

# To the Reader

*Words are my faithful tools and best hope.*

Paul Zimmer

Robin Hemley's essay "Field Notes for the Graveyard Enthusiast," in this issue, celebrates and confronts the one residence we all inhabit—not our graves but our humanity—and does so with writerly humor. Read it. Hemley plays with making categories of his subject but returns, ultimately, to his particular and individual story. With that focus on the individual, Hemley's essay and other work here do more than anything I could say to represent the tradition of this magazine as it enters its 75th year, with volume 75 no. 1.

Remember Thomas Merton's famous letter to peace activist James Forest, in the 1960s, in which Merton counsels Forest to worry less about seeing results from his work and to think more of the intrinsic value of the work, itself. "You gradually struggle less for an idea," Merton wrote, "and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything."

Literary art focuses on the reality that saves everything: specific people and their circumstances. Over the years, the editors who have guided this magazine have made their decisions, set their sextants, to line up for the work, itself. The value of a magazine such as this lies in the purity of its decisions; and I stand at the end of a line of editors, advisors, and mentors whose best hope stood with the value of the art, every time. The result has been writing that I can say has changed me, shaped me, and uplifted me. I hope it has for some of you, as well.

In a postscript to this issue—in the back pages—we have a little fun with the rhetoric of ideologues and idea mongers; but at this moment, at the start of the issue and the coming era, we all need to

recognize the vitality of literature and its importance. In the latter days of the presidential campaign, Vice President Elect Joe Biden closed a speech as he had done other times, by quoting from Seamus Heaney's poem "The Cure of Troy,"

History says, Don't hope  
On this side of the grave,  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.

Heaney's optimism looks to history; but as an individual, I take hope's occurrence to be more often than once in a lifetime. That's why we have great art in the first place, so we can experience intensity and transcendence with each poem and story. Individual lives make their own histories. Two years ago, I am compelled to announce, I had one child and now have four, a tidal wave of justice among many. Seamus Heaney, himself, said hope requires work and commitment. So here at the magazine, we press forward with faith in language and literary art that it will generate compassion, empathy, and family among us.

We enter our 75th year true to our mission, with three newer voices in fiction—Olufunke Grace Bankole, Ryan Clary, and Stephanie Powell Watts, who have no books yet but surely will—and one voice established and admired—as poet, essayist, and storyteller—Paul Zimmer, whose memoir *Trains in the Distance* I quote above. The same variety occurs among the poets and essayists—each generation of literary writer offering hope that we need not stay in the realm of ideology or ideas, but can move to something deeper, more human, more fun.

If you believe in this commitment to literature, I ask you, then, to take this time to renew your subscriptions and send gift subscriptions to your friends and family members. This is our celebration year. We'd like nothing more than for you to be with us.

—Robert Stewart