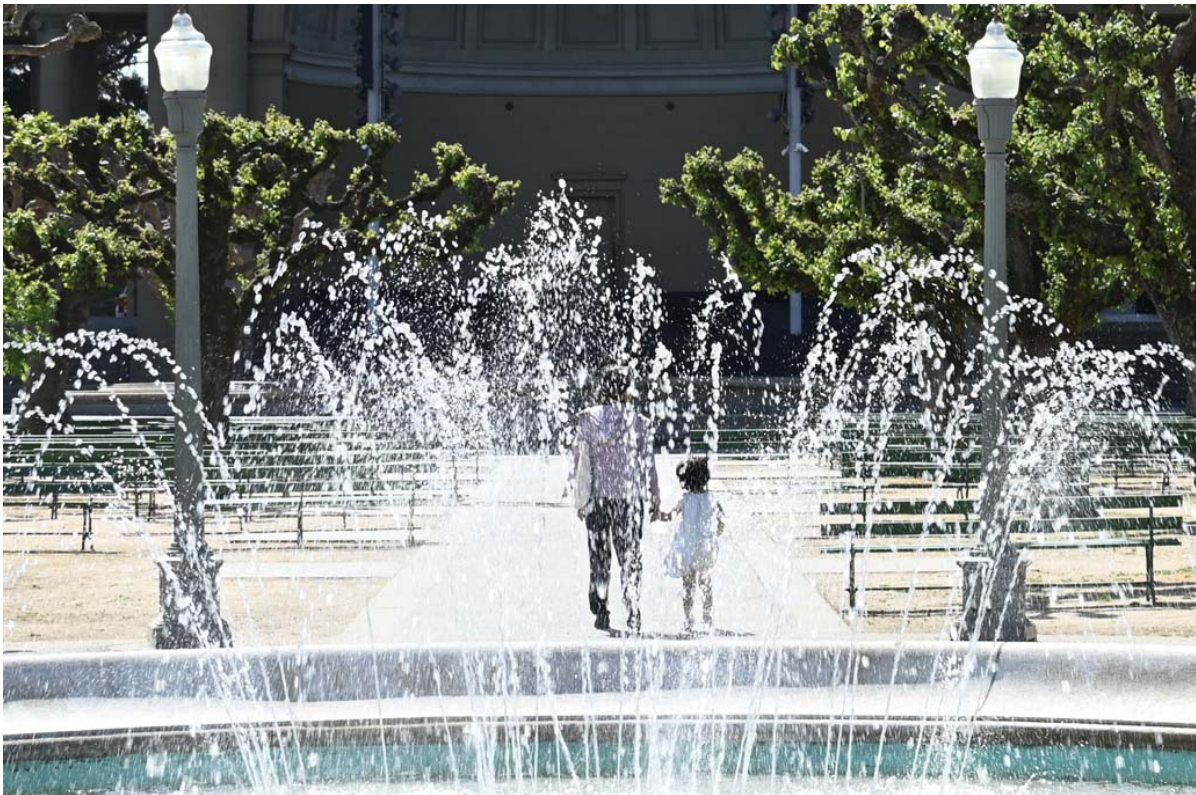


ESCOM Journal

The Literary and Visual Arts Publication of the Emeritus Students College of Marin

May/June 2026



Tom Gannon

INSIDE: Aging is Renewal, Moms, Dads, Wild Mothers and Talking Dogs

Aging as Renewal

“Who walks on four feet in the morning, two feet in the afternoon, and three in the evening?”

The old riddle of the Sphinx answers: the human being—crawling as an infant, walking upright in adulthood, and using a cane in old age. It’s a clever image, but it reflects a common view of aging as a steady decline.

There’s another way to see it.

I like to think of aging as the final stage of a long and meaningful journey. In many traditions, there’s a figure called the shaman, whose story begins in innocence, then moves through crisis—confusion, pain, and loss. Over time, through struggle and learning, the shaman returns with something new: wisdom, depth, and a broader vision of life.

In this view, later life is not the fading of meaning, but its fulfillment.

I began to see things this way long before I officially became a senior (I’m now sixty-seven), largely because my own midlife was so difficult. Serious spine problems forced me to stop performing surgery at forty-one. I had already struggled with depression, and this loss hit hard. I spent time in psychiatric care, then tried to build a new career—several times. Each attempt was cut short by health problems. Eventually, after a life-threatening internal hemorrhage, I had to accept disability.

In many ways, I was prematurely facing some common challenges of later life: illness, chronic pain, loss of work and status, and isolation. It was painful and disorienting.

For a long time, I couldn’t see anything positive in it. But gradually, something shifted. I began to question societal values I had always taken for granted. Are success, appearance, popularity, and wealth really the best measures of a life? Are competition and productivity the only paths to meaning?

As those markers fell away, I found space to explore other kinds of worth—ones I might never have discovered if my surgical career had continued.

Of course, aging does bring real losses. We tire more easily. Our pace slows. Our appearance changes. Health can become uncertain. Society, too, often overlooks older adults, valuing them less despite their vast experience.

There is much to grieve, but there is also much to celebrate.

Even though my experience of aging came prematurely, it brought me an unexpected sense of relief. The societal values that once felt so important loosened their hold. I began to see how focus on appearance, status, and achievement all were about proving myself to others; they didn’t reflect deeper, less self-aggrandizing values of meaning, integrity, service, and equanimity. The habitual concerns didn’t disappear entirely, nor do I believe they should. Supporting my body’s wellbeing, attending to my grooming, staying engaged, and contributing to society still matter, as long as they aren’t about propping up a self-image.

The ordinary markers of success began to take their place within a larger perspective. It became easier to see myself as part of a much bigger human story—billions of individuals, each moving through their own stage of life. Young people can and should focus on building and affirming the self. Midlife can be an enjoyable time of worldly success and authority. But later life, at its best, invites something different: a gentle letting go of the need to constantly improve, defend, or promote myself.

That shift, I found, is an enormous gift. It makes this stage of life feel like the peak of my existence, not its decline, no matter the pains, illnesses, and infirmities that continue to challenge me.

Seeing aging in this way is a choice, and not always an easy one. For many years, I resisted it. But looking back, that resistance feels like a shell that had to crack. Once free of it, I found a quieter kind of strength—one more in tune with what later life encourages.

I now enjoy a huge sense of renewal, as the shaman must after overcoming trials and reentering the world with wisdom, equanimity, and a broader vision of life.

Will Meecham

PLEASE JOIN ME: To further explore the gifts of aging and gain insights from others, I’m planning an ESCOM ‘Spirituality of Aging’ club, to meet in person two Thursdays per month, starting in May. If you want to be on the mailing list to be notified when it starts, please email me at: willmeecham@gmail.com.

Forty Columns of the World

Forty columns bear the weight of the sky. Break one--

*and the dome of heaven trembles. Break many—and
the garden and mirror of water weep.*

Engraving, Chehel Sotoun
Palace, Iran

In Isfahan the Forty Columns shake.
A garden built to mirror sky and soul
Now trembles under thunder made by men.
The cypress bows; the fountain chokes with ash.

Once water held the heaven in its glass;
Blue tiles of sky were set in living stone.
The dome would float like morning over prayer,
And roses breathed their quiet truth to wind.

The bombs fall hard on half the world's old heart.
Turquoise and gold collapse in bitter dust.
The mirror pool reflects a shattered age;
The songs of Rumi drift through smoke and grief.

Yet this one garden is not all that burns.
The columns fall in many lands at once.
In Gaza children search the broken walls.
In Kyiv winter carries cries through snow.

In Nanjing ghosts still walk the riverbanks.
Hiroshima remembers sudden sun.
Auschwitz breathes the ash of vanished names.
Each place a column broken from our world.

How many pillars must the earth still lose?
How many gardens turned to silent stone?
A thousand years of art and prayer and care
Can fall within a moment's iron storm.

Still somewhere seeds remain beneath the dust.
A human voice refuses death and hate.
Stand up and guard the columns of this earth—
For every life still holds the sky in place.

Ray Fay, M.D



Jeff True



Jeff Ross

Isola San Clemente, Jeff Ross

Wild Mothers

She sedately moved along a narrow path leading through dry grass from the bank high above the Klamath River to our lawn across from my garden. Three newly minted kits followed in a row behind her their coats jet black, shiny as a raven’s wing and white as newly fallen snow. A shallow grass carpeted ditch holding cool water from a slow leaking pipe ran through the lawn under the shade of a venerable black oak. After a drink she settled herself into the cool grass, I imagined her sighing, it was a 100-degree day. Her three kits immediately began to play. They wrestled and tumbled over each other and played a game of tag. After about fifteen minutes she rose and they fell in line behind her as she purposely headed down our driveway. I had watched spellbound from a vantage point in my garden. Skunks are normally nocturnal and I still cannot fathom why they were out in the middle of the day unless she was moving them from their birthing place while the night predators were safely having siestas.

Deer also visited the lawn to graze and have a cool drink. Our grape arbor, made from cedar saplings, shaded the far side of the lawn. Five different table grapes and one climbing rose twined up the cedar poles and across the top. When the grapes ripened in the fall the deer tucked their front legs to their chest, and while balanced on their hind legs, stretched their necks to steal the bunches they could reach. Bordering the arbor a lavender field’s fragrance wafted in the air. A heavenly spot for a nap and the does regularly brought their fawns to bed down in the heat of the day under the shade of the arbor. After a summer thunderstorm left a sizable puddle in the driveway, I observed a doe who patiently waited while her fawn repeatably sprang sideways, its four tiny hooves splashing in and out of it. I remembered when we were children how fun it had been to jump in puddles breaking their placid surface and stirring up mud. She indulged his frolicking a few minutes before they continued to the lawn.

Luna, our wolf hybrid, had given us the heads up. Just below the spring she had stopped stock still, head raised sniffing the breeze. We gazed into the dappled shade ahead where a large dark shape manifested into a Black Bear. We had seen bear footprints (they look almost human), deer prints, fox tracks and mountain lion paw prints in the moist ground surrounding the spring, so the bear’s presence wasn’t a surprise. Two small cubs were by her side. She suddenly stood on her hind legs having sensed our presence. She dropped back on to all fours and cuffed her cubs to a large pine and sent them climbing. She clambered up the bank next to the pine and kept watch. The cubs stopped their climb about twenty feet up the tree. Two adorable heads peered around each side of the pine’s trunk and gazed down at us as we walked by; giving mama a wide berth.



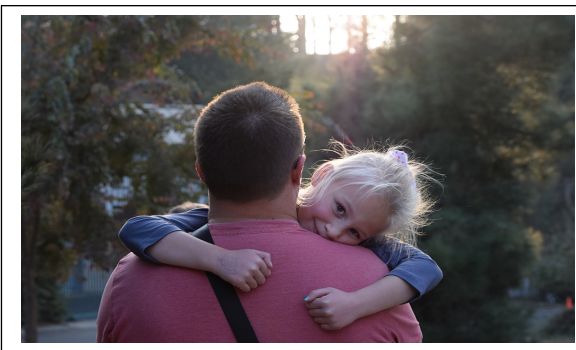
Leigh Nicolaisen

Every summer we waited in anticipation for the turkey chicks’ arrival. One mama would fly in like a World War two bomber with her fighter escorts, the chicks. Recently fledged, they were about the size of tennis balls and still a bit fuzzy. Once safely landed she would escort them to a maple just off the cabin’s lawn about thirty feet above the Klamath River. We tossed bird seed under its shady canopy and the turkeys congregated under it every morning happy to find breakfast. Turkey mothers, co-mother and one or two additional moms would come racing down from the forest above the cabin, their long legs and necks awkwardly stretched out in front of them. We always tried to get a chick count. They are easy prey for all the forest predators, and a flock of thirty chicks can be reduced to ten in a couple of months. The turkey moms all kept watch over the chicks. They showed no favoritism; all chicks being equally cared for. After feeding they often herded them down to the river for a drink and reposed in the cool shade next to the river. When the chicks got bigger, they sometimes would spend the hot afternoons roosting in the branches of the maple tree.

Continued next page



Laura Milholland



Laura Milholland



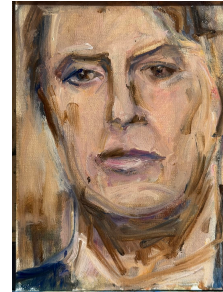
Laura Milholland

Wild Mothers, continued from previous page

We were picking trilliums to take to our friend Peter for his birthday, they were his favorite wildflower, when we happened on mama gray squirrel. Our appearance was bad enough, but Luna's put her into a tizzy. Her baby was with her on the ground under an oak. She aimed a barrage of scolding chuggs-chuggs at us then kept herself between us and her baby while she nudged it to the oak and up the trunk to its lowest branches. We kept Luna at bay. Mama gathered her baby to her, and it began to nurse. We resumed our course to the boggy area near the creek where trilliums grow in perfusion. Every year we come to pick these harbingers of spring. Like ballerinas in tutus, single white three petaled flowers are suspended above a whorl of three leaves on long slender stems.

A mother spider attached her egg sac high in the corner above the window in the shower room, a structure detached from the cabin and divided in two, one side a workshop the other containing a washer, dryer and shower. She had spun an artistic web to catch flies and moths but camped out right next to or over her egg sac for at least three weeks until the spiderlings emerged. She was probably a nursery web spider, a look-a-like for my favorite spider mother, the wolf spider. Wolf spiders get the mother of the year award. They attach their egg sacs to their spinnerets, (don't you love that word?) appendages at the end and underside of their abdomens. She carries this silken sphere, keeping her abdomen raised to protect it from dragging on the ground, and manages to hunt despite its hindrance. When it's the right time, she tears open the sac and releases the spiderlings. They climb onto her back where they stay several weeks. The babies don't eat during this time, and mama is their guardian-protector. She can transport over one hundred spiderlings and if one falls off, she stops until it climbs back on her back. When they are large enough to fend for themselves, they disembark from mama's back and disperse. I propose a toast to the wolf spider, the only know spider to protect their spiderlings by carrying them for such an extended time on their backs.

Susan Connelly



Homage to Humans, Parental or Otherwise:

You are a symbol a strength but were not there for me.
You promised me the world but I was alone.

You are human. I am human.
We tried to feel something that was not there.

He was there for me, he was not my father.
He was not my father but you were human.
Now you are gone.
We tried to feel something that was not there.

She is both my mother and my father.
She is human
She is superhuman. You were frail.
You are human.

I cried tears for you because you were my father.
I cried tears for you because you were not there for me.
Did you cry tears for me? You are human.

Tami Tsark

Painting above: "Figurehead," Tami Tsark



Harvey Abernathey

A Stream Orchid

*... what remains behind
In the primal sympathy
Which, having been, must ever be.*

-- William Wordsworth

*Epipactis opens unobserved,
Pushing past ferns and forest litter
To the canopy's uneven light,
Merely content in her own beauty. What is is, after all.*

*Soon though, she will bow to her ephemera,
Drop to the brook that is always there,
That brought her and now takes her.
Each beauty of her falls to its merry turbulence.*

*Should her procession be interrupted,
Taken by trout perhaps, mistaken for caddis,
Or caught in a snare of fallen rood
Until the brook lifts her off again,*

*Still, she was always to be carried to brook's end,
Scoured of everything that could be said of her,
To the perfect, davening ocean,
And to be set at rest in imperfect anonymity.*

Brian Racette

Connecting

Hiding from the terror of a funky party
Board the train named for the smarty.
Less congestion and smoke in travel
Computes so easily to me
Cognitively enjoying my journey.

My letters written or typing
Convey substance and what's coming.
WW II finished with a theatrical finale
Grand morality shown with music
Yet today theater has turned sick.

Let us show what brought our victory
Not the downside of superiority
Take the blues from the horn
Sell the products we make from our ABCs
Computers, AI helping our aging memory.

Let's get cooking
I use foil, not pots or pans in my kitchen.
The glories that could be tinsel town
Not LaLa Land where the crying screams
But the Tinsel Town Bakery of dreams.

Curse the Ninja Foodi darn microwave
Curse the multi cooker air fryer slave
Upgrade your cooking range, downsize empty nesters
Though the story is from long ago
Who and how many can have the mango?

Karen Arnold



Marilyn Bagshaw, Moms Love

Space Is the Place

Scientists tell us our planet is spinning faster now
I tell my husband I need more space
I can't seem to find enough these days

I turn my bathroom into Paris
Create a cabaret in the kitchen
My bed is a boat that sails

But when I find space
I eventually need you
or another view

What is it about space that seduces us so?

Empty space desires
and desire drives all

Then matter arrives
with a big clunk
And we want to throw it away

They say the world spins faster now

As zoom echoes in this room
I'm busy looking for a broom

We go out, then back in
Hoping the echo
of ourselves disappears

Day for a night, and we start all over again

Do planets desire us, as we do them?
Can time travel bring us in?

Everything dances between matter
But empty space demands a platter

Will this spinning planet throw us off again?

Marcia Taylor Smith

Father's Day Poem

For My Husband, David

Speaking your words in a simple tone

Leaving your home to make a living alone

Heartfelt passion is everywhere in your midst

You have the power to unleash it, or take little sips

Honesty is not a burden when your heart is in your hand

Believe your faith will help you to understand

Fathers you know will share the same pride

Innocence is your virtue; from that you won't hide

Subtle differences in the silence that awaits

Brings you to tears and tests your faith

In my heart your happiness glows

Fostering a wisdom, I hope always shows

Tactfully turn to see our life together

As a simple rhyme read solely to give you pleasure

Doors will open for you as far as the eye can see

Tread ever so lightly on the soles of your feet

Cynthia Rovero



Laura Harrison



Libby Smith



Crepe Paper Flowers, by Grace Alexander

Grandmothers,

let's start a rebellion,
every last chin wagging hellion.

Let's gather together on the square,
you gnarled of bone and white of hair.

We have no need to confirm our worth,
We've all witnessed upheaval since birth.
We know what's wrong today.

I say it's time
to address this mess and stop the crime.

Grandmothers, let's all start a rebellion,
Together we must be more than a million.
Let's spill our words of wisdom and fight.

It's gone too far. Time is already past right.

Let's stand up to these fascist liars, slay them
with canes and cries, bring on a little mayhem.
We all have the gumption, so don't be a wuss,
the whole free world will be backing us.

Carol Allen

Imagined Dialogue: Greenland ... The Long Con

Me: "Do you know where Greenland is?"

You: "I think so. Why do you ask?"

Me: "While most people can find it on a map, only a few know how big it is and how it got its name."

You: "Why is it called Greenland even though it's mostly snow and ice and is pretty darned cold?"

Me: "You can thank the Viking Erik the Red for that. Erik's father was banished from Norway after a manslaughter conviction and moved his family to western Iceland. Born around 950 CE, Erik later married and raised 3 sons, one of whom was Leif Erikson who would grow up and eventually discover the existence of North America by landing in what is now Newfoundland. Erik had a murderous dispute with a neighbor over property ownership and was exiled from Iceland for 3 years.

You: "What did he do then?"

Me: "When he wasn't raping and pillaging, Erik decided to explore the world (definitely not in comfort), especially that big land mass to the west. Other Norse explorers tried but failed to colonize this arctic hell hole because of the extremely harsh winters. Erik looked at different coastal locations and then returned to Iceland with stories of a "greeeeen land", hoping the name would encourage greater numbers of future settlers.

You: "So, Erik the Red was a scammer who knew that Greenland was much colder than Iceland, which had a moderate climate, even warmish in places with volcanoes and geothermal vents. Ah, the irony!"

Me: "Yep, an old Norse con man playing the bait-and-switch game with real estate."

You: "So, how big is Greenland?"

Me: "How big do you think it is?"



Nancy Outenreath

You: "It looks huge on a map, probably much bigger than the US or even Africa."

Me: "Actually, it's roughly one quarter the US area and about 14 times smaller than Africa. In the 16th century a Dutch guy named Mercator created a new map of the world by portraying the curved global surface on a flat piece of paper. Locally, the Earth seemed to be flat. So, shouldn't maps reflect reality? This made it easier to plot nautical journeys as a straight line, but it also distorted the sizes of features near the poles. Most maps use this flat Mercator style, even today."

You: So, believing that Greenland is really so large, a mad king with an interest in real estate might be tempted to try to buy or steal it, even though it's mostly snow and ice and has no roads at all.

Me: "Now, you see ... a real estate development scam spanning a thousand years."

Jeff Lemontt



Murmuration, Laura Milholland

On Webster Street

Sudden gust, in from the west,
boosts my shoulder, piloting me
through the heavy hospital door.

Lost in hallway labyrinths,
nose assailed by medical miasma:
tube feeds and iodine, GI bleeds,
and reek—of my own dread.

Scanning rooms, I brush arms
with a sleep deprived intern
his crash-cart rattling
to the rhythm of code blue.

Her room is dim.
Daddy, slumped against
the pea green wall, weeps
without a sound.

Her hand, dainty, smaller
than mine,
lies still on the sheet.

Bending to kiss her ashen face
I catch the scent of Mommy
—*carnet de bal*.

lynn arias macinnis

Three Critter Haikus

Breathtaking sight above
the whole local starling nation
glorious murmuration

Oh, little house mouse
how funny you would look
in Mickey Mouse pants

Colony of ants
I admire your labor outdoors
not on my kitchen floor

Larry C. Tolbert



Harvey Abernathy

Talking Dog. \$10

It was one of those mornings that makes you glad you stepped outside. Clear sky. Cool air. A quiet, leafy neighborhood where the houses sit back from the street and the trees seem older than the sidewalks.

I had recently moved to the area and was taking a slow stroll, getting acquainted. That's when I noticed a bright red *Talking Dog for Sale* sign in a front yard. I stopped right there. Had to check it out.

The house behind it was modest, with a wide porch, where a man sat in a wooden rocker, easing back and forth, drinking from a Mason jar. I walked up the path.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning," he replied.

I stepped through the gate and gestured toward the sign.

"I'd like to meet this dog."

He rocked a moment longer, took a sip, and pointed with the jar. "Out back."

I walked around the side. Lying in the shade was a big hound dog—long ears, sandy coat, and slow, knowing eyes. He didn't get up, just watched.

"Morning," I said. "Nice day, isn't it?"

"Sure is," the hound said.

I stood there a moment. "You can talk." I scratched him behind one ear. He leaned into it. One ear twitched. The other didn't bother.

"Discovered I could do this as a pup," he said. "CIA found me pretty quick. After that... the fun began."

"What kind of fun?"

"Mostly listening," he said. "People say remarkable things in front of a dog. They assume you're thinking about food."

He sniffed the air. "Embassies. Boardrooms. Hotel lobbies." He looked at me. "Spent a few weeks under a conference table in Geneva."

"Doing what?"

"Keeping things from getting out of hand." He said it like it wasn't much.

"Tracked a courier across three countries," he added.

"What happened?"

"Courier stopped for lunch," the hound said. "I stayed close."

A pause.

"Learned everything I needed to know."

I nodded.

I walked back to the porch. The man was still rocking, still working on the same Mason jar.

"How much for the dog?" I asked.

"Ten dollars."

"Why so cheap?"

He took a slow sip. "Because he's a liar." He rocked once. "Never did any of that stuff he says."

I walked home thinking about it—a talking dog. Ten dollars.

Next morning I went back. Sign was gone. Yard was empty. The man was in the same rocker, same jar.

"Where's the dog?" I asked.

"Left during the night," he said.

"Left?"

"Ran off."

"With who?"

"Neighbor's parrot," he said. "Practically lived here."

I paused.

"They'd been talking for weeks," he said. He took a slow sip. "Figured it out eventually."

I waited.

"That bird's a liar too."

Joseph Cillo



ESCOM

Emeritus Students
College of Marin

ESCOM Journal

Editor/Designer, Denize Springer

Web Content Manager, Richard Jensen

The ESCOM Journal is published on alternate months online at www.marin.edu/escom. A limited number of printed copies are available in the ESCOM office, Building 10, at the Indian Valley campus or the College of Marin Welcome Center in Kentfield. ESCOM members are invited to submit news items, or creative works, such as original art, photography, poetry, memoir and fiction. Consult the submission specifications on this page before submission. The deadline for each issue is the 15th of the prior month. Please send submissions or questions to the editor at denizespringer@gmail.com.

Production of the ESCOM Journal is supported by the Joan Hopper Trust.

ESCOM Council

President, Gary Gonsler; Vice President, Leonard Weingarten; Treasurer, Richard Jensen; Gloria Dunn-Violin, Peter Ehmke, Nancy P. Major, Will Meecham, Luanne Mullin, Beth Rowett, Lois St. Sure, Larry Tolbert.

ESCOM Centers

Indian Valley campus: 1800 Ignacio Blvd., Bldg. 10 Rm. 40, Novato, CA 94949 415/457-8811, x 8322

Kentfield Campus: 835 College Ave., Kentfield, CA 94904 (ESCOM office is temporarily occupying the Deedy Lounge in the Student Services bldg.) 415/485-9652 or escom@marin.edu

WANT TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE JOURNAL?

NEXT DEADLINE IS JUNE 15

Please send your **FINAL** draft to

denizespringer@gmail.com

PLEASE ADHERE TO THESE SPECIFICATIONS

Submit only ONE piece of final, proofed written work. Changes, unless necessary, will not be accepted after submission.

Include your name in the file name and on the page of your document. **You must be an ESCOM member. Membership is free but is no longer automatic with class registration. To join, go to: <http://escom.marin.edu/join-escom>**

WRITTEN WORK (750 words MAX): must be single spaced, left margin oriented, and ATTACHED as a Word doc) Do not submit PDFs of written work (as these cannot be properly transferred or edited). **Please submit only one piece per issue.**

ART and PHOTOGRAPHY: Borderless images only in file size no larger than 300 kb and attached to the email in the .pdf or jpeg format (not imbedded in email message). **Images larger than 300 kb or saved as a tif file cannot be considered.**

POEMS or PLAYLETS: (50 lines MAX including the spaces between stanzas and/or lines) If your poem must be centered, please note this.

Misspellings, grammatical errors, and erroneous line breaks could be mistaken as the author's intent and not corrected. Proof your copy before sending it in.