

# MULESKINNER JOURNAL



## ORIGINS



Journal Five - February 2023





### ***How did we get here?***

*Muleskinner Journal turned one in October.  
Our baby is learning to walk!*

## **ORIGINS**

*How did it begin? How does it begin?  
Was there magic and wonder, or accident and happenstance?  
What endings drove the beginnings?  
What endings are embedded in the beginnings?  
Send us your origin stories, your OG stories, and your original  
thoughts. Let's go forward by going back to the start.*

# MULESKINNER JOURNAL

## JOURNAL FIVE: ORIGINS

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## JEFF BURT

### WHAT THE BOY HEARD

1

Better leave space  
when you work with me  
his father with trowel and apron  
told the boy about his stream of syllables,  
but what the boy heard  
was to lay his words as close as bricks  
but leave room for mortar,  
that sealed lips meant time together,  
that his mother and father disliked  
long conversation, often could sit  
in the same room and not speak.

Better leave space  
the mother whispered,  
meaning he could no longer  
rub against her as they walked,  
but the boy heard  
he'd outgrown affection.

Better leave space,  
the brother said to the boy,  
packing his handgun  
and brown bag of pills in the closet,  
so things can be hidden.

2

You're in luck, his father said,  
but what the boy heard,  
was that life was a town he would pass through  
until he was out of it.

You're lucky,  
the boy heard,  
a more or less permanent state

CONTINUED...

his mother used about his father  
for marrying her,  
and once, in a hoarse whisper,  
his grandmother had said  
about his mom for marrying her father.

I hope you get lucky,  
his big brother's friend smirked  
when he went off with his Loretta,  
and returned from the brambles  
behind Murphy's in the field  
with the abandoned two-story,  
he smelling of spoiled summer blackberries,  
she of dirt.

3

Don't you go non-linear on me,  
his father said,  
and what the boy heard  
was that lines were his father's friends,  
that he should not cross them  
like in a coloring book.

Don't you go non-linear on me,  
his mother said,  
and what the boy heard  
was that he acted in some type of arc,  
an ellipse, a circling back,  
perhaps already wandering off  
in his thoughts by thinking  
of the beautiful figure eight.

Don't you go non-linear on me,  
his brother said,  
and what the boy heard were words  
that were warm, loving,  
a reaching beyond the lines to comfort him,  
that talk was straight between them  
and to spiral away meant no longer to connect.

CONTINUED...

4

Did you hit it off his mother asked  
and the boy imagined the girl  
had been a doll at the fair  
standing on a shelf  
and he could have won her  
if he had thrown harder.

Did you hit on it  
his brother asked,  
and the boy imagined a violence  
that did not match his fragile infatuation,  
but that a fist might provide  
what his brother desired.

Is she a hit  
his father asked  
and the boy imagined her as a ball  
soaring past him in the outfield,  
a ball he would never catch up with,  
that would go over the fence, unattainable.

You've got a hit,  
the father said to the brother,  
talking about the girl that hung out in his room,  
and the boy heard fishing,  
starting with a nibble, then a tug,  
then pulled hard to set the hook  
until the fish lunged from the water,  
the boy heard the surface break  
and the girl hooked, hooked  
to the violent lips of his brother.

5

Cut it out, his brother said,  
but what the boy heard  
was a knife chasing a thorn into the wound.

Cut if out, his mother said,  
with the slice of a hand across her neck

CONTINUED...



meaning to keep quiet,  
but what the boy heard  
was the loss of his uncle's arm from the war,  
the lame stub above the elbow that didn't flap.

Cut it out, his father said with a growl  
when the boy punched his father's shoulder  
looking for playful affection,  
but what the boy heard  
was the command to sever,  
not to quit, so went in for one more round.

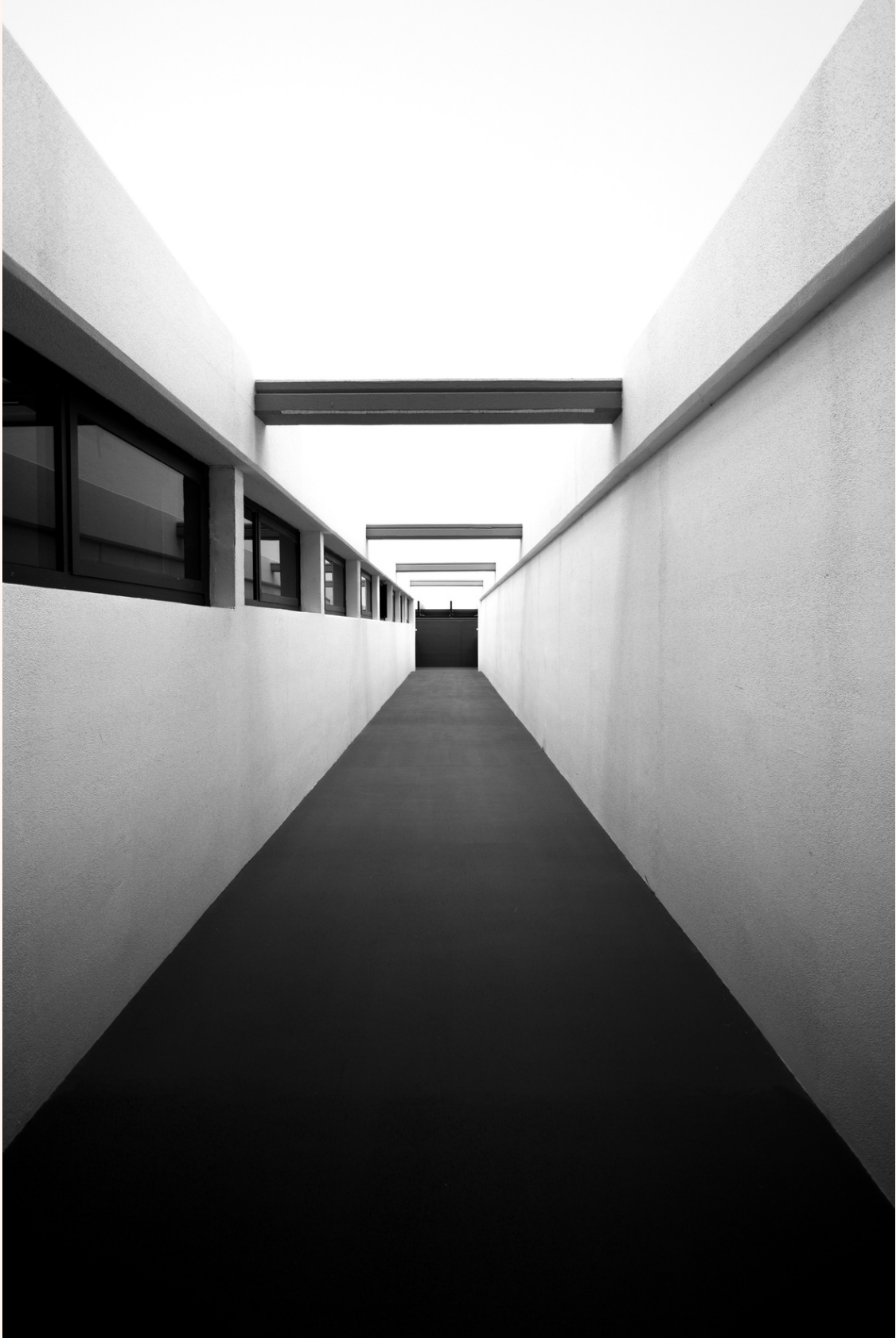
6.

You're a walking catastrophe,  
his father said,  
but what the boy heard  
was that he was mobile, like a tornado,  
that he could spin on his own course,  
touch down with violence wherever he liked,  
make things explode or implode with his whim.

You're a catastrophe waiting to happen,  
his mother said,  
but what the boy heard  
was the splitting of atoms in his gut,  
the spinning going out of control,  
not with vomit but with an anxiousness  
towards anger, as if a dam  
had not burst but was about to,  
and his lips were a levee  
holding back a breach of bad words.

You're like a ticking time bomb,  
a natural catastrophe,  
his brother said,  
but what the boy heard  
was that he was made to explode,  
made to delay, made to hold  
enormous potential energy in his tiny body,  
made to disrupt time itself,  
to blast the sequencing of time  
from past to present to future to everything now,  
to the moment they would remember  
only his tick, tick, tick.





## TOHM BAKELAS

### MURDER, MACHETE, MACHINE GUN

"my name is murder" he mumbled,  
"i'm here to kill the haitians with  
my machete. i'm going to cut  
their fucking heads off."

"okay" i said, "good thing  
i'm greek."

he laughed and asked if  
i had a machine gun

"no i don't" i said

"that's too bad"

he shook my hand and  
walked down toward the  
other patients' bedrooms,  
blasting them with his  
invisible machine gun  
before disappearing into  
his room and screaming

i went back to my desk  
and began to eat my lunch





## JOHN MACKER

### CERRADO

Listening to Mingus' Gunslinger Bird  
in the living room when I heard a loud thump  
coming from her studio. She was on the floor  
holding her bent Quasimodo wrist. As ugly a  
break as I'd ever been to. She had slipped and  
landed on her hip and hand. She went briefly  
into shock and stared at the ceiling.  
She didn't recognize me as her husband  
thought I was playing live music from somewhere  
in the Five Points of her imagination. After she  
came around she swore the darkness tried to  
close in around her. I took her to urgent care  
on a hot smoky night, the drowse of August.  
They determined she'd need surgery. They  
determined older people slip and fall, right  
before we begin to fade away.  
We are too old to be gunslingers. Bird died at 34.  
The nights closed in on him like carnivorous angels.

She now holds her bandaged wrist above her heart  
and walks with a cane. Life doesn't feel precious, it  
resembles an open wound we spend a lot of our time  
closing.  
Wildfire smoke fills the air, the sun has turned orange.  
Another man of color shot in the back.  
Who doesn't want to close the book on this grievous  
year?  
Who hasn't gone into shock, eyes filled with ash?

Today, I played music so loud it emptied the  
neighborhood  
of life as we know it. But it gradually returned.  
The silent ambulance mercifully left the cul-de-sac  
without the sick lady across the street. Victor brought  
in his recycling bin. I read: some words die in cages.  
I thought about what breaks us, what mends us, the  
border,

CONTINUED...

separations. What closes our hearts for good.  
I thought about hair trigger America,  
how smoke is the summer language of ghosts.





# LEANNE HUNT

## CONVERSATIONS

1.  
*At the front door, he asked me what I've done today.  
You have to be accountable. I'm accountable  
to my boss, my husband said. I listed all  
of the cleaning, the playgroup we attended,  
board books read. But supper was not on the table.  
He noticed.*

2.  
*Do I have to tell you to do everything? A knife  
by the sink. A toddler in the home.  
He stood over me. I kept my head down  
as I cleaned up cat vomit. The knife waited  
for me to wash.*

3.  
*I was sitting on the couch in a four-bedroom,  
two-story home near a lake. You don't want  
to improve yourself...never try to learn. He said,  
I try to better myself. You would be just as happy  
in a trailer park.*

4.  
*You are always groping me. You need to learn  
how it feels. He showed me with his hands, inside me.*

5.  
*I notice all the trucks, pick out the colors of cars,  
keep within the lines. My daughter's observations  
You are always late...You don't keep your promises..  
You say you'll change roll over me.*

6.  
*It's not like you were raped or anything, she says.  
You are always so emotional. I continue washing  
the plates, cups, and knives she'd left by the sink.*

CONTINUED...



7.

You're the mother, I'm the child, my daughter tells me.  
I shouldn't have to hold you accountable. But if I don't,  
nothing gets done. I have to be the one to teach you.  
I remind her we need to leave, or we'll be late to her father's.  
We'd promised.





## STEVE BRISENDINE

### FIRST, DO NO HARM

For most of us, it passed quickly – a cupped  
and lingering hand, a “careless” thumb-strum  
when we turned our heads.

Cough, move on, keep your mouth shut.  
Our parents paid for gloves, high-tops, cleats;  
we bore competition’s hidden fees,

resigned to the trade-off for his signature, for  
a chance to take the field and try to run off  
a shame both ours and his.

He had official sanction. He walked sidelines.  
Boys grew up, became men with trophies  
and letters and scars.

Either those who cared didn’t know, or  
the other way around; small towns keep  
their secrets in plain view.

We kept our own scores, though – not on  
lighted boards, but out of the corners  
of eyes and mouths.

He had Camaros. He had Corvettes. He had  
favorites who drove them. We kept track,  
snickered behind backs.

The favored swore innocence on both sides,  
dragged Main in his cars to pick up girls  
in the Pizza Hut parking lot.

CONTINUED...

Denial is an eternal currency. He passed  
free as a meadowlark, and no stories ever  
broke, no gavel ever fell.

I worked the sports desk for three years at  
the hometown daily; I never dug, never pushed.  
My shame-share is double.

Now, too late, tongues and typing fingers  
are looser. Even so, he remains a grim shrug,  
a greasy smiling euphemism,

a bland-faced ghost with soft chill hands;  
he never even bothered to put gloves  
between his want and our skin.







# MICHAEL LODERSTEDT

## WILD GOAT HUNT

I.  
Take the tiller & bring us  
up close, Junior said,  
as I steered skiff  
toward Goat Island that  
crisp first Saturday  
of November.

On the leeward side  
of a high dune ridge  
lay the wild herd, sunning  
on bright sand. Junior  
crouched low & leveled  
single-shot .22, elbow  
braced against  
gunwale.

When the rifle cracked  
kids & nanny scatter,  
the billy bucked high  
into the air, shaking  
that bullet laid  
just behind  
his ear.

Junior dragged muddy ram  
by curled horns through  
marsh grass, placed head  
upon thwart, tongue  
lolling, we stared  
at sticky barefeet  
caked-red with  
goat's blood.

CONTINUED...

II.

That night embers licked  
the sky from rusty-halved  
barrel, the goat quartered  
mopped with vinegar  
& red pepper flakes.  
Smell of charred meat  
hanging on  
night air.

We pull the stringy  
flesh to our mouths,  
hot & briny. Junior's Cherokee  
mother is stomp dancing  
on bare plywood sheet  
to Hank's Good bye  
Joe, we gotta' go  
me-oh-my-oh.

We'll sip the last Stroh's  
& take our smoke back  
under live oaks, wipe  
grease from chins, praise  
Junior's dead aim, pass  
goat horns tacked  
to his shed door.





## ELLEN DEVLIN

### THE REUNION COMMITTEE ASKS

The Reunion Committee Asks

what I've Done. Got a job. Got married. Saved quarters for the laundromat. Tried every church  
and left every church I tried. Yonkers was

a daughter, a son. A still born I never got over. I hooked a rug. Started wearing heels & CVS  
cosmetics again. Read all of Agatha Christie.

And most of Webster's Third. Fell in love with & fell in love with. To stop hiding from  
precision,  
painted botanicals but got

eroticized painting this leaf this green. Irvington was a grandson & two more, some civic  
collusion. I am still bewildered, hungry.

I went on retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh.  
He named me Compassionate Joy of the Heart which felt heightened & a little misplaced,

especially because I kept trying to see  
Richard Gere, rumored to be at the dharma talks.





## SUSAN BARRY-SCHULZ

### SELF PORTRAIT AS A FITTED LID

hl left New York in a warm wind. A pocket full of posies. Always falling short. I needed more space for my things. My notebooks and letters, my collection of olive green sweaters. My psoriatic elbows and too wide sighs. The pigeons on the 3rd Avenue Bridge shimmered for real under the ice-cream-cake-frosting-blue sky. Tugs nudged barges of garbage eastward toward someplace I didn't want to think about. Plumped in the suburbs I skimmed through the syllabus. Grew soon into a Pampered-Mary-Kay-Tupperware-Chef choked by the automatic sprinklers and the neon green of the fertilized lawns. I took the form of the bell-shaped darkness housed beneath the tarnished curves of a candle snuffer. Wet-blanketed and contained I concretized extinguished. Embodied the opposite of a breeze.



## JOHN DAVIS

### TO EASE THE HEART IN PAIN

Forget the cat I crushed on Highway 10  
the buck that jumped and crumpled  
under my car, stumbled up, blundered

into the forest and what about the mice  
and black rats when the traps snapped  
can I forget them or Father's jaw

hard as a claw when rigor gripped him  
slipped him a Mickey Finn is what I thought  
not as gracious as the day easing down

effortlessly folding itself into red velvet  
or the last leaf skying, riding the inland  
sea breeze like a kite surfer floating  
forever the final tone of a hymn.

If it's true our past lives are waiting  
over the hill for us to revisit when we drop  
over the green canyon with companions  
long since gone and the breath

of God is ours, then we shouldn't worry  
that we won't be forgiven. The white tongues  
of calla lilies will un-gray this day  
when this day smells like almost rain.





## CHARLOTTE M. FRIEDMAN

### THE FIRST TIME I PAINTED

My father handed me a brush  
nodded toward a canvas, as if to say—  
you know what to do. I was six.

I dipped the brush in blue, made a bowl  
of sky to hold stars, the earth green  
like the pines outside my window.

Anything else? my father asked.  
A house on the hill, a porch and a girl  
with a triangle of yellow hair, red dress.

The house poked through the sky,  
so the girl with the yellow hair  
would have her head in the clouds  
except it was sunny, I'd decided, and painted the sun—  
swirled circle, squiggly rays, same yellow  
as my hair. From the porch the girl could see

the sea. Doesn't it need a railing? She might fall.  
She wouldn't, but I painted those brown stripes  
to keep him happy. I knew she could swim

if she happened to fall. She might even jump.  
She might even be able to fly.  
Something had traveled through blood,

his to mine—some desire for world-making,  
shaping on rectangles of white.  
My hands were not his, but I held the brush.





**SEAN WINN**

**CORNER TREE**

Parallel strands of barbed wire march outwards from its center, spiking and curling at odd angles. The oldest are brittle to the touch, more rust than wire. Been here a long time, Dad says. A final set has been tacked to the bark, continuing a run down the fence line — shiny and taut galvanized steel that will turn cattle for another thirty years. Remember this tree, son. If anyone disputes the property line, it's been here for generations. Dad runs his hand along the curve of the trunk and pats it. He looks down the fence and sees his father showing him the same tree, and his father before him. He sees powerful modern tractors, and rickety earlier versions. Mules and men in suspenders, pulling stumps to open the land. And through his eyes, I see them too. I place my hand next to his, feeling history beneath the rough bark. Yes, Dad. I'll remember this tree.



## LORRAINE JEFFERY

### BEGINNING DUST

This tech generation of  
grandchildren, arrive  
with phones, videos,  
apps and games, to ride  
4-wheelers down dusty trails.

No sparkling stream—  
this is drought country,  
and dust coats the rental  
cabin when ATVs grind by.

Nearby dead undergrowth  
has been cleared around  
tree trunks, branches hacked  
off at various lengths,

Bored children troop outside.  
Thump!  
I listen and wonder.  
Click, thud. Thump.  
Snap, clickety, click.  
Bang. Clack.  
Click, thud. Thump.

I go to the back door—  
three kids, hands clutching  
assorted sticks, hit trunks,  
sawed off branches,  
tapping, cracking,  
thumping out a  
syncopated rhythm.

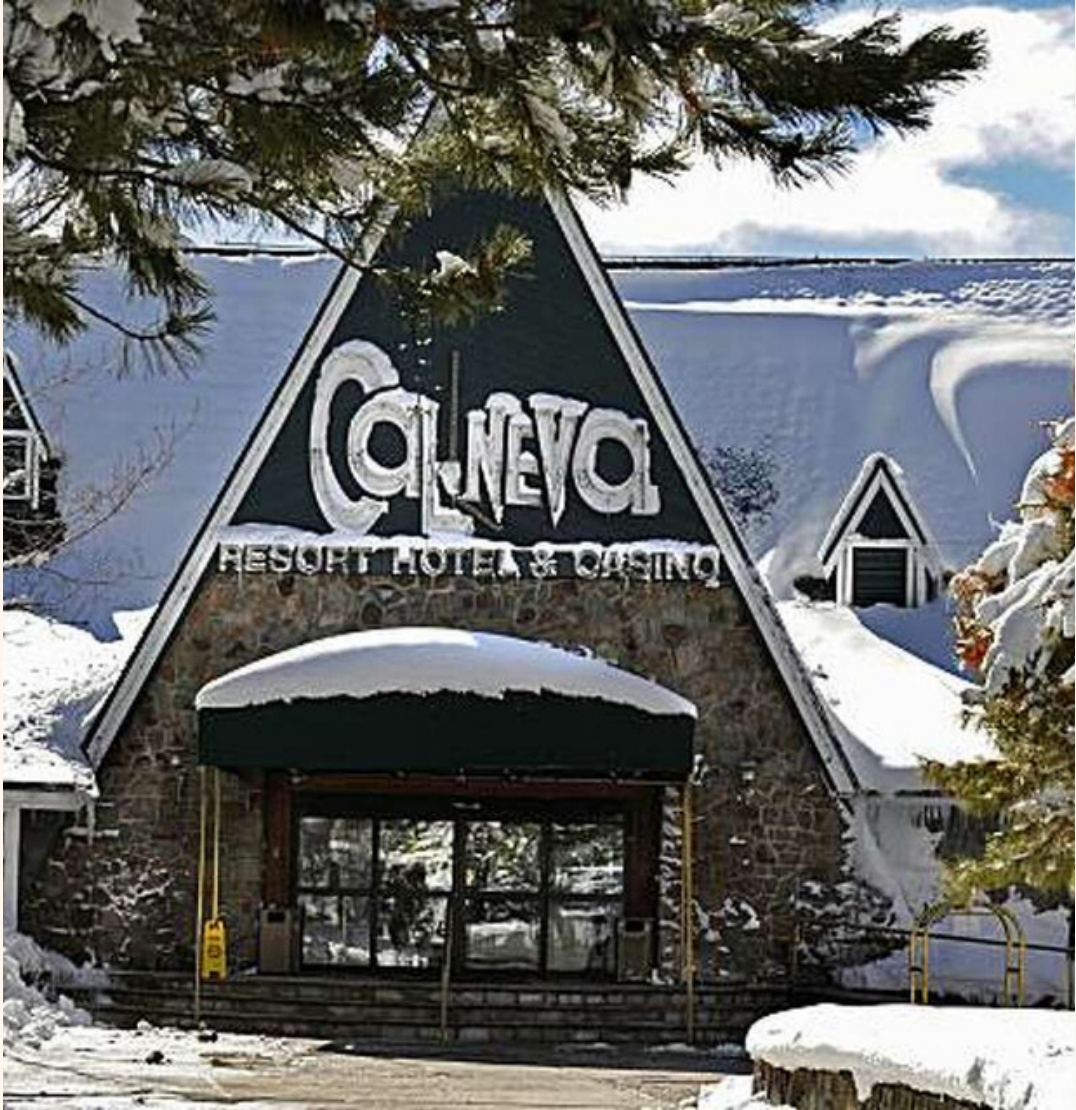
CONTINUED...

They sway and step  
in counter point,  
each jazz player listening  
to the others and adding.

Thump, whack, click.  
Ancient DNA dancing  
back to stones and sticks;  
they once again  
create beginning music.







## LESLIE HODGE

### AT THE CAL NEVA

Stan rambles through the casino, no clocks, oxygen pumped in. Finally a two-dollar table. Insurance? asks the dealer. Stan peeks at his hole card, smiles, waves his hand low.

His daughter Layla at the craps table shooting dice, her chips sorted by color. The stickman sings out, too tall to call! He winks, nudging new dice to her.

Coming out! All the hard ways, working. The stickman raises one eyebrow. Layla rolls a four, twenty-two, Little Joe. Says, place six. Place eight. Odds.

In the bar, her sisters Kiki and Joy swing onto the dance floor with sure-footed cowboys. The tip jar by the singer's boot is overflowing. Dim lights, thick smoke, and loud, loud music ...

What kind of beer do you have? Oh, says the waitress, you're asking the wrong person. She swivels through the tables setting down shots and margaritas, idly eavesdropping -

*That girl singer, she ain't got a country voice. Yeah? Yeah, now look at Loretta.  
She can rhyme hard and tired. You know, tard. Coal Miner's Daughter. Yeah?  
This place is a dump. I wanna take one of those buses into Reno. I'll take you, Ma.  
What? I'll drive you to Reno. If I wanted a drunk to drive me, I'd drive myself.  
Hey, why don't you all come out to West End Beach tomorrow? Where's that?  
Donner Lake. Hmm, I think we're gonna go rafting on the Truckee. Oh. Okay.*

At the table, the boxman raises his chin toward Layla. You've got good bone structure. While his hands casually change chips, his eyes shift to Joy. Joy smiles. Not you.

She's still rolling? says Kiki. Yeah, at least a half hour, maybe more. The table's crowded. Shouts surge louder with each throw. They brought in more chips for the bank. Twice.

Joy sniffs the tobacco stink on her sleeve. Gonna burn these when I get home. Ask for a Heineken. Better than those cheap watery drinks. Baby needs new shoes.

Finally Layla craps out. She pushes her chips to the boxman, tosses tokes to the dealers. They nod, tap the chip on the table. The pit boss says have a good night, ladies.

CONTINUED...



Cooling down with a longneck, Layla sits with Stan in the bar. The band's on break. A young man drifts toward them, tentative, polite. Are you going to shoot again?

Kiki and Joy enter laughing, stepping over the line separating Nevada and California. Through the open window flows the scent of sugar pines. No, Layla says. This is enough.





## MAGGIE MENEZES WALCOTT

### DO YOU EVER WONDER?

*do you ever wonder*

*if people think you're boring because you don't have any stories to tell? My daughter's voice is dropping, a casualty of her metamorphosis, once twelve and now thirteen. I am chopping carrots for soup and thinking about work, or the laundry, or the way the knife is sharp but the sound it makes is a dull thwack, thwack. I wonder if I should tell her how, before she was born, I spent several smooth-bodied years, weighing the pros, debating the cons, considering whether I ever wanted children at all. How the day we brought her home, we strapped all seven pounds of her into a crisply clean car seat, padding her tiny head so it wouldn't roll around, stopped for Original Recipe fried chicken: the most normal thing I could think to do on the most frightening day of my life. How she won me over, day-by-day, and now I sometimes cry soft tears thinking about how small and fragile she used to be. How edgeless and fragile we all were then.*





## DS MAOLALAI

### SEPARATE FUTURES

conversations which spangle  
and spread out in flowers  
like wrought-iron window  
ledged loft-level balconies –  
views of Parisian streets.

and Fallon is planning  
to go back there this summer.  
and Goggin a Galway  
university placement  
doing research  
on long-extinct life.  
Baker's bought land  
and has claimed a quite serious  
girlfriend, and I'd be remiss  
to dismiss my own life  
of development – engaged  
to be married, and happy

with Chrysty, though I try  
not to bring it up  
much. we sit  
out on lawn chairs  
in Baker's back garden  
at the top of its hill  
over Dublin. look past  
football fields, into  
the city below us  
as far away as childhood  
and life. talk of our separate  
futures, as travelers  
of landscapes  
and maps.





## NANCY MEYER

### OUR FAMILY'S FIRST CENTURY IN HADLEY

1659

Back when the 49 founders followed  
their Calvinist gospel. Back when  
they laid out 8 acre lots with care that no one  
had better land than another. Back  
when my ancestor Samuel Porter  
built the modest house on Middle Street  
and everyone's cows grazed  
in the Commons. Back then  
they still honored the contracts with  
the Pequot and Abenaki who sold them  
the land. Welcomed them every spring  
to plant corn, fish the Quinnecticut,  
and a few stayed on, sold baskets and brooms.

1704

Back when the Sumptuary Laws forbade  
gold rings and lace collars, lest God  
punish them with war and pestilence. Back  
when my forebears got rich trading furs  
down the river. That's when others  
pointed fingers, named them River Gods.  
Back when, one snowy night, the French led  
Mohawk and Pocumtuck to attack Deerfield,  
right next door. When they killed 48 townfolk,  
captured 140 in under 2 hours.

1752

Back when Samuel's grandson Moses acquired  
600 acres beyond the Commons. Back when  
he built his grand house, with a four-flued chimney  
and rusticated cladding. Back when the Abenaki

CONTINUED...

returned to plant corn and found fencing and dogs to run them off. Back when, two years later, Captain Moses Porter was killed in the ambush of Bloody Morning Scout.[i] And Porter's Pequot body servant delivered his sword to my 8th great grandmother Elizabeth, who took to laudanum and rocking in a darkened room.

[1] <https://elizabeth-porter-8edg.squarespace.com/letters-of-the-porters>





## NANCY MEYER

### STORYKEEPER

I inherit Mom's copy of *Forty Acres* when she dies at 98. Slim volume, nevertheless it jams my bookshelf. Grandma's cousin, Jimmy Huntington, wrote it. Moses Porter, my 9th great grandfather, built it, 1752. Said to be first house outside the stockade, that protected our Hadley, Mass. founders. *Forty Acres*, towering elms and single black shutters. 200 years we lived there, Cousin Jimmy the last. I played on the verandah, rolled in the grass.

Genealogies, antiquities, I never cared. Until these words, catalogued without comment:

an inventory for the Estate of Cap't Moses Porter, March 8, 1756. Cash 3£ 5s, Negro man £400... Zebulon Prutt, the son of Arthur, a slave, belonging to the Reverend Isaac Chauncy, pastor of the Church in Hadley... This slave boy must have been the property of the parson's daughter for she sold him to Moses Porter ... 29th of July, 1745 Minister. Ancestor. Women. Buying and selling people.

And then, this:

"... when the cock was placed at the top of the steeple, Zeb Prutt, a young colored man, ascended to the summit, sat on the copper bird and imitated the crowing of a rooster."

I know this church. The steeple, 90 feet high.

Grandma never told us these stories, no Zebulon on the steeple. Never, even when I married an African-Jamaican man. Mother never said our cow-milking, broom-corn-planting, Harvard-attending family were also slave-owning. Even when we raised a son only miles away. I must tell him, his children. I spin like the rooster. Us, enslavers. A man crowing. A man who hoed the sod where we just buried my mother.





# NANCY MEYER

## TEXT FRAGMENT: ACCOUNTING

*[My ancestor] Michael St. Agnan was drowned while bringing back to Trinidad a cargo of African slaves from the mainland of Latin America. This tragic event...[i]*

Michael, I refuse to let you curl  
silent on the ocean shelf, brass buttons  
turned green, beneath black bodies strewn  
among rusted chains and rum barrels.

I haul your ghost up from the brine  
stretch your shade out on the sand.  
Flies swarm, all these years waiting  
for you to surface.

Drowned 1821, you smuggler, you  
black marketeer[ii]. Let the sun parch  
your skeleton dry as the brown cursive  
of your human ledgers, promissory notes.

Cousin Jimmy elides this part, brags about  
your luster pitcher, tortoise-shell combs  
rimmed with gold, deep-toned mahogany  
on dusty display at Forty Acres.

No matter how I swat away the buzz  
tormenting me on kelp-striped sand,  
your ridged coins keep multiplying  
deep in my pockets.

[i] James L. Huntington, *Forty Acres*, p 37

[ii] International slave trade banned in 1808



## PETER ANDREWS

### AFTER LUKE PASSES

#### The Rules

- Outsiders are outsiders. That includes lawyers, social workers, and (especially) cops.
- Sometimes you can trust kin. Sometimes you can't.
- If you throw something out, you'll need it later.
- If you leave your stuff lying around, it won't be there later.
- First come, first served.
- Carry your gun, but don't aim it at anyone. If you do aim it, shoot to kill.
- Don't get caught.

Luke is three hours dead when that cocksucker Charlie texts me. Benny Dee is sure to have been there and gone, so Pop's service revolver, the TV, and any cash is gone. Lorraine's gotta be at Luke's by now. She'll have the sex tapes, and she's welcome to them. She's not much to look at. Nothing of real value is left inside, except maybe the bass I caught and Luke claimed and mounted. I think most of the family is smart enough not to piss me off by taking it.

But the trailer will be mine, 300 more square feet than what I have. And better for the kids, really, than this shitcan.

Provided I get there before any of Mom's clan, who are off to Hickman Corners. Thank Jesus, they have longer drive than mine, even with a head start.

I grab a garbage bag and toss stuff in. Tie the top. I slip my my Smith & Wesson M&P Shield 9mm into my vest. Grab Bobby's old shotgun. Once outside, I dump the bag and shotgun into the F150.

By then, E.M. is awake, which is good. He's in his PJs, shoveling at a big bowl of cereal, and watching the Ninja Turtles.

I shut the TV off.

"Boy. Get dressed now."

He doesn't move so I grab the bowl from him and toss it into the sink. Then I yank him up standing. "We're headed for Uncle Luke's, so move."

He skitters off.

"And if you need to pee, do it now!"

Patty Girl steps out of her room, and he bumps right into her. She sweeps him out of the way, and he lands on his butt but bounces up right away.

Patty Girl has her suitcase. Two moves. She knows.

"Put that in the back of the truck. Eat now or wait till we get there."

She hustles out.

I go out back and get the wood splitter. It isn't too old, and there won't be one at Luke's. I load it onto the flatbed. There's an iron bench from my Grandpa's out front I'd like to take, but I'll leave it. Need someone to help carry it. It'll go for scrap and good on whoever grabs it.

E.M. is dawdling when I get back in. Pawing his Big Book of Fairy Stories. He drops it when I pick him up. When I swing him down to get it, he grabs Booger, a one-eyed, stuffed dog. So be it. Tucked under my arm, the boy is easy to carry.

When I get back outside, Patty Girl is leaning on the truck, arms folded. Only eleven, but looking too much like Kate did.

"I like it here, Papa."

"Get in the car." She doesn't budge. "Or stay here alone if you want. Maybe the Maguires will feed you, but maybe not."

Doors are slammed. E.M. sits over on Patty Girl.

They take a last look, but good riddance to that tin can we lived in.

My tires rattled up the gravel. Love that sound. Mrs. Kay sticks her head out the window. She'll be scavenging through my place within the hour. Half a bottle rum, but otherwise not much to take.

"Who?"

I look over to Patty Girl. She can be nice, but she has the mean eyes now. I don't answer.

I turn out of the trailer park, onto the macadam road. Bit of a bump. Hear something rattle in the back.

"Dammit, who?"

If she'd yelled I'd have told her to fuck off. But she said it low.

"Uncle Luke."

E.M. nods. "Uncle Luke."

"Huh," Patty Girl said. "I was hoping it was Meemaw."

Amen to that.

\*\*\*

Luke's house isn't in a trailer park. Just a half mile into the woods, off a dirt road. But he has a truckload of rip rap in front of his doublewide so the Travelall can't sink in the the mud come April.

When we get there, Jesse and Bella are lugging Luke's barcalounger out of the trailer. A fat guy pushes past them and gets inside. I'm thinking he better be kin.

I jump out of the truck as soon as it stops. But then I mosey toward Jesse and Bella, not wanting to look too upset. I nod as they approach me.

"Morning."

Bella says, "Sorry for your loss." That pussy Jesse doesn't dare look at me.

The Crosley chair on the porch is peeling and its cushion is shot to hell, but I set it near the stair. I take out my 9mm, and I sit down, facing the front.

It takes a bit for Jesse to wrestle the chair into his trunk, and he has to move the deer head and a lamp to make it fit. As he works, a Camaro, polished like new, swings into the circle and slows down. Two cousins from Mama's side, no older than twenty, look me over.

I let my fingers run over the barrel of my gun, and they keep going. Around the circle and out.

The kids get out of the car. Bella meets them and gives their heads rubs. Then she and Jesse light off.

Meanwhile, the fat guy returns. He needs to angle himself to fit through the door. I recognize him as Joe, a cousin who used to hunt with me. He has a frozen turkey and a six pack of beer. Nothing else.

He nods. "Devin."

I keep my hand on the 9mm, but smile so he knows it's okay.

"Damn sad," he says. "Luke was a good one."

He puts the turkey down and offers me the six pack.

I break off a can. Return the rest to him. "Thanks."

He picks up the turkey. Goes off with it and the remaining beers.

A dog, not a hunting dog, ambles up to E.M. Starts licking him. It feels like trouble. We don't need a dog like that.

"Patty Girl. Let me see that dog."

She stiffens. "I can take care of him, Papa."

"Just do what I say, hear?"

E.M. starts to giggle, but he makes himself useful. Helps Patty Girl corral the dog. I feel sad for him.

"Come over with me, E.M."

But he thinks it's a game. He'll learn.



Finally, Patty Girl picks up the dog. Heads my way.

I look. There's a good spot just up near the woods. Down wind. Shovel should still be around.

Patty Girl stops, just out of my reach. "Dad..."

"We don't need to be feeding no animal."

"I don't need to eat so much."

E.M. gets the message. "Me neither."

But they are too skinny already, and Mr. Piper won't pay me more than ten an hour.

Patty Girl likes that song, "Rock Candy Mountain." She even has me sing it instead of "Happy Birthday."

So I start singing. Get up from the chair real easy. Put the gun down.

Hold her attention long enough so I can grab the dog.

I'm quick. Not even a yelp.



## AUTHOR BIOS

**Jeff Burt** lives in Santa Cruz County, California, with his wife. He has worked in electronics and mental health services. He has contributed to Rabid Oak, Williwaw Journal, Red Wolf Journal, and Brazos River Review.

**Tohm Bakelas** is a social worker in a psychiatric hospital. He was born in New Jersey, resides there, and will die there. He is the author of 18 chapbooks and several collections of poetry, including "The Ants Crawl In Circles" (Whiskey City Press, 2022). He runs Between Shadows Press.

**John Macker** grew up in Colorado and has lived in northern New Mexico for 25 years. He has published 13 full-length books and chapbooks of poetry, 2 audio recordings, an anthology of fiction and essays, and several broadsides over 30 years. His most recent are **Atlas of Wolves, The Blues Drink Your Dreams Away, Selected Poems 1983-2018**, (a 2019 New Mexico-Arizona Book Awards finalist), **Desert Threnody**, essays and short fiction, (winner of the 2021 New Mexico-Arizona Book Awards fiction anthology prize), **El Rialto**, a short prose memoir and **Chaco Sojourn**, short stories, (both illustrated by Leon Loughridge and published in limited edition by Dry Creek Art Press.) For several years, he was contributor to Albuquerque's Malpais Review. His one-act play, "Coyote Acid" was produced by Teatro Paraguas in Santa Fe in early 2022. He lives in Santa Fe with his wife Annie and two dogs.

**LeAnne Hunt** (she/her) grew up in the Midwest and now lives in Orange County, California. She is a regular at the Two Idiots Peddling Poetry reading at the Ugly Mug in Orange. She has poems published in Cultural Weekly, Spillway, Honey & Lime, and Lullaby of Teeth: An Anthology of Southern California Poets. She publishes a blog of writing prompts and apologies at [leannehunt.com](http://leannehunt.com).

**Steve Brisendine**, a recovering journalist who still wrangles words for a living, lives and works in Mission, KS. His most recent books are Salt Holds No Secret But This (2022, Spartan Press) and To Dance with Cassiopeia and Die (2022, Alien Buddha Press), a "collaboration" with his former pen name, Stephen Clay Dearborn. His first collection, The Words We Do Not Have (2021, Spartan Press) was nominated for the 2021 Thorpe Menn Literary Excellence Award.

**Michael Loderstedt** is nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2022 for his poem Why We Fished, which also won the Applewhite Poetry Prize from the NC Literary Review. He has work forthcoming in Bangalore Review, and Musepaper. He has also had poems published in a recent anthology entitled neighborhood Voices (Literary Cleveland/Cleveland Public Library) and received an Ohio Arts Council Fellowship in Literature in 2020.

**Ellen Devlin's** poetry has published or is forthcoming in The Cortland Review, Ekphrasis, Lime Hawk Review, New Ohio Review, PANK, Poet Lore, Redactions: Poetry Poetics and Prose, The Lost River Review, The Sow's Ear and Women's Studies Quarterly Review and Beyond Words, (forthcoming, Feb, 2023) **Rita**, a chapbook, published by Cervena Barva Press (2019), and **Heavenly Bodies at the Met** forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press (2022).

**Susan Barry-Schulz** grew up just outside of Buffalo, New York. She is a licensed physical therapist living with chronic illness. Her poetry has appeared in SWWIM, Barrelhouse online, Rogue Agent, New Verse News, Nightingale & Sparrow, Shooter Literary Magazine, The Wild Word, Bending Genres, B O D Y, Gyroscope Review, West Trestle Review, and in other print and online journals and anthologies.

**John Davis** is a polio survivor and the author of Gigs and The Reservist. His work has appeared recently in DMQ Review, Iron Horse Literary Review, and Terrain.org. He lives on an island in the Salish Sea.

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**Charlotte M. Friedman** is a poet, teacher and translator who grew up in Seattle and now lives in Princeton, New Jersey. Her poetry has been published in journals such as Connecticut River Review, Intima, Waterwheel Review, The Maine Review, Nightingale & Sparrow, Lilith and in the anthology, *A 21st Century Plague: Poetry from a Pandemic*. Her translations of Ch'ol poetry (with Carol Rose Little) have been published in *Latin American Literature Today*, *World Literature Today*, *Exchanges*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *The Arkansas International*. Her first book, **The Girl Pages**, was published by Hyperion.

**Sean Winn** is a former banker who picked up the pen after leaving the workforce. His fiction, essays, and poetry have since appeared in dozens of literary journals, most recently in *Talking River Review*, *Glint*, and *Marathon*. In addition to writing, his other project is getting an environmental nonprofit off the ground: the Plastic Reduction Project. After living in Indonesia, Singapore, and Hong Kong, Austin, TX Sean is now home.

**Lorraine Jeffery** has won numerous prizes and published many poems in journals including *Clockhouse*, *Canary*, *Rockhurst Review*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Orchard Street*, *Two Hawks* and *Bacopa Press*. Her first book is titled *When the Universe Brings Us Back*, 2022, and her chapbook titled *Tethers*, by Kelsay Books, will be forthcoming.

**Leslie Hodge** lives in San Diego. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in publications including *Sisyphus*, *Spank the Carp*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *The Orchards Poetry Journal*. Leslie writes poems to try to make sense of her life in a way that resonates with others.

Deep in the wilds of Northern Michigan, **Maggie Menezes Walcott** lives with her family in a house they built themselves. She has a grossly unused degree in physical anthropology and has recently returned from a 30-year hiatus to her first calling—creative writing. Her pieces have since been published in *Mothers Always Write*, *The Dunes Review*, and *Every Day Fiction*, among others.

**DS Maolalai** has received eleven nominations for Best of the Net and eight for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in three collections; "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016), "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019) and "Noble Rot" (Turas Press, 2022)

**Nancy L. Meyer** (she/her) is a 2020 Pushcart nominee, avid cyclist, grandmother of 5 from the unceded Ramaytush Ohlone lands of San Francisco. Recent journals include: *Decolonial Passage*, *Feral Journal*, *Third Prize Nebraska Poetry Society Open Contest*, *New Note*, *Gyroscope*, *Book of Matches*, *Laurel Review*, *Sugar House Review*. Forthcoming: *Last Stanza Journal*, *Write Launch*, *Kind of a Hurricane Press*, *Frost Meadow*, *Ocotillo Review: Julia Darling Prize Finalist*. In 8 anthologies, including by *Tupelo Press*, *Ageless Authors* and *Wising Up Press*.

**Peter Andrews** has been a speechwriter, a radio producer, an innovation consultant, and a chemist. His TV script, *Inflection Points*, earned him an inaugural Blue Sky Fellowship in 2022. He has had eight short plays produced, dozens of short stories published, and hundreds of articles. He has attended *Clarion* and *Bread Loaf* and *Stowe Stowe Labs*.













# THE MULESKINNER JOURNAL

LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.