
THE 2025 O:JA&L CHAPBOOK SERIES
A Writer's Portfolio

ONE MORE THING WITHOUT YOU

Haibun & Tanka Prose



JOSHUA MICHAEL STEWART

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PSITHURISM

Once, when I was four, my brother snoring in the bunk above, I crept out of bed and padded past my parents' room, down the basement stairs—both hands on the rail, and stepped out the back door, snow crunching under my footy pajamas, and except for wind in the trees: silence—no one to call me stupid or yell at me for not eating lima beans, and there, in the backyard, I looked up at the moon, and no one, not my parents, my brother, not a lover confided in years later, knew I walked away that night and never returned.

*december rain
a blue jay blooms
in tree after tree*

NATURE LESSON

Spring's been cold and rainy, so on the first cloudless day, I hop in the Corolla, and travel west to the Seven Sisters Mountain Ridge in Hadley, Massachusetts, for a late morning hike. It'll feel good to be in the mountains again after a long winter of not venturing far from home, with the exceptions of work and the grocery store, I've pretty much been in hibernation.

spring
I paw sleep
out of my eye

I stop at a pharmacy, purchase the most expensive, all-natural insect repellent they sell, then quickly get back on the road, take Route 9 past the Quabbin Reservoir, through Belchertown and Amherst, then park in a dirt lot off of Route 116, across the street from one of the trailheads. I spray myself from boots to buzz-cut with the insect repellent, and strap on my backpack.

wildflowers
all I smell
is cedar

White rectangles painted on tree trunks lead the way. It's not long before I'm winded and sweating profusely. There are steep rocky pitches where I have to use my hands to scramble up the trail. My backpack contains my journal and a few thin volumes of poetry, but nothing that should make the trek so difficult. Did I choose the hardest path? I stop and rest on a small bluff looking eastward, the modern buildings of UMass Amherst, look out of place within the landscape of plush hills and quilted farmland. Ice-age glacial sheets helped form these mountains, and a prehistoric lake, Lake Hitchcock, once covered much of the valley. I read a few Gary Snyder poems, and as I scratch in my Journal, sweat drips from my brow onto the page. The constant pop, pop, pop, from the gun range below echoes off trees and boulders.

lake hitchcock
what was written
now illegible

I climb to the summit. It doesn't take long, maybe a half-hour. However, it's

not the peak I meant to reach. I thought I was climbing the eastside of Mount Holyoke, which I've climbed several times before, but from the west. The Summit House, an old hotel perched on top of Mount Holyoke, can't be seen from where I'm standing. I'm sure I know how to get there, but that would mean climbing down one mountain to climb up another. The hike up to this point has been exhausting, I'm not going to consider the notion. I find a granite slab to plop down on, it's warm from the sun, but there's shade from a pine. I chomp on an apple I had stashed in my pack. I whip the core over a rocky overhang and think far too late that there might be hikers below.

I can't see it, but I know the Connecticut River flows between this mountain and the city of Northampton. Because of a few pines and bushes, I see mostly sky, and possibly far off to the northwest, Mount Greylock. Other hikers snap photos or munch on granola bars and raisins packed in sandwich bags. I exchange pleasantries with a few, but mostly keep to myself. The truth is, I wish I was back home, writing poems or picking my banjo while the cats sleep on the bed and rocking chair as traffic, birds, and rustling leaves lull me from outside the windows. This happens often: I putz around the house feeling antsy, then push myself out the door to go to a coffee shop or bookstore, or mountain, and once I get there, I want nothing more than to race back home.

*wrong mountain
a black and yellow butterfly
lands on my pant-leg*

A young woman walks down a path on the north side of the mountain. She moves quickly—it looks easier than the way I came up. I head in her direction. I know I'll need to get to the east side of the mountain, but there must be a trail that branches off of this one. The trail slopes downward, and there are the same white rectangles blazed on the trees. I don't want to creep the woman out by following too closely, so I take my time getting to my feet, but now she's nowhere in sight, and the path begins to climb uphill. The terrain's rugged. At times, you have to go up to get down, but this keeps going up and up, and before I know it, I reach another summit. I don't know what to do, except I know I don't want to turn back. There's a sign with an arrow: *To Chmura Road*. **WARNING:** *unmarked and confusing trails.*

*unfamiliar path
a garter snake slithers
through the understory*

I've never heard of Chmura Road, but it's a road, which means it's off the mountain. Much of the trail is deep with mud and ruts. I no longer hear traffic

or gunfire from the shooting range. On at least two occasions I discover mounds of scat too big to be from a dog, and too small to be from a horse. I look over my shoulder for bears.

I empty onto Chmura Road, and look left, scan right. A residential street with expensive homes and manicured lawns. A high school kid rides by on his mountain bike. I ask if he knows how to get to Route 116.

“116?!” There’s surprise in his voice and he needs to pull out his phone for a map. “Well, if you head north, you’ll eventually hit Bay Road, that’ll lead to 116.”

I know Bay Road. I know how far it’ll be until it connects with Route 116.

“Okay, will heading south be shorter?”

“Oh yeah, it should,” he says, “but the thing is, I wouldn’t know which trails to take.”

It’s shorter. I thank him, turn south, and start walking. The road is long and I’m tired. My feet hurt. I don’t own hiking boots, all I have are steel-toe construction boots, and my big toe rubs against the metal plate where the padding inside has worn away. I don’t come across any side streets and wonder what the kid meant by “trails.” I soon find out when the road comes to a cul-de-sac surrounded by oaks. That is, except for a gap between two trees, a path that leads back into the woods.

*sound of a lawnmower
mosquito buzz
in my ear*

No trail markers, but there is a fork that heads east. The sound of traffic returns and is somewhere in front of me. It has to be Route 116. I walk for a while; the trail spills out into an open field. The grass is about four feet tall and there’s a small hill that prevents me from seeing the other side. I start to cut through the field. A dog barks, the barking gets louder, closer. I don’t know if I’m trespassing on private property, and I sure as hell don’t want to get mauled, so I turn back.

*lost in the mountains
smell of cow shit
civilization near*

It's been forty-five minutes since I re-entered the woods from Chmura Road, four hours since I descended the first summit. I take another unmarked path. It ends in someone's backyard, but I know the house, at least I've driven past it before, I know the road it's on, Bay Road, just a little farther up from where I would've been if I just walked the opposite direction on Chmura Road. I stagger out from behind a garage, and in the driveway a guy works on his truck engine. I don't acknowledge him. He glances at me, then turns back to his socket wrench.

*everywhere
green leaves and brown bark
lady slipper*

I walk two-and-a-half miles up Bay Road, the sun beats down on my scalp. There are no trees along the road. I've got a large Thermos of water I've been reserving in my backpack. I stand off to the side of the road, unzip my pack, and take four big ice-cold gulps as family-crammed cars and commercial trucks throw warm wind in my face.

*sunbaked road
honking horns
cricket chirps*

I make it to Route 116 with about a half-mile to go to where my car is parked. Out of the corner of my eye, on the other side of the guardrail, a rabbit chews on grass. It watches me for a moment, then turns and hops into the underbrush. Besides a garter snake, a few birds, and some insects, this is the only wildlife I've seen all day.

*rabbit under
proceed with caution sign
beer cans in the weeds*

I reach my car, collapse on the driver's seat, drain what's left in my water bottle, and drive the thirty minutes home. Inside my apartment, I sink into my swivel chair, peel off my muddy boots. I hesitate, frightened of what condition my feet are in—am I going to have a sock full of blood? I'm sure I've got a blister begging to burst. I slip off my damp socks and discover only a small blister under my big toe. I pull off my shirt. There's a deer tick firmly attached under my left armpit. I pluck it off and flush it down the toilet. Lyme Disease crosses my mind, but I'm too spent to think about it.

Days pass. I don't see the infamous bulls-eye rash. A week later, I wake up with

a headache. I diagnose myself as going through caffeine withdrawal since I haven't had my coffee yet, but after my third cup, I still have a headache. I must be dehydrated. I drink water, pop a couple of Advil.

Memorial Day. I help a friend plant his garden. We rip weeds out of the ground, aerate the soil before we plant carrots, tomatoes, pole beans, Swiss chard, peppers, onions and herbs like basil, rosemary, and dill. While we work, I tell him about my mishap on the mountain. Later, we drink cold beer on his porch, shake our heads in disgust as we talk about our President, and watch my friend's two young daughters play in the yard.

*empty water gun
two clouds slug
across the sky*

The next morning I'm achy, especially in my shoulders and neck. It feels like someone whacked me with a 2x4. I must be getting old, or I moved the wrong way when tilling the garden with a pitchfork. I'm freezing. Another cold spring morning. A hot shower will revitalize me. I walk into the bathroom and catch myself in the mirror above the sink, see a bulls-eye rash under my arm. My thermostat reads seventy-four degrees. I'm shivering. I'm not cold, I have the chills. I'm not sore from gardening, and the headache had nothing to do with a lack of coffee. It's Lyme. I call my doctor; the receptionist fits me in for a late morning appointment. I strip off my boxers, and step inside the shower. As the water massages my sore neck and back, I think about all the indoor activities I can do during the summer.

*air conditioner
birch leaves rustle
outside the closed windows*

PARENTAL WISHES

“Step over here,” my father says, “quietly.” The two of us creep around his octagon shed, crunching leaves, snapping twigs, the dewy grass soaking our pant legs. “I’ve been meaning to prune the cherry tree, and I’ll show you why I haven’t.”

We round the corner where my father’s ladder leans against the shed’s backside along with some shovels and rakes. “Do you see it?” My father’s finger slightly trembles as he points. “Look at the top rung.”

Resting on the ladder’s top step and wedged against the shed’s green clapboard siding is a construction of pine needles, twigs, and grass stems. Scrunched down on the flimsy nest, a dove sits so still it takes me a moment to see its onyx eye looking straight at me. “She must have eggs,” my father says.

“Yes, I’d think so,” I say.

A crisp breeze rises; the cherry tree sways. “Maybe I should just buy a new ladder.”

*a hope for this spring
my brother’s memorial tree
finally blossoms*

INHERITANCE

raven croak
more and more my father's voice
flies out of my mouth

I inherited my father's diabetes, who inherited it from his mother, who, in turn, inherited it from her mother, who, on her deathbed, clung to a rosary and begged for the priest, who, when entering her dark room, gagged and stumbled out, refusing to give her the last rites, because he couldn't tolerate the stench of the gangrene rotting her left leg. I inherited my father's disgust for the Church. His stockiness, bowed legs, barrel chest, and prominent forehead. I didn't inherit his propensity for grit and sweat—for pulling tree roots out of dirt by hand or hammering shingles on a roof in summer heat. I didn't inherit his taste for okra or his predilection for the sea. But I inherited his love for inside jokes. Family and friends stare blankly, unable to comprehend, while my father and I stretch out in lawn chairs, both of us laugh-crying, holding our sides, unable to catch our breath.

day moon
my father's shadow
in my path

SPURTS AND FLASHES

This morning, I wake knowing I want to go to the New England Peace Pagoda in Leverett, Massachusetts but also know I'm not in a hurry. I have my daily dose of two cups of coffee (black) while I scroll through Facebook, test my blood sugar, eat a bowl of Raisin Bran, and take my morning pills. I dress and feed the cats. I let the calico in through the bedroom window and scold her for staying out all night by bringing her to my chest and forcing her to endure my cuddles and kisses.

*crisp morning
the cat's fur smells
of pine needles*

I drive to the Quabbin Reservoir, park my car, and take my morning walk on the Winsor Dam. The dam is half mile long, one of the longest dams on the east coast. I walk the length of it six times which takes little more than an hour. It's an uneventful morning. The sky's a deep blue with a few lazy clouds, and the same three turkeys I see every day graze in the grass below the dam. The lake's more choppy than normal, and down from the turkeys is a flock of Canada geese of about three adults and nine goslings. Once, about a month ago, I was trekking back to my car when a moose stepped out from the birch and oak and stood right in front of me. I froze, couldn't believe what I was seeing. The moose didn't budge but looked right at me. It was larger than any deer, but not as large as most bull moose, and it didn't have antlers, so it must've been a female or a juvenile. I slowly walked backward, chanted under my breath, "Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit." After a few seconds, the moose wandered to the other side of the woods, gone as quietly as it had arrived.

*a moose steps
onto the path
the same paralyzing fear
as when I had to stand
before my father*

I head west on Route 9. I eventually reach the winding roads of North Amherst that roll into Leverett. I've been to the Peace Pagoda a handful of times, but I still get lost. I know I don't want to find myself on Route 63. At every turn I plead for it to not be Route 63, but eventually, just past the Route 63 sign, I

pull my car over to the side of the road. I drag an old TomTom out of the glove box. It takes a few minutes to get it working, but soon I'm back on the road and after a few minutes I turn into a gravel parking area.

I walk for about five minutes on a path through the woods. At the end of the trail, the canopy of trees opens up to a lush green field, blue sky, and in the center, the white dome of the Peace Pagoda. On the left, made from tan and white stone is a Buddhist temple. It has large windows and two lion statues flanking the steps leading to its large wooden doors. I've never been inside the temple. I've been reading up on Buddhism for years and I practice mindfulness, but I don't feel comfortable calling myself a Buddhist, like I haven't earned it or something. I feel that if I set foot in the temple I'd be trespassing, and I don't want to give any sense of disrespect, so I go no further than the steps. I look back toward the field and the path that led me here. I look toward distant blueish-gray mountains, listen to crickets and birds, and think, *I could live here—just walk into the woods and disappear. I'd be okay with that.*

*in the woods
fantasy of a life
of solitude
the distant sound
of a freight train*

There's a walkway that circles the pagoda—at each of the north, south, east, and west points of the dome there's a Buddhist statue painted gold. I'm thankful that such a place exists so close to home. There's a pond a short distance from the pagoda that has beautiful pink water lilies. Goldfish swim just below the surface and at the water's edge is a bright-green frog with yellow eyes, it doesn't move, and for a long while, neither do I. A stone bridge crosses the pond, and near the bridge is a small tree that once had a wasps' nest in it. I'll tell my sweetheart that the nest is no longer here, but I know she'll never return.

*peace pagoda
my love walks too close
to the wasps' nest*

As I cross the bridge, I start to think about my meditation practice. From January 2018 to April 2019, I meditated every day for twenty minutes without missing a single day. I'd sit in a straight-back chair with my eyes half-closed either in silence or with some jazz playing softly. Most of the time I'd just focus on my breathing and observe my monkey mind as objectively as possible, other times I might do a body scan or a guided meditation, but in the past four

months I haven't meditated at all. I still work on mindfulness, while doing the dishes, driving to work, or out on my morning walk, but it's not every day, and I don't set a timer of any kind—I do it more in spurts and flashes when it comes to mind, especially when I'm anxious or find my thoughts spiraling down an abyss of negative thought-stories.

On the other side of the pond, a rock garden, and strung from tree to tree are brightly colored prayer flags. On one of the tree branches are some wind chimes ringing out the familiar notes of a pentatonic scale. There's no dramatic reason for why I stopped meditating, it just seemed that over time it became one more thing I had to do, one more chore. I'm a counselor. I work in a residential program for adults with special needs. I often work twelve-hour shifts where there aren't twenty minutes to sit and meditate, and if I do try to squeeze it in somewhere, I spend the whole session worrying if the office phone is going to ring, or if one of the clients will knock on the door needing help with something, and in the end, whether I was able to get through the twenty minutes uninterrupted or not, I'm more stressed and frazzled than I was going into it. I do miss it, and I may start up again, but I don't think I'll be so rigid with making sure it's done every day for a specific amount of time, and then berate myself for being a failure at living up to my own expectations.

*late morning
here to hear it or not
the cicada sings*

I sit on a wooden bench, watch two bumblebees do what they do on goldenrods that live next to some pussy willows. I focus my attention on the bees, then on the movement of the goldenrods in the wind, then the wind on my face, then on my breathing, uninterrupted.

*prayer flags
flutter above
yellow zinnias
I leave footprints
next to the pond*

MEDITATIONS WITH DEAD HORNETS, BUT ALSO WILD BIRDS

After Frank O'Hara

Through an open window: a breeze, or is it a mother's loving hand running through the wheat field of my head? For the first time in a long time, it's as if I've arrived home after hitchhiking abandoned highways—ones with trees breaking through asphalt. Of course, not my home, but the idea of home, and not my mother's fingers troweling my scalp, but fingers belonging to a woman who'd look upon my landscape, eager to drive a stake into my soil.

Last winter, I pushed a rotting gourd off my windowsill and let it become one with snow and mud. Now I've got an octopus-like green monster thriving below my writing desk; its yellow-orange lips pucker skyward, beg for water, and I'm a servant to its thirst.

It's been years since I've seen her, the woman with dark hair and sunken eyes. She used to buy me ice cream and once gifted me a bike for my birthday. I used to crawl onto her lap while she read romance novels on the olive-green couch with embroidered vines. My head on her thigh, she'd rub my ears until I fell asleep. I've yet to see a blue heron this year—all I've seen are dead hornets on the windowsill. I did not see a blue heron last year, but the year before, a long shadow shaped like a crucifix glided overhead and disappeared into fog wafting through cattails and reeds.

Christmas 1987, we haven't seen my brother in days, probably getting high in some basement apartment, snow-light splitting maroon curtains, shadows deepening in flame flicker. Mother's given up on looking for him, even though he's only sixteen. I'm twelve and watching something insipid on TV when she announces she's heading over to her boyfriend's house. "You can open your presents if you want." She closes the door before the words finish leaving her mouth. I don't know it yet, but this is the last Christmas I'll spend in my childhood home, the last Christmas with my mother. I'll spend it alone, opening gifts I already knew the contents of because I found them weeks before hidden unwrapped in my mother's closet.

I look up from my notebook, a Ruby-throated Hummingbird hovers. Last night's thunderstorm battered the azaleas until they let go of their petals. They stand naked without beauty, without their sweet-filled usefulness. My mother never told me she wished I was never born, but once said to a neighbor while

I stood beside her that if she could do it all over, she'd never have children.
The hummingbird will not come this way again.

sparrows flutter
in and out of a hemlock
one more thing without you

SUNDAY IN THE PARK

As one police officer handcuffs a thin woman, her body bent over the back of a squad car, another officer carries away a small boy with arms straight as spears, stiff with war, his cheeks slicked with tears. The child shouts, “Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!” until the officer buckles him in the seat of another cruiser flashing blue and closes the door on his raw and high-pitched anguish.

*marsh marigolds
a mallard leads her brood
into the reeds*

UNDER THE SUN

Quarter to noon, and I'm still in my underwear, eating honey-roasted sunflower kernels one pinch at a time as I stand on my paint-chipped veranda, gazing across the road at the yellow alfalfa fields crowned with straggly pines. I must do laundry, which means sliding into pants and driving to the laundromat. Instead, I natter with the neighbor's orange tabby that spouts from under the hydrangeas and the chickadees flitting in and out of a tangle of oaks and birches. From the open window behind me, Bill Evans plays *Nardis*, and the song unfurls like dogwood flowers. The old farmer's wife, who owns the fields, bumps down the road in a rusted-out '78 Chevy. I step onto the sunny stone steps and wave. She gives two curt honks.

*roadside daisies
nothing she
hasn't seen*

PILGRIMAGE

We trudge through a mucky power-line path, cut through a cluster of spruce, and reach a stream brimming with mountain runoff, its banks overgrown with chokecherries. It was at this spot last summer a group of boys found our child's body wedged under fallen branches in the water, her pink jacket standing out from the blue-gray river stones and wet bark.

We were perusing a flea market a few miles upstream when we noticed our daughter was no longer with us. Shouting her name, scouring under cluttered tables, scanning stalls, calling the cops—we did everything we could to locate her.

For three days, search parties combed the forest and roadside ditches. The State Police waded the stream flowing behind the flea market but came up empty-handed. The boys who discovered her weren't looking for her, just playing in the refreshing current.

"Do you think they live there?" Allison asks, breaking my trance on the tiny cascades trickling over rocks.

"What?" I say.

"The boys. Do you think they came from over there?" She nods toward a barren cornfield littered with stalk scraps and patched with encrusted snow, where the stream bends southward. Chimney smoke plumes from a bedraggled farmhouse. White smoke against a white sky.

"I don't know. Maybe." I walk closer to her. In a few months, the crop's greenery will obscure the farmhouse and the mountains further west. The world swings around the sun; we've no say in the matter. I offer my hand; she doesn't take it. Our breath—the ghosts tethered to our lips.

*rain sweeps over
westerly mountains
a distance away
but headed
in our direction*

SHEDDING SKIN

On my morning walk, I spot a milk snake threading itself through the crack in a bridge abutment. Myth surrounds their name: Farmers would enter their barns and find snakes dangling off cow utters, fattening themselves on milk. It's not true. The snakes are interested in the barn mice, not dairy. Because of their color and markings, milk snakes are mistaken for copperheads but aren't venomous. They don't even have fangs. Their teeth are so small they can barely break the skin on a human hand. Backed into a corner, milk snakes will shake their tails like rattlers but have no rattles. Their greatest defense is fooling everyone into thinking they're tough guys, but of course, that's also why so many meet their demise at the business end of a shovel.

*visiting hours
at the county jail
my brother confesses
all he ever wanted
was to be loved*

UNCLEAR AND NOT SO PRESENT DANGER

On my daily walk around the reservoir and surrounding woods, a motorcyclist heading toward me stops in the middle of the road and waves his arms frantically. *What the hell is he doing?* I think.

I look over my shoulder; a black bear stands on a bluff between two scraggly bushes about five yards away. The bear's motionless. Up the road, forest rangers distributed coyote decoys around the reservoir to scare off Canada geese. *Bear decoy?*

I stare into the eyes to see if I can see life. The bear cocks its head. I fight the impulse to run but pick up my pace and reach the motorcyclist idling on the road.

"I tried to warn you," he says through barn-wide teeth.

"Thanks," I reply, catching my breath.

I turn back to the bluff and wonder how the motorcyclist could spot the bear from this angle with all the overgrown vegetation. The bear eases down and crosses the road, disappearing into a thicket. Not once did the bear look in our direction.

"That has to be a three-hundred pounder," I say.

"Oh, jeez," says the motorcyclist. "I didn't even see that one."

"What do you mean?"

"I was trying to warn you about the bear that stepped out behind that white pine. It crossed into the woods right behind you."

"Are you kidding?"

"Afraid not," he chuckles. "That bear on the bluff must've acted as a decoy so the other could tiptoe past you."

He laughs at his joke, revs his engine, and speeds off. I watch him until he's a

red dot amongst all the green.

*summer dusk
at the reservoir's edge
a canada goose
slumbers in the shadow
of what she's supposed to fear*

FETCHING THE MAIL

I talk wide-mouthed with slow pronunciation, easier for my deaf neighbor to read my lips. “Careful. A lot of ice.”

He smiles. Salutes as he shuffles past with hesitant steps, traversing the path to the congregated mailboxes like a minefield.

*after the storm
snow falling from one pine branch
onto another*

SHELBURNE FIRE TOWER

November 11, 2019, Veteran's Day, my friend Scott and I are going to hike up to the Shelburne Fire Tower. I'm up by 4:00 a.m., take a quick shower, check my blood sugar, and have a bowl of Raisin Bran so I've something in my stomach for when I take my meds. The weatherman says it'll be around forty degrees today, but it's always colder in the mountains, and who knows how windy it'll be. I'm a firm believer in the adage, *better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it*, so I put on my long johns underneath my jeans and red and blue flannel. I fill my Thermos with water, pack my camera and notebook, and I'm out the door by 6:45 a.m.

*snow clouds quilt the sky
three cats warming
the warm bed*

Scott and I have known each other since seventh grade. In high school, we co-lead a jazz group, and though we haven't played in a band together in over twenty years, the harmonic memories of those times will forever keep us in rhythm. These days, we live an hour away from each other, and our work schedules couldn't be more opposite. It's a rare thing for us to have the same day free from other obligations.

I drive north-west to the town of Greenfield. I meet Scott in a parking lot behind a bank, and after exchanging pleasantries, I pop my trunk so he can transfer his backpack and trekking poles from his car into mine. We travel west on Route 2 toward Shelburne. It doesn't take long to find the trailhead about 50 yards past the turnoff into Shelburne Falls, a village famous for its old trolley bridge that's been turned into a floral garden.

*bridge of flowers
an old friend's hand
clasped in mine*

The trail starts off steep, and I'm soon out of breath. Scott hikes more than I do and moves a lot quicker. In a short time, he's a good distance ahead of me. The air's brisk. I can feel it deep in my lungs, and my throat's dry. Every few feet there are laminated signs nailed to trees letting hikers know what kind they are, and a bit of description, including an illustration of their leaves. We stop

for a breather, and as I learn the Latin name for red maple, Scott notices some princess pine peeking out from the undergrowth. “This used to grow all around my meme’s cottage,” he says. “People would go around and collect them to make wreaths and other Christmas decorations, but no one mentioned to us kids that we shouldn’t pull them up by their roots or when they’re about to seed, and by 1985 they were all gone.”

*november’s gray wind
the pursuit of happiness
stuck in our boot treads*

We continue toward the summit. My body has acclimated to the climb. I’m no longer out of breath and, not to say the hike is easy, I’m not feeling the strain on my thighs and knees as in the beginning. However, I’m sweating right through my long johns and flannel, so much so, my jeans are damp to the touch.

Scott tells me that his wife, Christine, is getting certified to be a yoga instructor. I ask how his daughters are doing in school, and mention the book I’m reading, a true story about this twenty-year-old kid who one day drove into central Maine, parked his car, and didn’t come out of the woods, or speak to another human being for twenty-seven years. My envy echoes off the quiet birch that surrounds us.

*bare trees
the only sounds of wildlife
are our voices*

We reach the top of Mt. Massamet. There’s a clearing with a couple picnic tables. In the center is one of only two stone fire towers in New England. It was built in 1909 and stands at sixty-five feet. We lay our packs and trekking poles on one of the picnic tables and sit for a few minutes. I even take off my Vermonter-style black and red plaid coat that’s wet around the collar with sweat. I take a few hard gulps of water from my Thermos and watch steam rise from my skin.

The fire tower doesn’t have a door so you can walk up the spiral staircase. Without a door, and the fact that it’s made of stone makes it look like a cave, which is why I half-jokingly ask Scott if he thinks a bear might use it for its hibernation. We chew this gristle for a moment, but then conclude that it’s more likely that we’d stumble upon a raccoon, opossum, or even bats. Despite all this, we decide to venture inside the tower.

dark, cold, damp
I reach out not knowing
what it is I touch

Scott has a headlamp and leads the way, but because of the twisting staircase, Scott's headlamp proves useless to anyone who is behind him. There's a steel railing, but it's ice cold and I can only hold on to it for a short amount of time before it becomes a piercing pain to my palms. There are a few rectangle windows that allow enough gray light to make out the narrow steps. We're unable to reach the absolute top of the tower because there's a locked door, I'm sure the forest rangers don't want people messing with any maps or equipment, but we go as high as we can, and from our viewpoint we can see into Vermont and New Hampshire, and down into the heart of Shelburne Falls. I can see the buildings of downtown, the two bridges that cross the Deerfield River. The cars parked along the streets could be mistaken for Matchbox Cars. In fact, with less than two thousand residents, and a landmass less than three miles, its pharmacy with a working soda fountain, and knowing it's one of the few places left in America that still has a country doctor, all I can think of is Mr. Rogers' neighborhood as I look through the zoom lens of my camera.

We traverse down the mountain without much fanfare, stopping every now and again to read more of those placards nailed to the trees. When climbing a mountain, I always think about how it'll be easier coming down, but then rediscover how wrong I am as all my leg muscles work overtime to control my descend. My thighs burn, my knees want to buckle, and the pounding the soles of my feet take is relentless. We've been hiking for five hours and are glad to get back to my Corolla. We dump our gear into the trunk, and head east on Route 2 back to Greenfield. I park behind the bank next to Scott's Mazda, and then we walk around the block to a local brewery that's known for their fish tacos as well as their beer. We both order a brown ale, but skip the fish tacos, and order instead two grass-fed beef burgers.

city sidewalks
a single blood-red leaf
among the dead leaves

It's been dark all day, but now it's getting darker. We walk back to our cars. I tell Scott to give my best to Christine and the kids, and he assures me that he will. We say our goodbyes, and each begins our drive home in separate directions. I wonder what he's listening to on his ride home. I can hear the sound of his daughters' voices as he walks through his front door, can feel the warmth of his house, and envision the brightness of the kitchen as he and Christine sit together at the table, and he tells her about his day, and she tells

him about hers.

I pull into my driveway and turn off the engine. I check the mailbox but remember a moment too late that it's a holiday. I unlock the door to my small apartment, flick on the light, and there on the bed are six eyes squinting sleepily up at me.

*snow clouds quilt the sky
three cats warming
the warm bed*

GLOBAL WARNING

Beyond white pines bordering the snow-patched field across the road, a freight train rattle-clacks and fades—hellbent on leaving town, destined for city lights' industrial glow. I'll stay here where wild turkeys cluck and purr, peck between yellow grass blades on the front lawn, where I pour warm water into a birdbath and two hens dip their beaks, stretch their necks heavenward.

*last day of winter
a tom accosts his reflection
in my car door*

ISABEL

We feed wild turkeys at the office. They strut down the sidewalk and stare at us through windows, their big eyes blinking. Their heads move with our movements, and they trot to meet us at the double doors when they see us get up from our chairs. We toss them bread, stale bagels, crackers left over from the last staff meeting's cheese platter. A coworker feeds them salted peanuts from a large jar she stashes in her desk drawer.

One hen we've named Isabel walks with a limp and has a messed-up wing. She's not plump like the others. Sometimes she's among the flock, but off to the side. Mostly, she comes alone. We try to feed her a little more than the rest. I'll make a separate breadcrumb pile and stand between her and the flock so she can eat peacefully. The gobblers puff their feathers and fan their tails but keep their distance.

Over the weekend, an arctic blast ripped through the region, plummeting the temperature to life-threatening levels. Frostbite could set in within minutes. Pipes froze. Car batteries died. I worried about the turkeys, especially Isabel. I knew they'd huddle for warmth, but would they include her or push her aside?

Monday arrives. Sun blazes. The temperature jumped up forty degrees. I climb from my car to go into the office, and heading straight toward me is Isabel, her legs moving as fast as they can. She stops two feet in front of me, flaps her wings, and purrs. "C'mon, Isabel," I say as I walk to the front entrance. Her feet click on the sidewalk behind me.

*winter stars
thinking of the friend
I couldn't save
from the storms that raged
within her childhood home*

TREE RINGS

In my father's backyard, we swat away black flies. With chainsaws buzzing, the air fills with a cypress's spicy aroma. We trim the branches and lay them in a pile before a woodchipper. My father gestures toward some elms crowding out holly bushes and hydrangeas. I stomp through the undergrowth to reach them with an electric pole saw. My ears sweat under the protective earmuffs. Despite leather gloves, a splinter buries itself into my palm. How many decades has it taken for these trees to grow? It takes seconds for the chipper to chew them up. Spit them out. My father flips a switch after the last elm travels through the feed chute. The grumble and grind halts. "We got one more," he says, pointing to the memorial tree he planted twenty years earlier after my brother's funeral.

"But that's Frank's tree," I say.

My father's shoulders sag. "The roots are damaging the septic system. I have no choice."

*felling the cherry tree
pink petals cling
to our boots*

TO LIFE

To the cat, I'm no more than a stepladder—a tool for looking out the window. From here on the bed, I see a scribble of branches, the occasional flash of bird, and the dusty underside of drawn-up blinds. The cat reports on ground activity. His chatters indicate the robin's return. His yowls announce that the calico next-door is all belly and paws in a patch of sun. Today, there are no big questions I'll ask or try to answer. Instead, I'll fold my hands on my chest, and tap a finger along to my neighbor's hammer as he pounds something beautiful and strong to life.

sundown
sunrise
a butterfly
opens and closes
its wings

ABOUT THE WRITER

JOSHUA MICHAEL STEWART is the author of *Break Every String*, *The Bastard Children of Dharma Bums*, and *Love Something*. His work has appeared in *Modern Haiku*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Brilliant Corners*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, and many others. His latest book is *Welcome Home, Russell Edson*—a graphic novel & prose poem hybrid created in collaboration with illustrators Bret M. Herholz and Aaron J. Krolikowski. Stewart lives in Ware, Massachusetts.

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