



April/May 2021

National Poetry Month

April 2021 is the 25th anniversary of National Poetry Month. Across the internet, tributes and poetry prompts are sprouting like spring crocuses. Somewhere deep inside us all we recognize, as Mary Oliver said, “Poetry is a life-cherishing force. For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry.” This month, write a poem or memorize a favorite one, and, as New York Times opinion writer Margaret Renkl urged in her April 5, 2021 piece, give thanks to “our poets, here in the mildness of April and the winter storms alike, who help us find the words our own tongues feel too swollen to speak...who teach our blinkered eyes to see the gifts the world has given us, and what we owe it in return.”

A Greening High Desert



Telling it Like it Is

“The Third Act”, a monthly column by Ellen Waterston in Bend’s The SOURCE Weekly, debuted on March 25. Next one up April 22, 2021. You’ll never guess what it’s about! Calling it like it is. [Click here to read.](#)

RIVERFEST



DESCHUTES RIVER
CONSERVANCY

Deschutes River Conservancy's Annual Fundraiser

As Central Oregon and many parts of the nation and the world face drought conditions, the work of the Deschutes River Conservancy and other NGOs working in sustainable water management becomes increasingly urgent. I was

honored to be invited to create a poem for this event. [Click here to learn more and to register.](#)



Stay tuned for the highly anticipated announcement of the 2021 judge of the Waterston Desert Writing Prize and more details about the event

itself! Click
on the links

[2021 Waterston Prize](#)

[Student Essay Competition](#)

below for details on the 2021 Waterston Prize and the 2021 Student Competition.

What Am I Going to Do Now

by
Ellen Waterston

It's clear the distant
calibrated steppes
are the wiser course,
but for the why not,
the I dare you,
of the solitary,
lime-bright willow,
its roots barely
grazing the surface
of the mud flat, branches,
heedless, hoping skyward.

WRITING RANCH WORKSHOPS

The World According to COVID

Writing Down the Baja 2022



Watching in dismay as other conferences and writers' gatherings go virtual well into August and even September, I am doing what I probably should have done in the first place. The eleventh annual "Writing Down the Baja" writing retreat in Todos Santos, BCS, Mexico is returning to its favorite month: February 19-27, 2022 to be exact. Thank you all for your understanding and flexibility. As we have learned through COVID, "pivot" is the operative word.

All information on 2021 and 2022 retreats is available at www.writingranch.com. Costs and details associated with fall retreats are forthcoming.



Hard Decisions

Speaking of the ongoing impact of COVID, for the second year in a row the Fishtrap staff reluctantly decided the **34th Annual Summer Fishtrap Gathering July 12-18, 2021**, will be held virtually. Having been a member of the virtual faculty in 2020 I can say Fishtrap managed to pull off a miracle, bringing to the virtual experience the inspiration, camaraderie and sense of renewal Fishtrap is known for. The 2021 faculty is anchored by African American award-winning poet Frank X. Walker, who will deliver the event's keynote address in addition to leading a workshop. Walker is the author of eleven titles, his most recent collection released in January, 2021: *Isaac Murphy: I Dedicate This Ride*, written from the perspective of the African American jockey Isaac Burns Murphy (1861-1896). [Find more information here.](#)

Via con Dios

Bruce Berger

1938-2021

Author, poet, friend and mentor Bruce Berger was a panelist and presenter at the Waterston Desert Writing Prize in 2019, and a frequent guest at the Writing Ranch's "Writing Down the Baja" in Todos Santos, BCS, Mexico. The echo of his arresting readings, gentle counsel to writers, and classical and jazz piano concerts in the main room of Serendipity in Todos Santos will, as far as I am concerned, reverberate in that space for eternity. The following is excerpted from the obituary that appeared in *The Aspen Times* in February 2021.



Berger divided his time between La Paz, BCS and Aspen, Colorado where he was known as "the unofficial dean of arts and letters" according to friend and author James Anderson. "His cabin was a legendary gathering place for writers, physicists and musicians for more than 50 years." The obituary in *The Aspen Times* extolled his writings on Aspen that focused on it as "a small town and idiosyncratic mountain hamlet, as a magnet for characters, as an intellectual and cultural hub". But Berger was perhaps best known for his desert writing. His collections of essays "The Telling Distance" (1990), "There Was a River" (1994), and "Almost an Island" (1998) chronicled pre-development Phoenix, Baja and the last river trip through Glen Canyon among other topics. In 2019, publisher Farrar, Straus & Giroux released a new collection of Berger's noted works from earlier desert books and added new essays. Titled *A Desert Harvest*, it drew wide attention and its launch included a seven-city book tour for the 80-year-old Berger. "It's really exciting," Berger told *The Aspen Times* in 2019. "It's a sense of finally having arrived."

Berger, according to the obituary, wrote slowly with a thesaurus at his side, meticulously crafting his phrasing and cadence. The result was a contemplative style and lapidary prose to savor, always punctuated by his wry wit. "A lot of people write quickly because things flash quickly into their heads and they don't want to lose anything," Berger told *The Aspen Times* in 2019. "I go bit by bit, forming the sentences the way that I want them. ... It's a slow process, but it works." Of his one-of-a-kind style, Berger told *The Aspen Times* in 2005, "I always look for an angle. As Emily Dickinson said, 'Tell the truth, but tell it slant.' I try to go in sideways, to get a fresh perspective."

Berger retained that outlook through the public health crisis and tumult of the past year. "I am healthy, appalled by our times, and frustrated on the personal front, with normal life in lockdown, though I must say it's beautiful as I look out the window," he wrote in an email to an *Aspen Times* reporter in January. "When people ask what I'm doing, I reply that I'm keenly focused on drifting."



Get Out!

Wherever each of us live there are opportunities to make good trouble on behalf of conservation efforts. When you head out, bring a small journal with you and take time to reflect and write about the beauty of what you see, hear, smell, feel. In the high desert, the Oregon Natural Desert Association is the go-to. ONDA invites you to be an Independent Steward. You'll be matched to a critical project and supported every step of the way, from planting native trees and shrubs to inventorying wild and scenic rivers, monitoring habitat or trail maintenance. [More information is available on ONDA's website.](#)



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