoping to meet my future spouse at a cafe, I met him in less than a week online. We spent more than a few nights in each other's arms, looking out over Chicago's nightscape. When we decided to blend our lives, both of us and his two children, a boy and girl, it was time to leave my high-rise apartment behind.

But I did not leave my fantasy view of the Chicago skyline. We collapsed two households into one and moved to Oak Park, a small suburb west of the city. A suburb with wildflower gardens measured, not in acres like those of my youth, but in yards. A suburb with tree-lined streets. A racially diverse, eclectic village where the schools are named after African Americans, like chemist Percy Julian, and poets, like Gwendolyn Brooks, John Greenleaf Whittier and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. A suburb where Nobel Prize winning author Ernest Hemmingway attended high school and architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed houses that populate the heart of the village.

I see the glorious Chicago skyline each morning when I drive east toward my office in Logan Square. It rises high above the residential streets of Oak Park. I see the Chicago skyline each evening when I drive back to Oak Park to pick up our son from school. As I look east toward the city, the dazzling sunset dances off the skyscrapers and illuminates thousands of windows, which reflect back the polychromatic sky. The sky echoes my dreams from the dirt road, the Natural Beauty Road that set it all in motion.

End

Stairway to the Sky

Roger Camp

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight*, *Thames & Hudson*, 2002 and *Heat, Charta, Milano*, 2008. His work has appeared in numerous journals including *The New England Review*, *New York Quarterly*, and the *Vassar Review*. His work is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC.


Hisense

The Castle of Ayre

Jon Stone

Jon Stone is a Derbyshire-based poet, researcher and editor. His collection *School of Forgery* (Salt, 2012) was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. He won the Poetry London Prize in 2014 and 2016, and the Live Canon International Poetry Prize in 2018, and has recently completed a PhD in digital poem game hybridity. His web-site is www.gojonstonego.com.

Stop at sundown

beneath a crumbling stronghold of ayre and cloud,

from whose pinnacle is flown

a banner cloud.

It's what's known as a folly, an extravagance.

The battlements cannot be reached. One glance

confirms there are no full-time occupants –

just drifters, spies,

like you, like me – climbing spiral towers of cloud,

not caring who it is who flies

the banner cloud.

Its barbican is the last of the March day's blaze

and, as if to deter any frantic escalades,

its machicolations leak crepuscular rays.

With the grapnel wind

you could grip, perhaps, an oriel of cloud,

and shin up to that sequinned

torn banner cloud –

but where would you land? The walls are waft.

The outer layer is even now being sloughed.

It can barely guard the gold in its undercroft.

From arrow loops

birds and shadows of birds are shot into cloud.

And you have sewn all of your hopes

in a banner cloud.

On a memory trail

Swati Singh

Swati writes about spirituality within and around us. She has written for *Science of Mind*, *New York Spirit*, *Saevus Wildlife*, *Prana World*, *Mind Body Green* and more. A nature-lover, she loves to sprinkle happy-dust on people. When she is not busy finding nothingness, she is here: swati2610.wordpress.com, @swati2610 and fb.com/beyond2610.

"Look, that's Ursa Minor! Those seven stars in a kite-like shape with a tail."

I pointed to the constellation, joining the dots with my index finger as I lay next to my sister in our cots under the gleaming night sky.

During summer vacations, our extended family used to meet in the village. Cots braided with Jute rope were put side-by-side on the terrace so that people could sleep under the blanket of starry sky. An elder would tell stories—a mix of both mythology and *Panchatantra*[1] tales—to the kids: a little boy who became the polestar by the grace of the gods; anthropomorphized animals, birds, and trees teaching wise conduct; and epigrammatic verses of destiny and *Karma*.

The moon traveled with me, matching the pace of the car. I saw a face in it. It was still now, gazing back, smiling. My grandma said it was an old lady spinning the magical yarn, knitting dreams for us. But the dark splotches of lunar maria never looked like an old lady to me, no matter how hard I squinted. Maybe my soul knew that I have to weave my own dreams.

"I wonder where my constellation is…"

"Your constellation?" my sister asked, perplexed.

"I have a namesake constellation in Indian astrology. I wonder where it is!"

I remembered this two-decade-old conversation while downloading a sky-map app on my phone

1 Panchatantra is an ancient Indian collection of interrelated animal fables in Sanskrit verse and prose, dated to roughly 200 BCE, based on older oral tradition.

today. It displays the luminous sky, identifying stars, planets and even nebulae above your location. All this without the need to step outside. I held the mini-planetarium in my hand. Second-hand experiences. The city's hazy aura rarely allows for a clear view of the sky.

This wasn't the case a decade ago. The city sky wasn't this blurred. I could still join the dots.

As an inquisitive kid, I began identifying Orion, Ursa Major, the Pleiades, and a few others. I grasped how to distinguish a shiny planet from a twinkling star. Once, while flaunting my new-found knowledge of these sparkly orbs to my friend who lived next door, I witnessed a shooting star. Oh, the awe-inspiring moment and the innocent wish that followed. Meteors are a dull textbook chapter; a shooting star is a quixotic poem. Meteors gratify our curious minds; shooting stars gratify our poetic hearts.

It wasn't just the night sky that bedazzled me. The cerulean blue sky was equally enchanting. Who knew the subliminal process of finding shapes in Cumulus clouds—the fluff balls of the sky—was actually pareidolia at work. A group of birds flying around old buildings made me wonder if they were practicing ballet or playing tag. I saw them flying across the sky in a bow-shape once. No one believed me.

And somewhere amidst all the morning chirps and caws, a roaring airplane would fly by. I wondered if they could see a tiny human waving at them. I didn't know that eventually the experience of plane turbulence would fuel my anxiety, draining away my childhood enthusiasm.

In winter, grey spills over the azure sky. Crop stubble burns and vehicles and factories contribute their daily exhaust smoke. Incessant fireworks to celebrate Diwali, a festival that signifies the beginning of winter, add to the layers of smog. The cityscape turns into a scene out of an apocalyptic movie. The world's news headlines have been constant for a few years: "Cities of North India worst in the pollution index."

Blame-game politics intensifies and the sale of masks and air purifiers goes up every year in the winter months. Hospitals swarm with respiratory illness; blackened lungs look for respite. Droopy plants, perplexed pigeons and crouched chipmunks are left with no choice but to inhale this soot-laden air. While the myopic vision of humans contributed to this condition, environmentalists, activists and concerned citizens of the world are trying their best to reverse the damages. Yet the air feels dense with apathy and avarice. If I could satin stitch this on the sky for present and future generations, I would: we are just visitors here.

In search of better skies, I have traveled. Mountains seem to hold clearer expanses above them. How I wish I could copy, paste that image over my head once back in the city!

The only relief is monsoon season, when the grey is washed out of the sky by the rains to reveal the true color behind it. The big-wigs of the cloud community—Cumulus and Cumulonimbus— hold

an annual meeting with Nimbostratus at this time of year. After brainstorming with thunderous claps and lightning bolts, the bountiful showers cool down the burned tar and tiles. Nature transforms dusty-olive to bright green. The fresh new sky above and rejuvenated plants below are unchanged over the years, thankfully. Maybe people like me coined the word *pluviophile* after witnessing the joy the rain brings in a place where the sun is wrathful for almost eight months of the year.

I step out onto my balcony every evening to see if the sky is willing to shine a light on me. The city lights haven't quite engulfed the stellar night, the way they have almost consumed the fireflies that used to whisper magic chants and light up the meadows. The sky is one of the few places to look for the little magic left in the world. Nature has always been my inspiration and solace. Is it because I was raised amongst plants and bees, butterflies and folklore, wind and space? Or did the moon's old lady knit the fabric of my soul?

It was Arcturus, the constellation. I am trying to see on the app where it is stitched in the sky.

Restoring Stars

Lew Forester

Lew Forester is a social worker and Multiple Myeloma survivor who lives with his wife in Arvada, Colorado. He enjoys gardening, travel and hiking in the nearby Rocky Mountains. Lew's poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Slipstream*, *New Madrid*, *Plainsongs*, *Pinyon*, *Colorado Life Magazine*, *The Colorado Independent*, and other journals and magazines. His first full-length collection, *Dialogues With Light*, was recently published by *The Orchard Street Press*. You can find him at http://www.lewforester.com.

Night light woes spur Colorado push to restore starry skies.

The Denver Post

Beyond this shroud of light, stars
wheel around galaxies like headlights
from endless cars through the city.

Research tells us sleep is disturbed
under our blankets of manmade light.
Rhythms disrupted, wildlife confused.

Planetariums fill with folks who crave
a glimpse of the Milky Way, or even
a new moon, arc so thin it could break.

Van Gogh once gazed out of
his asylum window, so starved for stars
he painted them huge. Starry Night

hangs in a museum under artificial
light while we, screens glowing,
write laws to restore the stars.

Hope In The Stars

Kerenza Ryan

Kerenza Ryan writes about her personal experience with schizophrenia from an easy chair with her cat Rory on her chest. She also works in the mental health field and helps the mentally ill write stories of their own. You can access her books, social media, and email from www.kerenzaryan.com.

I think people like getting real glimpses of the sky, in or out of cities. I used to. When I was little, I craved sunny days, my bike bouncing over the back street potholes. When I was first in college, there were thunderstorms, particularly at night, when my then-best-friend and I hung out without coats on and let every inch of our skin get soaked.

I also loved starry nights, where every twinkle was visible. During college summers, I lived in the suburbs, and because of that I could see a bit more of the night sky, but I used my first telescope in Philadelphia. I hadn't realized there was such beauty up above us.

But then, halfway through college, I went through a major life transition. I started having psychotic symptoms, and was diagnosed schizophrenic. I went months thinking nothing was real, that everything was created by God to trick me into majorly sinning so he could kill me. Looking at the sky was actually a trigger for a while.

When the clouds didn't seem to be moving I felt like they were painted on. When the clouds were moving quickly I felt like they were a motion picture across the clear-sky background. I still liked thunderstorms, but my best friend had dropped out of college, and I had a habit of getting lost in the rain and not being sure how to get home, sometimes with a dead phone or no phone at all.

I'm not going to bore anyone with the details of trying medication after medication, or the two hospitalizations. A lot of people think those are the interesting points in my story, but I think my relationship with the sky is much more important.

I will make one small statement though. When you are locked up, truly locked up, every chance you get to see the sky—real or not—you cherish. If it was a trick by God, it was at least a very pretty one.

I didn't realize I was getting better right away, because I got better slowly, a little at a time. I no longer saved walks for when it was dark or storming. I learned the importance of a single woman out at night having a phone.

But one night my new then-best-friend told me she had never been stargazing. This was in my parent's suburban home. It was her, her boyfriend, and me, and I felt more than a little left out. I led them down our long, winding, woods-surrounded driveway, and we lay on the paved road of our cul-de-sac. We looked up at the sky: her head on his chest, and me, a few arm lengths away. This was their romantic moment.

And yet, in a way, it was my romantic moment as well. It was a moment between me and myself, when I accepted that it was okay I was sick, and it was okay I was scared, and just because I sometimes thought God hated me, it didn't make it true.

So far this story is set in the suburbs, but my journey didn't end there. It's easy to have one emotional moment while looking at the stars. What was special was when I went back to Philadelphia.

Upon returning to college, I was nervous to ask the teacher about using the telescope. See, I had dropped her class before for mental health reasons. She was kind, but didn't really have the full picture, and though I had no proof, I sometimes worried that she thought I could've tried harder and kept going.

And yet I did it. I asked to borrow the telescope, and I got permission. I even went stargazing with a few people, which could be hard for me while trying to break out of an isolating disease. Compared to third-wheeling on pavement, the sky meant so much more as it hung over the frost-crunching grass. We took turns with the telescope, rubbing our hands together for warmth any time we had a second. It was pure, and it was practically holy, even Godly. I see hope for me in the stars.

Moonstruck

Marc Nieson

Marc Nieson was born in Brooklyn, NY and has lived in cities from Venice, Italy, to Minneapolis, MN. His background includes children's theatre, cattle chores, and a season with a one-ring circus. He's a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and NYU Film School. He's won a Raymond Carver Short Story Award, the Literal Latte Fiction Award, Pushcart Prize nominations, and been noted in *Best American Essays*. His memoir, *SCHOOLHOUSE: Lessons on Love & Landscape*, came out in 2016 (Ice Cube Press). He teaches at Chatham University, edits *The Fourth River*, and is at work on a new novel, *HOUDINI'S HEIRS*. More @ www.marcnieson.com.

Summer 1969, and I am nine years old, lying in a city pool. The moon hangs above, nearly full. For weeks before school ended our teacher told us it would happen. History. She taught us names for each crater and ocean, about the rise and ebb of tides. Galileo. Eclipses. Her face so round and soft, glowing.

Come July, the first steps looked light and small on the television. More like a leap, they said. She, however, called them "stained." Never once did she mention the astronauts. Among the shallows of that city pool I'm still afloat, waiting to be lifted, just that inch or two.

Issue 4 – Fauna

Cities are becoming increasingly rich with animal life: rats, pigeons, sparrows, squirrels, and raccoons, but also peregrines, herons, coyotes, and bobcats. Whether you've come face-to-face with an urban animal, or simply seen evidence of its presence, we want to see your artwork and photography and read your stories! Although cities are often more accepting of their wild fauna, many are still seen as pests. We'd love to see submissions that explore the complexities of animals in the city. The submission period for this issue is

1 May 2020 – 31 July 2020

Issue 5 – Flora

From weeds pushing their way up through cracks in the pavement to wildflowers planted along roadsides, from potted plants on your balcony to trees providing shade in the park, plants can shape urban landscapes. They can provide oases of calm in a bustling city; yet their roots can also wreak havoc as they crack open roads or disrupt pipelines. A fruit tree might be a delicious treat, or a messy nightmare. We can't wait to see your artwork and photography and read your stories about the plants you experience in your city! The submission period for this issue is

1 December 2020 – 28 February 2021

Submit here:

http://stonecropreview.com/submissions/

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