

Making What Matters

Editor's Note

How could one not respond to the motherly lament at the start of a poem by Debra Marquart: “north dakota I’m worried about you.” Marquart gets us going in this issue, on a theme reminiscent, at least for me, of Erik Erikson’s seventh stage of psychological development, as he defined it, generativity vs. stagnation. We know that stagnation makes for dull writing; in this issue, much of the writing and art examine folks looking outside of themselves, toward relationships with children, loves, nature, and God.

Marquart’s poem “Lament” does not rely for its literary power on the urgency of its topic—evidence of greed upon the land—if so, we would not call it a poem. I want to make that point. Poetry, as W.H. Auden reminds us, “Survives in the valley of its making,” and Marquart’s poem relies first on its voice, diction, and wit. Writers and artists in this collection, however, have taken on dual roles, as makers of art and as the ones who maintain the urgency of generativity.

This comes at a crucial time for me. In my home city recently, a 10-year-old girl named Machole and a 6-year-old girl named Angel, in separate events, were shot dead by gunfire. Machole was in her own living room when someone in a car shot several times into her house; Angel was walking out the door of a convenience store with her father. Other children continue to suffer abuse and violence, yes, but these two events, nine days apart, have caused many people here to examine the kind of landscape—city and country—we have shaped for our children.

Given the weight of the concern, one might consider the question, Does art do much good? This is not usually why

artists create art, but the question confronted Trappist monk Thomas Merton in a 1962 letter, where he confessed to being disheartened by evil in the world, despite his own writings and art. "Tell me," Merton wrote to his friend, "am I wasting my time?"

No one who reads Merton or the writing in this issue would think so. We are consoled and uplifted by the making, itself. In that way, at least, writers and artists give us hope; as Erik Erikson has written, "Hope is the earliest and most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive." Hope resides in a poem called "Ice Storms," when Alik Barnstone finds that the lake seems to be, "a huge fire-opal // surrounded by violet shadows / of human enterprise." It is also in a poem by Abby E. Murray, when a U.S. soldier at a military ceremony says, "I love the Iraqis," and he means it. It is also in this issue, where Ward, reprised from Robert Day's classic novel *The Last Cattle Drive*, says in the new story here, "I don't see what difference it makes whose life it is, just as long as it's life."

Our featured artist for this issue, Margaret Brommelsiek, examines, in both short prose essays and visual art, elements of five religious traditions. In her essay on Buddhism, she offers an expression that could be said to hover over the entire issue: "Peace is found in peace," she writes. "Suffering redeemed through compassion." As you will read, sometimes compassion misses, if we are to be honest, and sometimes our characters fail to find peace. There, too, we learn understanding; there, too, we are not wasting our time.

—Robert Stewart