

MIDWEST REVIEW features the Midwest in work by writers, photographers, and artists who live in, or have lived in, the Midwest. We consider the Midwest to be the region in the north central United States that includes the Great Lakes area and the upper Mississippi River valley (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, and Missouri). Of course, the Midwest is also a state of mind.

MIDWEST REVIEW is published each spring in Madison. We look to publish thoughtful and thought-provoking writing and visual art that examines, interprets, and redefines the wide spectrum of life, past and present, in the Midwest. We are especially interested in new and emerging voices. We accept unsolicited submissions of original poetry, creative nonfiction, short stories, and visual art from June to December. [midwestreview.org](http://midwestreview.org).

MIDWEST REVIEW is a publication of Continuing Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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**Congratulations to the winners of the 2018 Great Midwest Writing Contests**

**POETRY**

Gen Del Raye, "Seven Mistranslations"

—selected by Catie Rosemurgy

**FICTION**

Steve Fox, "Ronny"

—selected by Liam Callanan

**NONFICTION**

Eileen Favorite, "On Aerial Views"

—selected by B. J. Hollars

The University of Wisconsin-Madison's tradition of teaching and supporting writers goes back to the 1890s and its correspondence writing courses. This tradition continues today at the University's Division of Continuing Studies with writing retreats, in-person workshops, online courses, manuscript critique services, an annual writing conference, and Midwest Review which serves as a venue for the community of readers and writers in the Midwest, and beyond.

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## On Aerial Views

The pilot turns the key and the Cessna's engine sputters, then purrs. A voice comes through the static on the radio, rattling off numbers and we're cleared for departure. A high-pitched whine rings through the Cessna, and before us stretches a runway with a bright gold line. As we power down the runway, the windows rattle, the wings bounce. I lean forward in the backseat, *willing* the plane into the air. And it works—the wheels go up, my stomach drops, and we are airborne, bouncing off the blacktop, climbing up from the green fields of Lansing, Illinois. My dad sits next to the pilot, pointing at the instrument panel and shouting happily about the horizon line. At twenty-six, back to visit from California, I'm glad to go on this flight with my dad. I like the risky buzz of climbing into the sky.

Once we reach a steady altitude, we head east, toward the sprawling steel mills. This aerial view of an industrial landscape is a shock. The plane tilts and I look through the scratched-up window to the ground below. The wild prairie, the swales and ponds, were long ago paved over and divided, like a game board for Industry. I've forgotten where I came from, or maybe I never knew. Here's the other confusion—I'm not really from here. I can't claim a proud working-class background or boast of an East Side street cred, because I'm from near here (a leafier suburb, South Holland, and I grew up in a midcentury split level, 4 beds 2.5 baths). My father had escaped factory work thanks to the GI bill. But we hadn't completely escaped all this. I knew now, I understood completely, that you could escape it. At least geographically.

I'd been living in San Diego, in a pastel stucco cottage, where I walked on sandy beaches and learned to boogie-board away a year of wild and stupid decisions. The taste of salt is now something I crave in water. The whole cliché of reaching the end of the continent and starting over has worked. I ran out of land to flee across and reached the soft shores of the Pacific.

Through the scratched-up window of the Cessna, I see empty parking lots beside a boarded-up steel mill. The Michigan City cooling tower belches out dense white smoke. As the smoke drifts away, you might

even mistake the vapors for real clouds. Candy-striped gas flue stacks poke up from a coal power plant, surrounded by spindly electrical towers. Freight trains slowly snake between the outbuildings of a steel mill. The Skyway bridge looks like an upturned insect, offering two skeletal breasts. Beyond all of it, there she is, the Windex-blue wonder of the great Lake Michigan, big as some seas.

Our suburb, South Holland, is to the west, but closer to Lake Michigan than I ever realized, maybe twelve miles, because the lakefront isn't ours. Instead of beaches lining the shore, as it is up north where the plant owners lived, steel mills squat on our lakefront. Trains move gently around the plants. I've seen the trains up close, on car trips to the Indiana Dunes, their gondolas filled with petcoke or giant spools of steel coils.

My father points out the Ford plant, where his father worked. He's smiling, looking down at the game board, but I can't square it. How can he smile so hard, looking down on all that pillaged land? It isn't masculine satisfaction of seeing nature dominated. He isn't like that. Is he thinking about all the jobs created? After working one summer for Roscoe Soaps, he decided that factory work wasn't for him. He joined the army, served in Korea between the wars, then went to DePaul for an accounting degree. Did he feel gratitude toward the Ford plant, which had given his mother a tidy pension for years after her husband had passed? Or is it simply the joy of flying—the bird's eye view, the delight of squaring his landed experience against the view from above?

Flying over this landscape is a privilege that a \$60 plane ride can buy. Now this view would always be in me. I can't unsee it, and knowing what's been made of this land, the

way it was exploited by steel magnates to fund their Lake Forest homes, how it employed thousands of workers and gave them enough money to sustain offspring, some of them my high school friends and neighbors. I wanted to judge it, because I was repulsed, to decry the industry, to hate it like a good Sierra Club member, and yet there it is. Being on the wrong side of the argument again. A little too privileged to be "of" this scenery, but not privileged enough to avoid it completely.

My father had always wanted to be a pilot, and he'd once taken lessons on the sly. What made a man with nine children sneak off in the early morning and take flying lessons behind his wife's back? Escape? He couldn't risk not trying. I understood this impulse. When I'd left for California, my mother had said to me, "I think you're running away from your problems." My response: "Exactly."

That was a year ago, and I've pieced myself back together after sixth months of making my way from Brooklyn to San Diego. I'd learned that having two or three men in love with you at the same is not actually any fun. I had W2s from New York, Ohio, Illinois, Utah, and California that year, funding my foolhardy drive by couch surfing, mooching off siblings, and working office temp jobs. I've wound up with a low-paying but steady job as a production editor for a press in San Diego. I've reached a steady altitude.

My parents don't know the whole story, only fragments. I'm still supposed to be a virgin. I'm supposed to be going to Mass every Sunday. I know that my own children will have secrets from me one day, that it will be impossible for me to know them completely, and that this is the natural way. But the boy's name, the one who broke my heart, who sent



me on this wild tear to regain and recapture the languid days on ferris wheels and love-making, his name is never spoken. Because I can't explain him, I'll never be able to explain him to anyone but the closest of girlfriends. They'll nod, they'll understand this big secret ache of regret and startle.

Instead over dinner last night, my parents and I gossip with good-hearted *schadenfreude* about my cousins, discuss the plots of television shows. We plan excursions.

The plane heads toward the landfill, Mount Sag, as my brother calls it, and the Paxton Avenue Lagoon where they dumped slag and bulk waste. I keep thinking of that boy, what he would have to say about words like volatile organic compounds, arsenic. He'd been a canvasser for Greenpeace and taught me how smoke and chemical byproducts rob the air of Vitamin D, seed cancer in our ground, lead the water. How much is still lingering within me, or have I escaped? Are my parents filled with the secret cancerous plague? Whole swaths of land have been designated as brownfields. There's no way to hear the phrase brownfield and not think, shit. I see industrial waste and nature dominated, but Dad is smiling. Areas I've learned in California to call wetlands were called swamps back in the 1940s. Call it a swamp and then the idea of dumping slag into it won't seem like such a bad thing.

It's been a year and still I hope that the boy will return. He's always in my mind except when I snap a rubber band on my wrist to get me to stop thinking of him. My father always looks to the good, though I know he would see nothing good—nothing productive—in my lingering attachment to the canvasser.

The good, I know, is in the riotous sunflowers that spring between the rocks along the railroad tracks. The good is in the towering thistle that muscles its spiky leaves into the rotten-egg-smelling air. I'd seen them all my childhood, playing by the tracks in a "prairie" behind the Methodist church. But I can't see the flowers from the dusty windows of the Cessna, only the dinosaur sprawl of the steel mills desperately leeching the blue out of Lake Michigan.

But we were flying, my darling, and Daddy loved to fly!

As the plane starts descending, I trace the path of the Little Calumet River, which runs from Mount Sag to South Holland. Nobody in my neighborhood ever jumped in the Little Cal, it would be like bathing in motor oil. When the wind blew south from Mount Sag on summer days, it smelled like rotting garbage, rotten eggs. My father came outside on the driveway one afternoon, when I was back from Brooklyn, and he breathed in deeply as he stood on the driveway and said, "Ah, fresh air!" I thought he was crazy, or maybe the sense of smell diminished as somebody aged, or maybe he'd been steeped in downwind methane for so long he didn't smell it anymore, kind of like working in a pet store, but it's your whole neighborhood. I doubted his senses and his sense, yet he was also displaying that quality that sustained him. That ability to see the good despite all evidence to the contrary. When did it happen to him, this decision, because I see now, I deeply believe even, that optimism is a choice. And somewhere my dad made that choice, to embrace, to find joy, to ignore the foul stench of what others have wrought on their fellow citizens. Is this point of view a veiled kind of

desperate resignation, or is it faith? Maybe when you're raising nine children and making parochial school tuition payments as a self-employed CPA with a bare-bones medical plan, all you can do is hold on, accept the limited field of your influence, and enjoy the flight.

When you're leaving for California with two hundred bucks in a rusty Honda Civic with a boy you hardly know and a backseat full of albums and a huge featherbed, there's

a kind of dad who unfolds a map and traces your path along I-80. There's a kind of father who loves the word "profound." There's the kind of father who tells you how profound it was to watch the sun break the Pacific's horizon line on the army ship to Korea. There's the kind of father who after he dies, you mourn, but not as much as you did for other losses, because oddly, somehow, you feel that he's with you, next to you, sometimes behind you, but never looking down from above.