



Ponder Review

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PONDER REVIEW

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TANYA E. E. E. SCHMID

BEYOND GRAVITY

The sky falls to my feet as I roll off the edge of the fishing boat, the diesel fumes and the voice of the captain cut short as my scuba tank hits the waves, and I submerge. I watch the choppy surface rise above me, a fine membrane between dimensions. Saltwater sneaks into my rubber mouthpiece, washing away the sour taste of being landlocked. I exhale hard and a thousand bubbles flee upward to where gravity reigns.

Releasing the last bit of air from my lungs, I sink into the belly of the sea. I turn onto my stomach and the current sweeps me into its arms, my useless flippers trailing behind me like rudders. I spot our scuba guide and the three other members of my group speeding along the underwater conveyor belt. They are far ahead, black squiggles suspended for a moment as they turn to locate me.

The guide motions for me to catch up. My legs want to kick, but the signal from my brain disappears into the black hole of my spinal cord injury. The current presses my arms to my sides, so I undulate my upper body like a mermaid. Seawater strokes my face and breasts with invisible hands, welcoming me like a soulmate. Its caresses ease a bone-deep pain as my spine lengthens and my cramped muscles sigh. It tells me I should never leave.

I draw closer to the others, but they remain out of reach. They spurt ahead of me again and again. *We'll leave you behind*, their words, unspoken. *Hurry, hurry*. But we all know I'll never catch up. It's all I can do to follow in their wake. *Leave her here!* my saltwater friend calls to them. *I will care for her like you never could.*

The angled shadows kick their flippers at me. I want to break from the current and disappear into the deep blue, forever free of the earth's pull.

But then we reach the wreck. Once a ship, buoyant and lively, it now sits knee-deep in the ocean graveyard, its rusty metal blooming with wild pinks and oranges. On the shore, corals become pale skeletons that crumble to sand. Here, in the ocean's embrace, they are living, pulsing animals. Entire cities take refuge in their iron host, revitalizing it, making it more beautiful in death than it ever was in life. I want to linger, but the current drives me onward.

Spit out the mouthpiece, swallow the blue, sink into numbing darkness.
Then up ahead, a flock of mantas! A dozen twirling dancers flap and

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dive in a silent ballet. They cannot fall. I float past them, carried, too, by the unconditional support of the sea. The Earth's air is too thin, too weak to lift us up. On the surface, we sweat and toil under the burden of being. *Should I stay?* I ask my deep-blue lover.

In answer, a sea turtle swims towards me, a leather-backed dinosaur out for a Sunday paddle. Its age-old eyes calm my surprise. We pirouette slowly towards the surface, wrapped in a cloak of bubbles.

Twenty feet beneath the waves, I relinquish my prince to remain at the safety stop. I hover for three minutes to release surplus nitrogen from my bloodstream before returning to the realm of gravity. Ascend too quickly and bubbles can rupture small structures in the lungs, making it difficult to breathe.

But that's what happens to me at every safety stop. The longer I wait, the more breathless I feel as I remember what lies above.

When I can no longer stand it, I rise to the surface. Above the membrane, the ink blots have taken form. They stare down from the boat as if I were a wet dog trying to scratch my way up the sides. They help me over the edge. My flaccid legs bounce rubbery and useless on the deck. It takes three people to get me out of my wetsuit and two more to help me into my wheelchair. Gravity once again pins me to my seat. But I can still taste the salt on my lips.

PONDER REVIEW

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A NOTE TO READERS

Whether we like it or not, operating under the anxiety and grief of COVID-19 has become our new normal. But all this anxiety and grief has allowed us to better adapt to the constantly changing landscape of our world, including seeing the world from new and different perspectives, and opening us up to conversations that were long overdue. One of the conversations that has made it into our “new normal” is the important conversation about diversity and inclusion.

Different perspectives add to our understanding of the world. With an explosion of social issues in art, poetry, and prose, it's an exciting time to be part of the literary world as we move forward into a more hopeful, inclusive future.

We often describe *Ponder Review's* aesthetic as “Southern eclectic.” We get our sense of eclectic from publishing stories, poetry, and art from every corner of the world. The “Southern” part, for us, comes from the natural world at the center of many pieces that work to simultaneously show family matters, relationships, politics, death, love, and the *self* in our ever-evolving world. In this issue alone, we feature poems like “the forest” by Cordelia Hanemann, “My Father’s Breath” by Linda Malnack, and “Rosemary” Brent Amenyro which hold complex emotions toward the relationships between humanity and nature, as well as creative nonfiction like “My Southern” by Martha Graham Wiseman in which the author details the meanings of the strange words and phrases her Southern mother uses. This issue encapsulates all we hold dear at *Ponder Review*.

In *Ponder Heart*, the Eudora Welty novella that inspired the name for our beloved literary magazine, narrator Edna Earle Ponder uses a humorous, incredibly relatable voice to tell the story of her family and her small town. This story is reflective of our magazine's compilation of strong voices and converging stories, creating a microcosm of art and literature, and a community that we hold dear.

At the end of the day, that is who we are and what we hope to foster here at *Ponder Review*: the real and ridiculous, funny and relatable, strong, diverse voices that impact our readers and each other. We hope that you find all of that in the following pages.

This issue is also special in another way. Within these pages, we feature the winner of our inaugural 10:4:TENN playwriting contest, Bryan Starchmann, as well as an exclusive interview conducted by *Ponder's* own Melissa Goodnight. We are thankful to everyone who made our contest possible!

Sincerely,

The Editors