

Segue

online literary journal

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Segue is published once a year in August. We accept submissions of high quality fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction between January 1 and April 30 (closed May through December), and writing about writing year-round via email. Before submitting, please read past issues to understand the sort of work we publish, then read our submission guidelines.

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Dawn

*A socialist health takes hold of the adult,
He is stripped of his class in the bathing-suit,
He returns to the children digging at summer,
A melon-like fruit.*

—Delmore Schwartz, “Far Rockaway”

The first boat
out in the water bobs along in the breaking up
of the surface, and holds the course loosely,
battered by waves but seeming to have
as its end a movement toward sunrise:

an orange-yellow, flat, plate-like recurrence
of light on the water encrusted with mist.
The sky has not even started to yellow
or blue, but retains its dull grayish wall-like

plaster of fog the light cuts through,
and so is seeming to come from nowhere
if not sudden. These boaters have brought
with them the expectation and the non-

expectation, the gear and the knowledge that somewhere
beneath this, there is something or nothing,
that non-directing is an aspect of life
as singing is a reversal for fish,

as lovely as drowning, but one never thinks
of that—The father is talking to his boys
with a fog of cigarette smoke as haze-bound
as the sun. His gear is as netted

and intricate as the mess he must work through
every morning, and so brings survival
into this instant of not really looking
forward, for the boat moves by happenstance,

water buffeting it in continuous
resettlings of its non-direction
which is relying upon the sameness
and generosity of the sea.

What after all are destinations
for the entangling schools of fish
or wheeling, eyeing gulls, except
a moment of eating from the waters?

Pacific Palisades

That place teetered like a grandmother.
It seemed a mix of ash and flesh—
color, sentiment, and ancient sea.

I, a child climbing that face,
knew nothing about those cliffs
not found through finding and losing footing—

only how the coast formed
its hazard there, and fell toward oceans
in soft moldings of debris.

Here and there, random patches
of buried highway peeked from detritus
near the chain link fence

past which construction of the new road
continued beside a chameleon ocean
always changing, according to the sky.

What were these weathering fabulations
of mud? Hard enough to scramble on;
they powdered underfoot;

the scree slid as you plunged down
into the wreckage of the coast,
a soft announcement of the mountains

rising at the far end of the plateau.
Each year the rain cut off slices of cliff,
trying to push the sea away,

but water was always smarter and had
no sense of shame. It waited across the highway
while the road crews cleared out the rubble,

and above, the demolition teams
took down the houses left dangling over
or too near the drop for habitation.

That place was terraces, yarrow, chaparral,
clad in sunlight, a rough skin of cracking mud,
a constellation of pebbles in clay

that, like a grandmother, spent days remembering
how the land and sea had once kissed.

Homeless

After Anzen Sensei Sekei

I say to you, "Look! Take this! It is yours!"
How can I pretend to have said anything?

Moonlight is drifting down a cliff
and the pine trees
seem infused with a glow.

The glow tells us something—
perhaps we are home,
though we cannot see where we are going.

Going itself might be enough
if one is ready to sleep at all odds
anywhere—
 where corn grows,
or beneath the marquee of some vast theatre.

We are all homeless in at least one way—
another way to say we are here.

We traveled, dreamed;
we know there is someplace
we still need to go,
but do not know where yet.

The birds are alive
and the first moon shines.

We seem to resemble the things we know.

Author Notes

Allan Johnston was born in La Jolla, California, but moved to Pacific Palisades when he was six months old. He started writing poetry at about age sixteen, and did an undergraduate degree in English at California State University Northridge. Jeffers, Eliot and Plath are poets who haunted him early on. Between 1974 and 1976 he lived intermittently between eastern Washington state, Denver, Colorado, and southern California, and in 1979 moved to Davis, California, where he received an M.A. in Creative Writing and a Ph.D. in English from the University of California—Davis, working with Gary Snyder. Since 1989 he has lived near Chicago. His poetry has appeared in over sixty journals, including Poetry, Poetry East, Rhino, Weber Studies, and Rattle. He has published one book (Tasks of Survival), and has a chapbook forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. His awards include a fellowship from the Illinois Arts Council and placements in competitions sponsored by Two Review, New Letters, Roberts Writing Foundation, and other venues. Besides writing poetry, he has published studies of authors and literature in ISLE, Twentieth-Century Literature, AUMLA, and other journals, and is currently president of the Society for the Philosophical Study of Education.

About the Work

All three of the poems came more or less as word flows sparked by memory or association. “Pacific Palisades” reflects back on the extensive time in my childhood I spent climbing in the canyons near my house, and the cliffs that face the sea and crumble underfoot. “Homeless” stemmed from readings I did of a commentary on Dogen’s *Mountains and Rivers Sutra* combined with associations with landscapes I encountered in northern California while fighting forest fires. “Dawn” most probably reflects on Lake Michigan, which I live by. Stanzaic structure would be the most worked on component of these works; “Dawn,” for instance, started as a free flow, free verse work, and only slowly moved to the quatrain pattern it now holds. The same holds for the stanzas of “Pacific Palisades,” which underwent two-line and other stanzaic patterns before reaching its current form. I resolved these tensions by playing. Playing, self exploration, word exploration, world exploration, and finding out what you know by what you write and rewrite are all part of what makes poetry for me. In the moment is the muse, and I love that instantaneous moment of creation; in the labor is the joy, when things take form out of slow buildings-up of possibilities.

Allan Johnston on the Web

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