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## Writing Through A Place

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# WRITING THROUGH A PLACE

A Conversation with Elsa Nekola



**ELSA NEKOLA** is a writer from Wisconsin. Her fiction appears in *Ploughshares*, *Witness*, *Nimrod*, *Passages North*, *The Cincinnati Review's miCRo series*, and other journals. Her debut collection of short stories, *Sustainable Living*, won the 2020 Spokane Prize for Short Fiction and was published by [Willow Springs Books](#)

in 2021.

**Victoria Hulbert** and **Kacee McKinney** are respectively the senior fiction editor and the fiction editor of *Yalobusha Review*.

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**EDITORS:** Elsa! Hello! What a beautiful collection of stories. Congratulations on winning the 2020 Spokane Prize for Short Fiction! So well deserved—we were wholly enthralled by the world of your stories and the women and girls who live in them.

**ELSA:** Thank you so much! I really appreciate it.

**EDITORS:** It's clear that the ecological makeup of the Upper Midwest shapes these stories—from the keen attention to weather shifts and season changes to your stunning descriptions of landscape, and the way that landscape imposes on these character's lives. The title of the collection, as well, suggests a critical attention to our ecological moment. Can you speak to the influence that ecology—of living in the region and land about which you write—has had on these stories specifically, but also on your writing as a whole?

**ELSA:** Writers who focus on place—whether exterior, physical landscapes or more interior, domestic spaces—have created a big impact on my writing and shaped my literary values. I draw influences from fiction and narrative nonfiction about human relationships with land and wilderness, from *A Sand County Almanac* (which I think is required reading for anyone in Wisconsin who takes an environmental studies class!) to Willa Cather's prairie novels to the essays of Wendell Berry.

I also grew up with a lot of physical space around me. When I was a small child my family lived in the country, in a rented 1860s farmhouse. Then we moved into a village on the banks of a creek with a population of a little over 200 people. The village center only had a tavern, a Lutheran church, and an auto body shop, but luckily, there was a large county park to explore. I went to school in the adjacent town which, at the time, had a population of a little over one-thousand. I had to learn, for the most part, to entertain myself, and I believe this helped cultivate my imagination. Like my mother, who grew up in a cabin in northern Wisconsin, I spent hours drawing, writing stories, listening to music, and wandering around outside. Despite the physical space of where I grew up—the farm fields, the long

country roads, the big sky—my world felt very small. And because there was no option for external escape, I did so internally, into the fictional worlds of my characters.

I think about a quote from the introduction of *The Selected Stories of Alice Munro, 1968-1994*: “The reason I write so often about the country to the east of Lake Huron is just that I love it. I am intoxicated by this particular landscape, by the almost flat fields, the swamps, the hardwood bush lots, by the continental climate with its extravagant winters... I speak the language.” Munro goes on to say that she doesn’t feel confined or limited by writing her particular setting: “I don’t think I’m writing just about this life. I hope to be writing about and through it.”

When I write about the Upper Midwest, I feel that I’m not just writing about a place but through it, as well. I am attempting to deepen my understanding of the physical geography, the culture, and the social and ecological history of the place, the things that I love and the things that trouble me. I have only developed more appreciation for the region over time—even the winters!—and it is a privilege to share that through my work.

**EDITORS:** You seem to have an attraction to the fringes of a person or a place. Geographically, these stories are all set in a part of this country that is quite literally on the edge of its borders, but even more so, the characters you write about are often on the fringe of an already fringe society—we’re thinking about Tom in “Winter Flame,” Ellis in “White Birch Winter,” or Eva in “River Through a Half-Burnt Woods,” among others. Why do you find yourself drawn to these kinds of narratives? What is most exciting to you as a writer about inhabiting a character who is living, for the most part, on the outside of the people and society that surrounds them?

**ELSA:** I’m fascinated by people who take unconventional paths, when the dominant culture tells them not to. Growing up in a small town, I felt like an outsider in the community from a very young age. However, the loneliness I felt, I’m sure, contributed to my empathy, to developing an attention to my surroundings, and having a creative life. What I’ve also noticed about small town life in the Midwest is that there is usually someone creative around, someone who didn’t take a conventional path—but they may not be immediately visible, especially when you’re a child. My father made a living as a potter. I also make pottery. Like writing, you don’t make pottery because it’s a lucrative business to be in—you do it because you can’t imagine doing anything else. Having grown up around that, I took it for granted. As an adult I realize what an unconventional

path that is, a path most people would not, or could not, ever consider.

I hope that through my own fiction I'm able to convey that while my characters face challenges living where they do, they also have deep ties to the particular landscapes they inhabit. If they face hardship with their family, there is comfort to be found in the non-human world. Take Coral in the story "Oktoberfest"—she's experienced a traumatic event she is struggling to make sense of. She doesn't feel comforted by cooking with her aunt—she wants to go outside, go to the woods. That's something she can make sense of.

And, you know, even when there is some sense of discontent among characters, sometimes it's the outsiders who are actually doing better, all things considered. For example, in "Winter Flame," June is struggling with her life and roles as a wife and mother, while Tom, this newcomer to the town, seems to be living quite peacefully, and she sort of envies his life, although she doesn't quite understand it. In "White Birch Winter," Kaye tries to inflict her aid on Ellis, but you get the sense this is more about Kaye and where she's at in her life than it is about him. Of course, Ellis is not doing well—his health is declining and he's experiencing lapses in memory, he's living in a somewhat destitute way. But he wants to be left alone, he prefers to be alone with his paintings because he's found some peace in that routine. Flora in "Meat Raffle" doesn't plan to leave Sauk Island, despite the environmental risks and the warnings from her daughter. She's accepted herself and what makes her happy, even when others haven't. The characters who struggle the most, who feel the most shame and like they must apologize for their lives, are perhaps the ones who still have one foot in mainstream society or have constraints placed on them by the expectations of others.

**EDITORS:** Relationships between women—whether familial, sexual, sororal—feels like the emotional core of most of these stories. Often moving beyond our culture's traditional view of mother-daughter relationships, many of these stories explore alternative forms of mothering—exhibited between characters like the narrator and her mother, Flora, in "Meat Raffle," the narrator and Sandra in "Centering," and of course, the triangle between Myra, her mother, and Eulea in "Sustainable Living." How did your focus on female relationships offer you a specific way to construct this collection? What about these relationships feels important for you to get right on the page?

**ELSA:** I suppose my focus on female relationships, especially mother-daughter relationships, wasn't intentional or something I deliberately constructed my collection around—it's just what comes out when I write. After I had written

several stories, I could see where they were thematically linked around those themes of intergenerational relationships between women. When I started to become more serious about writing, writers like Marilynne Robinson, Alice Munro, and Eudora Welty helped me understand that quiet moments could be even more impactful than explosive or dramatic ones. There is plenty of material to mine from domestic life, and often there is something strange, uncanny, or a little dark when you scratch the surface a bit. *Housekeeping* by Robinson was influential for me as a writer because up to that point, I hadn't read something with such a deeply personal voice, both somber and dreamlike, grounded and philosophical, with a delivery both spare and poetic. The reader moves through *Housekeeping* because of the voice, not necessarily because of the plot. This novel was my first real lesson in how conveying the quiet inner lives of characters could be more compelling than action. The sense of mystery, the questions of spirituality, the attempt to reconcile past family trauma made Ruth a memorable narrator and gave the book this almost elegiac tone. And here are these women living in a state of decrepitude, and while together, the isolation, the loneliness is so palpable. I think about that with my characters—there is usually some attempt at understanding or reconciliation, with the world and with each other, and in some cases, there's the question of, is it even possible?

**EDITORS:** Related, what elements of midwestern womanhood, or rural womanhood, did these stories allow you to celebrate, critique or even just pay closer attention to?

**ELSA:** As I talked about earlier, there are certain characters who are living on the margins or the fringes of society, but in many ways, it's more acceptable for the male characters to do so because the women just don't have that choice. And if they are living on the fringes, something has gone wrong—economically, socially, spiritually. Many of the women in these stories are accountable to others, whether it's spouses, children, or their community. And there are levels of “what's allowed” between the female characters, as well. Flora in “Meat Raffle” is an older, widowed woman whose daughter is grown up and on her own. While she has dealt with great loss, where she's at in her life in the pages of the story, she has more personal possibilities than someone like June in “Winter Flame,” who struggles to balance work, marriage, motherhood, her own strained relationship with her mother and sister, and insecurities over her appearance due to a facial scar. June is trying to be everything all at once, while also attempting to fulfill her own desires. Flora doesn't concern herself with trying to be everything at once—her attitude is more like: I like where I live, I'll date who I want, thank you very much. Kaye in “White Birch Winter” escapes an unsatisfying marriage but her first

inclination is to seek out someone to help, someone to care for. She struggles to find meaning in her life when she does not feel useful or accountable to someone. Meanwhile, Kaye's mother has said to hell with regular society and gone to live on a commune!

**EDITORS:** Can you speak a little about your writing process for this collection? Over how many years were you working on it? When did you know you were moving away from the writing of disparate short stories to something larger and more connected?

**ELSA:** As a setting-oriented writer, I tend to start with a place or character that interests me rather than plot, and I will imagine a plot or situation around the place and/or character. In *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez writes: "The mind, full of curiosity and analysis, disassembles a landscape and then reassembles the pieces—the nod of a flower, the color of the night sky, the murmur of an animal—trying to fathom its geography. At the same time the mind is trying to find its place within the land, to discover a way to dispel its own sense of estrangement." A landscape, he writes, is simultaneously larger than our mind can grasp but still knowable. I don't have much of a science background, so sometimes I am limited in my understanding of the environment I write about. There are many aspects of it that are beyond my comprehension. At the same time, my challenge as a writer is disassembling something large and unfathomable and reassembling the pieces into something that I feel I can communicate and make sense of, and expressing these thoughts, feelings, and ideas through my characters.

As far as a story draft itself, I typically don't write a full draft from beginning to end. I am just not that efficient, or a very linear thinker. I tend to write in scenes, and over time and lots of redrafting I'm able to figure out how they might fit together, and a theme starts to emerge that gives the story some life. I usually let my writing sit for a while between revisions, because I find that a little bit of time is necessary to see the piece with any sort of objectivity. I have let some drafts sit for a couple of years before I'm able to go back and finish them! It's usually because I know something now about how to finish the draft that I didn't know before, which only comes with a lot of reading and writing practice. I would say I worked on these stories over the course of four or five years. And of course, I have folders full of writing that didn't make it into the collection, that I just consider my practice on the way to getting to a better story.

There's also, of course, some influence on my writing from whatever I'm reading at the time. For example, when I was working on "Then I Will No Longer Be Me, but

the Forest” I was a little influenced by *The True Deceiver* by Finnish writer Tove Jansson, and I had been reading about labor history surrounding copper mining in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Although the stories that made it into *Sustainable Living* are more on the somber side, two of my favorite novels about the Midwest are *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis and *The End of Vandalism* by Tom Drury, which are very funny. Carol Bly, a short story writer who was from Minnesota, is also funny in an understated way. These writers are able to both scrutinize and celebrate small town life, and have served as such good models for me as I think about my own writing.

**EDITORS:** Did any of the stories in *Sustainable Living* surprise you in the way they may have changed in revision? Were there any stories that appeared to you fully formed? Were there any that felt impossible to write until they didn't?

**ELSA:** Nothing I've ever written appears fully formed—I wish that it did! Yes, “Meat Raffle” was one of those stories I thought I'd never get right. I'm still not sure it's right, but I felt I took it as far as I could. I had written many versions of the story, spanning back years. Earlier versions had a sister character and a brother-in-law, a missing dog, and took place during the flood rather than in the aftermath. None of those things were working, and the story went through several overhauls. The idea to add a meat raffle came much later. The only consistent thing was the setting of the island, which is loosely based on Blackhawk Island in Wisconsin. I knew I wanted to write about the Midwestern floods of 2008. So much was happening then, not just the floods but the recession as well. It was important to me to convey the resilience of these communities and that even years after these floods, there are still restoration efforts happening—the damage isn't something that just goes away overnight. “White Birch Winter” is another story that I almost abandoned a number of times, but there was something about the relationship between Ellis and Kaye that I kept wanting to explore. Why would someone take it upon themselves to move up north and start hanging out with their ex-stepfather? What happens when you put these two very lonely people, from different generations, together? The story is also a bit formally different than some of the others; it has more of a vignette style with shorter scenes, which I think mirrors Kaye's scattered, displaced frame of mind, and I wanted to figure out how to use this style effectively to tell this particular story. “River through a Half Burnt Woods” was a story I felt very strongly about getting right, because there was a feeling and tone I wanted to convey throughout the story, so while I was polishing the language and structure of the piece, I still wanted to allow the sense of longing, confusion, and betrayal to come through in an organic way. I think I came up with the ending in an early-ish draft and knew I wanted to keep it. Then I had to build



toward that ending. With other stories, I don't have a sense of the ending until much later.

**EDITORS:** It seemed as if many of these characters existed in the same world, if not the same town. Do you consider *Sustainable Living* to be a linked collection? If so, was this a conscious choice during the writing of these stories, or did that decision come later when you were shaping the collection as a whole?

**ELSA:** It's not explicitly linked, though I do think it's thematically linked. And several of the stories take place in the same "world" of White Birch, which I imagine to be a lake town in the northwoods of Wisconsin with a small year-round population and a sizable summer population. So, you will see some storylines that are specific to that kind of setting, such as the couple who owns a resort, friendships and friction between locals and tourists, or people working seasonal jobs. I found this setting so compelling that I kept wanting to revisit it, while also leaving room for stories that take place elsewhere, such as the Upper Peninsula of Michigan or even southern Illinois.

**EDITORS:** Related, what made you decide that "Sustainable Living" was your titular story? What places that story at the center of the collection for you?

**ELSA:** I workshopped the story in a class with Melissa Ginsburg, and at the time, it had a placeholder title. There's a section in the story that goes: "I wrote letters to the post office near Sienna's intentional community, in case my mother happened to be there. Going off the grid, my half-sister had called it. Sustainable living. I didn't know what she was sustaining, other than discomfort, misery." Melissa rightly suggested that "Sustainable Living" would make a better title for the story than what I had. I ended up feeling that the title encompassed several themes within the whole collection, as it represents this idea of women trying to figure out how to sustain themselves amidst hardship or difficult relationships, while also suggesting a focus on, or attention to, the environment.

**EDITORS:** What are you working on currently? What is getting you excited in your writing right now?

**ELSA:** I am in the early stages of writing and revising some stories that I hope will make it into my next story collection. I love working in the short story form. Once again, some of the stories take place in White Birch, while some take place in other rural areas in the upper Midwest. Someday, I would also like to spend all four seasons on Lake Superior and see how that influences my writing. I am not

done writing about this very special region. I've only just gotten started!