

Introduction

TWO YEARS AGO, when we were first planning this issue to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the UMass MFA program for Poets & Writers, we batted around all sorts of ideas about how to canvas alums in an effort to represent the program as rigorously as possible. We quickly learned that that approach was totally inadequate in dealing with a living population of extremely lively writers characterized best by their restless invention. Any form of being representative felt erstwhile or ersatz. Instead, it became clear that we ought do what we do best: make a great issue of the *Massachusetts Review*. The special part of the issue is that we would be selecting from current available work by alumni of the program. Meaning: us: magpies pecking through an Oscar-worthy closet in search of nesting.

As someone who teaches poetry writing, I've had my share of academics sidle up to me querulously with a: "You don't really think you can teach someone to be a great writer, do you?" To which I inevitably lose the nerve to reply: "Well, not *you* surely." But it is actually, clothed in a different tone, a decent question to which the answer is yes and no, since a writer needs to teach *herself* to be a writer—how to enable that? A writer needs, absolutely needs, a literary education, however that is configured. And most of all, a writer needs to learn to revise. And yes, in fact, these are precisely the things that a great MFA program teaches. Above and beyond these, and something the UMass Amherst's MFA program has a particular skill for creating: a writer can learn to be sustained by and can sustain community in ways that make the world better. *Way* better.

Which leads me to a differently configured party primal scene. I can't recall if it was the party with baby goats present or not, but it was one of the many incredibly genial gatherings hosted by Dara Wier at her home. We were inside, there was a fire burning, so probably not the season for baby goats. But the blend of the impish younger grad students, local folk, alums, visiting luminaries, faculty and so on at these parties always has a heady character for me. Many of the people I admire and might be a little intimidated by, but the weirder Proustian pleasure is the presence

of many others I don't know or know of. . . yet. Anyway, a riffraff of writers, we're sort of slouched into your usual dining room-cleared-of-its table circle and Cory Ericson is telling a story that is challenging our snarf and gag reflexes at once. A story about him. A detail-rich, squirmingly good story about him . . . decapitating a moose.

When I was sending out tendrils for this issue, I was sometimes disappointed by favorite writers not having anything for me presently. They had just published a book, were busy being poet laureate, or were on the way to something still just a glow on the horizon. Worried that this might be the case, I was about to close an early exchange with Cory—until, he offered: what about I write up that story about the moose. Insert insanely smiling moosehead emoticon here.

I like to think about that story, “Scavenger,” as, among other things, a nimble, if gory, account of one writer's dogged work at revision. And indeed, many of the pieces presented in this celebration issue dwell on re-vision. From Mira Bartók's “Alternate Endings,” where she takes received stories about writers, artists, and famous dogs, and revises their outcomes, to Valerie Martin's “Incident at Villedeau” where an incident rattles around its Hawthornian box til the dirt is worn off the artifact. And: Jedediah Berry's steampunk spy noir atmospherics; James Haug's retrofitted comics; the poetic distillation of Matthew Zapruder's unnamed perfume.

We ourselves have attempted a little revisioning of our usual format—we actively sought and happily found longer poems, two love-lies from Gillian Conoley and Brian Baldi in particular—but also generally solicited works in clusters. The hope is to create a novel texture for our special issue, one up to exploring the pleasures and peculiarities of duration.

The *Massachusetts Review* is very proud to be neighbors, and now fellow quinquaginarians, with the MFA program for Poets & Writers.

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for the editors