

“Nature and science writing are well-established genres [...]. The distinction has always seemed to me to be artificial. The best nature writing is informed by reliable, scientific knowledge of the world. The best science writing is infused by a love that can only be inspired by a sense of the organic. We don’t have a name for the kind of writing that brings these things seamlessly together, but *Isotope* offers a place, almost uniquely, for science and nature writers to explore their common interests, and perhaps to create—and name!—a literary genre that will serve to bring scientific knowledge into our affective lives and put a human face on science.”

Chet Raymo

former *Boston Globe* science columnist

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Petroglyph, published at Utah State University from 1990 through 2002, was a biannual journal of nature writing named for a prehistoric drawing or carving on rock. It got a little old, so last summer it was replaced by *Isotope* (websites.usu.edu/isotope), undoubtedly the only literary magazine in the country that bills itself as *A Journal of Literary Nature and Science Writing*. Editor Christopher Cokinos says, “We wanted to send a message. We wish to embrace a wide range of writing—moving beyond the tradition of nature writing while including it and challenging it.” The second issue of the biannual was published last month.

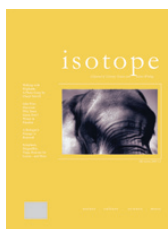
Poets and Writers

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Bone by bone the skeletons of nature and science are picked, rattled, and pieced together to flesh human in *Isotope*. The journal sports a mere 40 pages, however, the breadth of its fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art stretch a noble distance while avoiding naiveté about the natural world. One of the choicest pieces is Brandon Schrand’s story “Notes from a Drill Rig” where the narrator confesses: “Diesel. Everything smelled and tasted like diesel, aftershave of the hard-knuckled, the whiskied sweat of a world driven mad by men and trucks and tools.” From John Price unearthing “Why Snow Geese Don’t Winter in Paradise,” to Juliet Mattila pondering “Ectoplasm,” the journal moves cover to cover on its own time like the intriguing animal from Botswana that Cheryl Merrill discovers in her fine photo/essay piece “Walking with Elephants.”

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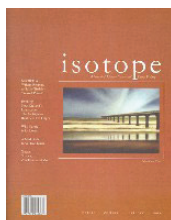


Isotope, Utah State's journal of literary nature and science writing, is not content with the usual dichotomy between wonder and funeral song that characterizes our discourse on the environment, but strikes out fearlessly across new (and ancient) terrain with a backpack full of ceaseless questions and a full canteen of inspiration. If the world is preserved by acts of attention, local or cosmic (from Lilace Mellin Guignard's "dead bee in a shaft of sunlight" to Douglas Schnitzspahn's description of "the Andromeda galaxy, a spiral island of stars [. . .] too distant to properly comprehend"), *Isotope* demonstrates that seeing clearly is our best defense against extinction in all its forms. In Sandra Kohler's "Mesa Verde," a mother, against the backdrop of a vanished civilization, grapples with the everyday mystery of her child's vanishing into his own becoming. Contemplation of a crab leads Mary Crow to speculate on a less knowable species: the human being. And Scott Minar, in a rough terrain, rounds up strayed elements of his own character. Staking out the territory between the facts of the natural world and the human imaginations inspired by them, *Isotope's* unique dual vision reminds us that the telescope, moving, as John Q. McDonald writes, "with ungainly precision and surreal silence," is an artifact of human longing no less than Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, and that a poem is capable of preserving a periwinkle (see Carla Panciera's wonderful "Plum Island and Back") as well as any museum of natural history can.

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What a great idea for a literary journal! According to the journal's website, *Isotope* is "especially interested in work engaging fields, subjects and concerns that move beyond traditional nature writing—including urban ecosystems, astronomy, physics, chaos theory, genetic engineering, sexuality, medicine and the body." Indeed, the journal is a surprising and occasionally delightful blend of science and nature that, like Houghton Mifflin's *Best American Science and Nature Writing* series, leans more heavily toward science (at least in this issue).

Isotope is in some ways phoenix, having arisen from the ashes of a former Utah State University journal, *Petroglyph: A Journal of Creative Nature Writing*, which began publishing science writing in 2002 when poet Chris Cokinos assumed the editorship. When Maria Melendez reviewed *Petroglyph* in *Literary Magazine Review's* Spring/Summer 2002 issue, she called for a new twenty-first century kind of nature writing that moved beyond "the crows and me" and even beyond "the crows and me and my soul" all the way to "the crows and me and my neighbors and my culture and my nation and

my god.” Whether or not he responded intentionally to Melendez’s plea, Cokinos has put together a journal with a social awareness that reaches beyond an author’s own world—a little bit.

The centerpiece of this issue is a commemoration of Sallie Tisdale’s *Talk Dirty to Me: An Intimate Philosophy of Sex*, published in 1994, and called by Cokinos “one of the most thoughtful meditations on human sexuality I’ve read.” To celebrate the tenth anniversary of Tisdale’s publication, *Isotope* commissioned a variety of responses to one brief passage, in which Tisdale connects our understanding of sex with our understanding of nature, commenting, “How we are rooted to the earth through our bodies determines how we see other bodies, and ultimately the earth itself.” Six writers—biologists, a linguist, a psychologist, poets, and others—weigh in with short pieces that circle the Tisdale excerpt as viewers examining a sculpture from different angles.

Tim Birkhead is the first, with an essay entitled “Talking Dirty, Talking Truth.” After describing the “wing-shuddering, foot-clenching orgasm” of the female buffaloe weaver bird, he makes a puzzling comment: “Sallie Tisdale suggests I might be unhappy about this.” In fact, he is delighted to show a connection between our understanding of female promiscuity and a century of research in evolutionary biology. It is that research, he believes, that has made us more comfortable with our sexual selves. I have no idea why Birkhead thinks Tisdale thinks he might be unhappy, but his enthusiasm for “the truly wonderful thing about the notion of sperm competition” is riveting.

Poet and essayist Paisley Rekdal’s “The Erotics of Open Spaces” is a more personal essay, tracing her years in Wyoming, where she felt vulnerable and “loved it.” “I responded to the place,” she writes, “with the same passion some women have to a rape fantasy: Wyoming was the partner that would overtake me completely, rule my body and heart, make me fulfill desires that I could only long for in secret.” Biologist and linguist Bruce Bagemihl looks to tabloid stories of aliens and UFOs to uncover homophobic ideas of gay sex. He turns away from accepted definitions of “nature” and “natural,” claiming “I want to be unnatural. I want my acts and actions—sexual and otherwise—to transcend nature, defy biology, confound genetics.” Both Rekdal and Bagemihl seem to find that Tisdale’s idea of sex is, in aiming to be broad and encompassing, paradoxically limiting.

The series continues with three discussions of our hesitancy to discuss sex, including a touching poem, “Twelve,” by Dorianne Laux, in which children solemnly examine a *Playboy*-type magazine. David Shields contributes a short story about a young man who almost has sex with his girlfriend. The strongest piece in the collection is a poem, “Body, World and Food,” by ethnobotanist, poet, and MacArthur Fellow Gary Paul Nabhan. Reflecting on food, which “becomes the very cells of our own bodies,” he writes:

I can sometimes taste in a canteloupe the very soil in which it was grown,
...
I can taste the hands of the farmwife who had palanted its seed
And the immigrant who first brought those seeds from Egypt long ago,
Long before farming and eating became *agribusiness, food industry*,
Long before our sense of body was cleaved from our sense of earth...

“Between Hunger and Shame,” Tisdale’s response to the responses, wraps up the series. This kind of dialogue is one of the things that journals can bring us that books have a hard time managing. I love listening in while intelligent people respectfully look at things differently (insert your own *Crossfire* reference here). Here, Tisdale reflects on the effects *Talk Dirty to Me* have had on the public’s perception of her as a writer and her initial resistance to *Isotope*’s idea to circle around her work. Her admiration of the “interesting and thoughtful responses” in the issue, her discomfort with the fact that the writers have responded to only a short bit of a long work, her thoughtful disagreements and agreements with the writers, and her understandable uneasiness at being under so public a microscope makes for fascinating reading. For me, the tensions among the pieces in the series are more engaging than any one of the pieces individually; the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. Surely this is the kind of thing the *Isotope* vision statement refers to when it notes, “an isotope is a useful variation on a theme.”

Another extended piece in this issue, “John James Audubon in the Land that God Forgot” by Glen Chilton, is a narrative about the writer’s obsessive search in progress for information about the extinct Labrador Duck. His ultimate goal is “to visit every stuffed Labrador Duck in the world, to examine every egg and to visit every spot on the planet related to the duck,” and in this piece his search takes him to Labrador, where he finds colorful characters, forbidding landscapes, and half-remembered clues to the ducks’ former nesting places. If this piece is the one most like traditional nature writing in the journal, poems like Jim Fisher’s “Professor Roentgen’s Penetrating Rays” and his “Rays: An Omnium-Gatherum” are the least like it. “Rays” is a song in praise of, well, rays:

name soft dorsal-fin rays of surfacing fish;
 AB, AC, and AD rays; anachronistic ocular rays;
 cathode rays (-) and positive rays (+); rays of truth

Gene Washington’s “Artificial Intelligence, Synthetic Sod and an Espionage Satellite” is, like Fisher’s poems, more centered in the lab than in the great outdoors. In fact, he celebrates not native plants but “fake grass woven from two-and-a-half-inch long polyethylene and polypropylene emerald green blades.” I wish I knew whether he was being ironic.

In its thirty-six pages, the Fall/Winter 2004 issue includes ten poems, a short story, several essays, photography, and other images. The contributors include the expected folk from Utah State University, the journal’s home (though it must be said that the locals have earned their spots here by the quality of their work), and work from as far away as Guatemala, New Zealand, and Canada. The journal’s 8 1/2 by 11-inch pages and creamy paper present the artwork well, and give graphic designer Kathe Lison plenty of room for layouts that are appealing without dominating (this is a designer who does not feel compelled to pull out every font she has just to show off the power of her software). Five black and white photographs of nudes from Sara Northerner’s *Forgotten Knowledge* Series are used to illustrate the Tisdale conversation. They are haunting images that demand close attention, and I wish they had been given more prominence of their

own, rather than being asked to sacrifice some of their own power to serve the essays. The images are wrapped in text, with no attribution tag (one must read the single line in the table of contents to see who made this work, and titles—if, indeed, the images have titles—are nowhere to be found). One photograph, used as a title page for the series of essays, has had writing superimposed on it. Sad, the life of a photographer.

The New Zealand artist Pat Unger, on the other hand, gets the star treatment with her lovely series of paintings, *Beautifully without Edge*. Unger creates oil and acrylic paintings that echo the blurred images created by a camera out of focus. Six paintings, including broad ocean views, shadowing urban parks, and a fantastical art museum half-buried in the sand, are each given a full page and the center of the journal, and the soft colors seem to melt into the paper. They're beautiful.

Bottom line: These people know what they're doing, and it's a task worth doing. I did not love this issue, but I love what it tried to do. "Embrace the tradition of nature writing—and move beyond it (even challenge it)"? I'm in. My subscription check is in the mail.

Cindy Bily

Literary Magazine Review

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Isotope: A Journal of Literary Nature and Science Writing, published by Utah State University, boasts an impressive selection of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, in addition to a striking, full color portfolio of artwork by Richard Gate. This issue includes the winners of the first annual Editors' Prizes: "Consumption," a remarkable essay by Sunshine O'Donnell, and a suite of poems by Thomas Joswick that examine the life and art of John James Audubon. My favorite of Joswick's poems is "Audubon Anticipates Dawn and Blood": "Before sunrise, from scratching grounds, / where males assemble to strut and boom, / you may hear their ruffled notes, / followed, at times, by rapid / and petulant cackling, / like laughter." Also noteworthy is Janette Fecteau's poetic short-short, "Hounds of Light," which illuminates the work of Nobel prize winning scientist Albert Abraham Michelson, "The earth's slip along the luminiferous ether, stellar aberrations explained by light in waves. Waves, not packets. These are his preoccupations." The work in *Isotope* celebrates and probes the natural world—from the pockets of nature that thrive in Manhattan to the Grand Canyon to the Florida Keys. However, the journal isn't satisfied to simply explore these environments, but the points at which nature, science, art, culture, and human involvement intersect. Even if you don't have a special interest in nature and science writing, *Isotope* still makes for an excellent read.

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