

A scenic photograph of a river flowing through a rocky landscape. The river is clear and blue, surrounded by large, light-colored boulders. In the background, there are green hills and trees under a clear sky. The text is overlaid on the image.

# Sierra Musings

LITERARY SPARKS  
FROM EMERGING WRITERS

SPECIAL *YUBA LIT* ISSUE

- FALL 2016 -



Welcome!

Thanks for picking up a copy of Sierra Musings. This zine is grassroots literature love, spreading local writing in a self-published format. Sharing for the sake of inspiration, entertainment, self-expression – all the reasons you've made writing a part of your being. This zine is dedicated to emerging (and established) writers and poets who are often excluded from the mainstream's field of vision.

This first issue showcases the work of our talented Yuba Lit readers, including Memoirist Frances Stroh, Poet Eugene Berson and a teaser for Fiction Writer Elizabeth Soderstrom.

We're inviting contributions to our next issue. We're looking for talented emerging writers to fill our pages for Issue #2.

Email poems (single spaced), flash fiction or memoir (under 500 words) to [sierramusings@gmail.com](mailto:sierramusings@gmail.com). The deadline for Issue 2 submissions is October 15, 2016.

Muse away!

Jenny & Angela

A word is dead  
When it is said,  
Some say.  
I say it just begins  
to live that day.  
– *Emily Dickinson*

## - Editors' Note -



**Angela Sells, PhD**, is an instructor of mythology and poetry at Sierra College and Meridian University. She is an aspiring writer, with her first book, *Sabina Spielrein; The Woman and the Myth*, due out in 2017 with SUNY Press.



**Jenny Godwin** has a community-minded job she loves, but leaps back to the mountains and Yuba the moment she's off the clock. Her landscape-rooted poetry has appeared in *Scribendi* and is forthcoming in *Tule Review*.

## - Contributors -



**Gene Berson** is a poet based in the Sierra Foothills, and working on a collection titled *Yuba Grooves*. His work has appeared in such journals as *American Poetry Review* and *Beatitude*, and the anthology *Honeydew*.



**Elizabeth Soderstrom** of Nevada City is working on her first novel, *Malachite Drift*, taking place in Northern Botswana in the Okavango Delta, where Soderstrom worked for the State Department. She is a Program Manager at the Resources Legacy Fund.



**Frances Stroh's** *Beer Money: A Memoir of Privilege and Loss* is at once a recollection of a city, an industry, and a dynasty in decline, and the story of a young artist who struggles to find her way out of the Stroh family ruins.

## Temporary Ongoing

A great blue heron flaps and lifts  
from the estuary  
where splintered pallets float  
gathering the daily tide of wrappers and scum --  
the bird tilts  
veers back over the freeway  
fishing line hanging from its feet

to a cypress where it  
luffs its wings  
dances for footing, slightly  
hampered by the monofilament

before settling  
onto branches nodding  
under its weight

neither of us  
can do anything about  
the problem

but there's no getting away  
from it: I'm the one  
with the fingers

**no illusions at five o'clock**

people were getting off downtown  
rushing to get home out of the cold wind  
fog poured down Market Street  
shrouding doorways in gloom  
sunlight visibly leaping out of its way

a middle-aged black gentleman strolled  
up to the pebble-textured trash receptacle at Fourth & Market  
quite unconcerned about getting anywhere  
obviously facing the night without refuge  
and whispered to himself

“ . . . relinquish the chastity pose . . . ”

as he reached into the garbage  
to retrieve an almost  
unsmoked cigarette  
delighted at his good luck

*relinquish the chastity pose . . .*

he dropped this pearl, no doubt dearly earned  
in my ear for free  
as I was vacuumed along with the crowd  
down the BART stairs into the tube  
wishing I'd had the presence of mind  
to slip him a few bucks

the moment already gone.

**in the mix**

swirling more slowly  
in an inner tube  
having just rippled below rapids where the river  
widened into quieter water  
I spun beneath alder trees  
where damselflies were mating

males, attached behind each female's thorax  
faced other attached males  
seeming to shadow box each other  
females holding onto blades of river grass  
elbows jutting out, threadlike forearms angled  
in a sure grip, anchoring their mates

wind high up the ravine  
spilled down its path of paling leaves  
lichen quivered  
umbrella ferns twisted on their stems  
ripples reached me  
hair on my arms  
leaned in the direction  
the breeze was following

all because the earth was turning  
in soundless space

- Interview with Gene Berson -

**What drives your writing? Where does inspiration lie?**

The flow of life can be cruel (a very human word), and is no respecter of human hopes. Poetry is at the heart of this continual impersonal transformation. "I walk out into a flood of correspondences" wrote Rimbaud.

Everything is connected. Is it divine intuition when we think of someone and suddenly they call? When you live in a certain openness meaningful correspondences occur. Our lives are not careers. They frequently take dangerous and mysterious curves that leave us uncertain as how to navigate them. But the universe is full of clues. But a literal mind cannot discern them.

Of course we are also manifest in this sea of forms, seeming at times to appear almost as apparitions. But we are blood and thought and feeling and whatever composite we call soul.

Like a landscape of reflections sliding over a bubble we occur on the surface of a miracle. When you realize that all life on earth occurs within a mere 90 miles above and below the surface of the planet you get the feeling we have appeared on a screen, like a movie.

What we feel within we observe without. Where that conjunction between inner and outer occurs the poem appears, between past and future, the poem appears, between literal history and imagined reality -- the poem appears. I tend to live from that awareness, however I may feel bludgeoned into one category or another by the social order.

## **Why is poetry necessary today?**

Everyone, at one time or another, gets shoved up against the hierarchy of human society. It can be a cold, even humiliating experience. But often we discover our battles in such times. For example we are now facing constant war, a constant flood of refugees, extinctions at every turn; our battle to be ourselves connects us with kindred spirits and even the life of the planet. To be fully alive predicts this communion. My poetry constantly reminds me to face my fears and accept my place in this matrix of life.

## **How would you describe your poetry style?**

We tend to categorize poetry -- nature poetry, political poetry, metaphysical poetry and so on. Perhaps my examples suggest the category nature poetry. I don't mean to. The attitude toward life I'm trying to describe has nothing to do with such a context. It is within oneself and a way of perception.

## - Interview with Frances Stroh -

### **How did you come to enjoy literature and writing?**

I was always a reader and a writer, even as a child, and understood early on that my experience would be expressed through a creative form. It wasn't even a knowing, it just was. I drew incessantly as a child, perhaps as a way of walling off certain realities of my life but also as a way of sublimating my experience.

### **Is there any particular work that you remember making an impression on you or inspiring you?**

I remember being influenced by the writing of both Fitzgerald and Hemingway, in particular *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* – novels that both explored, among other things, the crumbling worlds of the upper classes.

### **How did you settle on autobiography rather than a fictionalized account?**

My family made beers that were emblematic of the American Dream, brands that represented and were consumed by Detroiters and the automakers themselves, so to fictionalize the brands and the company made no sense. They were what they were and I wasn't going to give them fictionalized names to shroud an identity that everyone would have guessed at, anyway.

**In one of your interviews, you spoke about your journey towards independence, both financial and personal. You now work in the Bay Area with the freedom to continue a life of writing. What**

**was that like for you, breaking from your family's history to become established in your own right?**

Forging one's own identity is essential to growing up, and to creating anything worthwhile. Moving to the Bay Area at age twenty-two, to London at age twenty-eight, etc. and creating a life utterly different from the life I knew while growing up has been an amazing journey. These places have also been vantage points from which to reflect on that other life, and it's that point of view that made its way into *Beer Money*.

**Is there a defining moment when you gave yourself permission to claim a life in the arts? As a woman myself, this carries an exceptional significance, and is also encouraging to many emerging writers out there now.**

In college I had a double major of Psychology and Asian religions. I thought then about getting a PhD and becoming a clinical psychologist. But when I recalled the sense of freedom I'd felt in high school making photographs and printing them in the darkroom, I realized my true passion was making art. I went for the MFA instead, and over time my work evolved and I became a writer.

**What came up for you during the writing of *Beer Money*? How was it to move through the emotions entangled in the past in order to return to the page to get the story out?**

By reconstructing the past through the writing of the book, I was able to reclaim many of the feelings that I'd had to push aside through the years, feelings I hadn't been able to feel at the time because the events that triggered them were too taboo to talk about in my family, such as my brother Charlie's drug bust.

As I wrote the book, patterns began to form, links that connected events that had never before seemed connected – such as the simultaneous unraveling of my family, our business, and Detroit. A new kind of understanding took hold within me. I call it “strange alchemy.”

Only through the writing of the book did I come to see how these links were all there, all along, on a somewhat epic scale, making the story of the family, our livelihood, our hometown, and our shared destinies a kind of American story. It became something bigger than my own personal story, while at the same time it's told in a very personal voice.

- Interview with Elizabeth Soderstrom -

### **How have you come to writing?**

When I was in second grade, I wrote a story that was called The Rabbit, but it was all about a deer. There wasn't even a rabbit in it. After that, I don't remember a time when I wasn't writing. In college, I first majored in English Literature in college, but ended up also getting a degree in Biology - a decision that was spurred by my feeling as if there were great words and metaphors that one could glean from the study of the natural world.

Although I do a lot of writing for the foundation where I work, it has only been in the last two years that I have been writing my novel in earnest. After turning 50, I realized that it is now or never. I try to make time to write every day if

only for a few minutes. I find that unless I have a daily practice to which I commit, many other things such as my full-time job end of up taking priority over my creative writing.

**Can you talk a bit about *Malachite Drift* and how your professional life inspired the content of your book?**

I spent four years on a post-doctoral fellowship working in Botswana for the State Department and USAID on international rivers. During that time, I came to love the Kalahari Desert, the Okavango Delta and the people and animals of Botswana. I think it was this beautiful and harsh land combined with the tension of being an expatriate in another country that called me to write this book.

**Excerpted from *Malachite Drift***

For the Love of Life

The electricity and telephone service came and went like a friendly neighbor, randomly and without good reason. That night, both were gone, and so the message about Mackenzie Slater was passed from one friend to the next via the radio.

These people, although quite used to emergencies, responded in a panic. It was not the instructions that confused them: “Go to the airstrip. We need light for the plane coming from Gaborone. Go now.” But rather the fact that Mackenzie was one of theirs, a long-term expatriate, and

bad things do not happen to one of them.

In contrast to their active disagreements over everything - from which was the worst foreign aid agency to whether warthog or buffalo was the best game meat – that night the friends of Mackenzie Slater were united in their thoughts. Not Mackenzie. Not Mackenzie. They drove without heed for themselves or for the goats in the deeply rutted road. It was a wonder they made it to the airstrip at all.

Five Hilux double cabs, three Land Rovers, two Pajeros, two combis, and one VW bug arrived at the same time despite the distances from which they had come. Lionel Slater, Mackenzie's husband, known for minimizing danger, greeted them as if they were all gathered for an impromptu, late night bush braai. Although neither he nor any of the rest of them would ever admit it, Lionel was the leader of this band of settlers and Mackenzie was their princess. With this group, leading was akin to herding a pack of honey badgers; Lionel's so-called followers complied only when absolutely necessary, and not without leaving a trail of for-the-record disagreements.

But that night, everyone did as told with uncharacteristic efficiency. They pulled into place along the runway, turned off their engines and lights, and waited with their windows open. A pair of nightjars called alternately; their song ending in a low, hollow whoop.

It was not long before Lionel whistled and waved his flashlight. All thirteen vehicles shot double beams of light angling across the airstrip. A few minutes later, the Cessna droned closer until it rumbled overhead. Making one low pass over the airstrip to check the conditions, the plane circled for landing. It was a cold night, with a strong crosswind, so the pilot landed with a dipped wing and put down one wheel spraying dirt, then the next. The plane taxied behind the small, flat-roofed concrete terminal building to refuel, and the night was quiet again. Those in their vehicles waited and watched the dry-season dust eddy in the wake of the plane.

When the plane returned, Lionel and Dr. Amundson carried Mackenzie on a stretcher from the terminal. The two men seemed unburdened by her weight, as if they were lifting her with their fingertips at a séance. Mackenzie's two dogs ran round the threesome, shepherding them as they made their way to the waiting plane. Lionel and the pilot negotiated Mackenzie into the back and then strapped into their seats. Dr. Amundson called the dogs away. The pilot yelled "clear prop" through the small airplane window, and the black blades of the single propeller disappeared in a blur.

For Mackenzie, in her blanket cocoon, it seemed as if they were barreling down the airstrip forever. As the plane charged forward, the phrase, For the love of life, let go. For

the love of life, let go, repeated itself over and over in her mind. And then the force of lift exceeded that of gravity and the small plane climbed into the vast Kalahari sky.

As the plane ascended, Mackenzie felt as if darkness pressed in from all sides. What she knew to be herself seemed to grow smaller and smaller as the darkness eroded her sense of being one layer at a time. Finally, there was only a pebble of herself left and the image of her child's face. Why did she run away? Where was she going? Then, the image melted into the shadows, too, and she had no choice but to let go. Below, the double beams of light broke from their orderly line-up and began to cross and tangle as the vehicles huddled together and the drivers tried to sort out what had happened and organize what should be done next.

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