





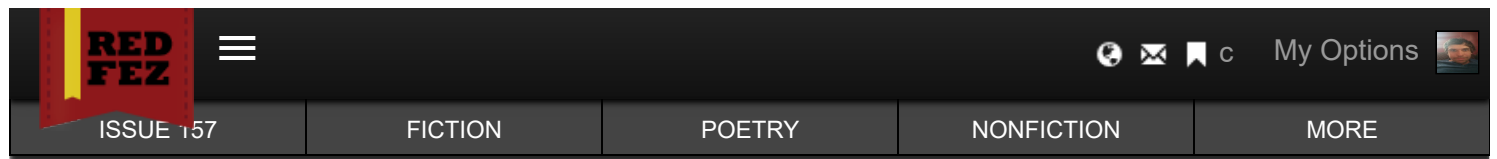


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BOOKS: Under the Mountain Born by John Swain

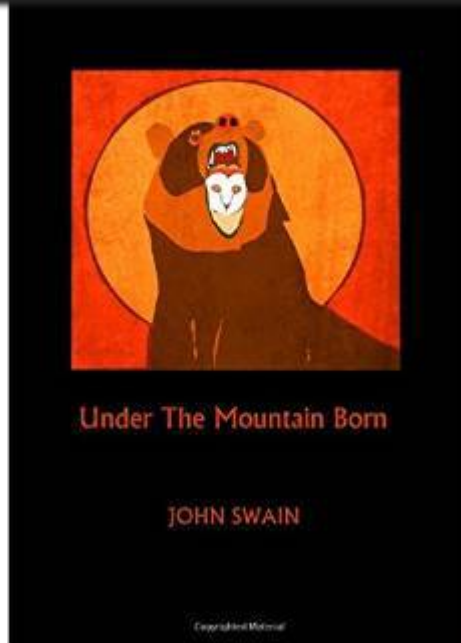


Pagan in the oldest sense of the word, a person of the country, uncorrupted by the metropolitan, a person intimate, but not naughty with Mother Nature; and pagan in the most common sense of the word, unchurched and unfettered by the constraints of Abrahamic strictures, yet a close reader of the creator's original book, the creation itself; and while I do not know the man, I ascribe these attributes to him relying on his own words, the poems of John Swain.






The world is too much with us, said William Wordsworth, who helped usher in the Romantic Movement in English letters, mostly as a reaction against the industrial revolution. Even more so today, People are too caught up in “the fetish world of the market”, ruled by the iron-fleshed demiurge Techne, the god of made things, the gadgets and doodads, the smart phones, the ever present noise of the media. As Mr. Swain's literary ancestor, Wordsworth made popular the idea that nature was a fit subject for poetry, that most of what was beautiful and worthy of adoration was not man-made.

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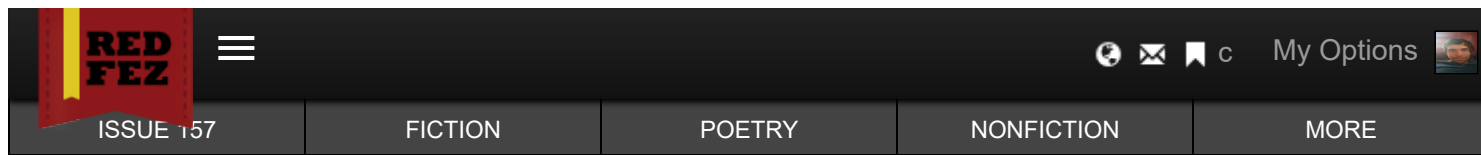
Under the Mountain Born
by John Swain
136 pages

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The Romantic strain took an peculiarly American twist via transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau as a man who turned his back on civilization and took to the woods, for a spell, to get closer to nature, to live a more deliberate life. In syntax and lines, the discerning reader will detect more than an



fire hangs still..." Set firmly in the tradition, our Mr. Swain has his own agenda.

"Wyandotte Woods"

Green forest of thrush song

as half the sky darkened with rain

leaving the sun in a hollow.

God darker

with cavern fish deep in the hills

like a heart

whose streams flow out to the river

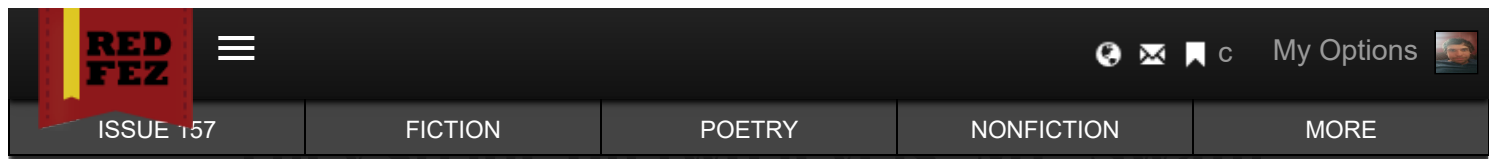
that devours its source.

A punctured green colubrid snake

fell to the ground

from the fire of a hawk's claws.

A ring of ashes remained



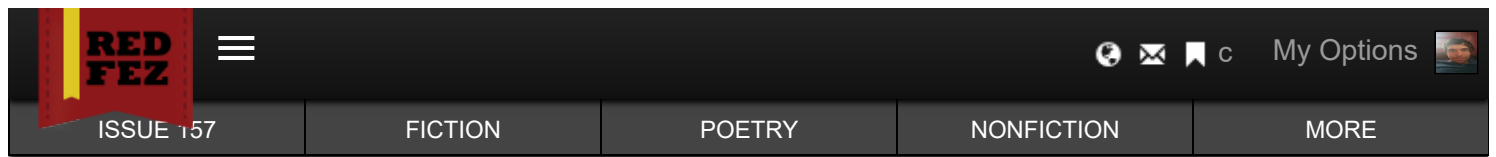
They stride on two levels, Mr. Swain and Shaman John, sometimes one and the same, sometimes twain.

like a bed in the clearing,
to remember the shelter here
hidden among the black winds
swirling the heavens.



Mr. Swain checks in with a new collection of poems, *Under the Mountain Born*, midwifed by the fine folks at Least Bittern Press. The book sports some apt illustrations by Bree, an editor at the press and she has acquitted herself well in conveying effectively the themes that dance thru the words.

Not for Mr. Swain the white hot revelations and self-autopsies of the confessional poets such as Sexton or Plath. His poems, without exception, are told first-person and he employs little variation of poetic voice. There is a reporter's detachment. Even those personal poems, wherein he addresses a female companion, evince an emotional distance. We are greatly inclined to identify the narrator

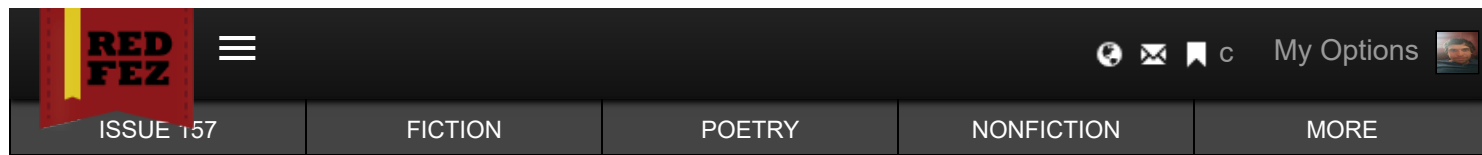


thing. We'll see.

He locates the poems in real places. Sometimes they are known by their map names. Mentor Headlands, Redwood Coast, Big Sur, Bear Island Estuary, Huckleberry Ridge, Chadron Butte. Each poem pinpoints site specific and even when he omits the map name, even transformed as they are by the poet's figurative language, we know the place is real. Not some Middle-Earth, not some mindscape. We know, as in our bones, we know.

His world seems depopulated. Nary a mention of other people in these poems, other than the poet narrator and his occasional muse companion. Scattered throughout the poems are signs of human life — a bridge, a road, a lighthouse, a gate — like remnants of a lost civilization. As in the song “(Nothing But) Flowers” by the Talking Heads, unrelenting nature has seemingly taken over and humankind has dwindled to an essential two. Perhaps, a new Adam and Eve. We almost expect the poet to come upon a half-buried Statue of Liberty slanting upward out of the sand.

Here in “Beneath the Lighthouse” he alludes to another person, present only in memory and the connection is impersonal at best.



beneath the lighthouse.

a boy drowned

where we swam

and climbed

toward the sun

upon a pillar of rocks

the day before.

I hear his voice

in a white sail raising

far on the lake

and the osprey








touching the water

for a silver fish.

Angels serrate

the edges of the map

I drew on my hand

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the expanse of waves

like his shoulder

to remember

a wild innocence.

Note the cascading waterfall of long “A” vowel sounds.

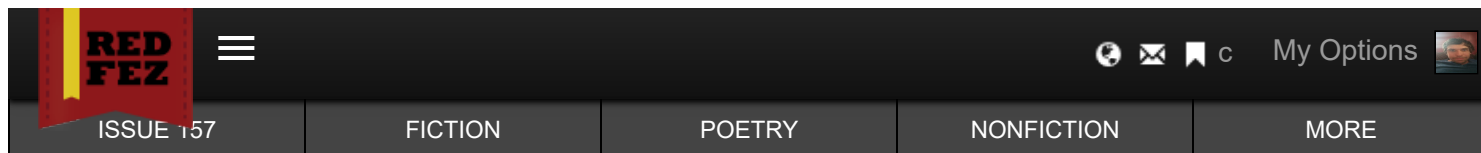
Raising, lake, osprey, serrate, grazed, waves. A suggestion of wave chop and serrated map. The slant rhymes. They may be in his bag of tricks but certainly not his principal instruments.

We trust his voice. We know, as in our bones, we know that he is a man of knowledge and lore. Plants and animals and waters and terrain, his learning is wide. Details ring true. Mr. Swain is the witness to the created world. He reports. He testifies.

And then he crosses over.



The shaman enters the Spirit World thru an altered state of consciousness achieved usually by the ingestion of certain herbs or drugs, magic mushroom, peyote, or the local version of shaman sourmash. The shaman must journey into the unknown realm and return with knowledge that will



Joseph Campbell Country, the poet actively portrays himself as a shaman.

“Hot Spring”

Hum of gentle river cane

bright gold wavering

and then undressed.

Our faces interlock

with the bending sun

and the lithium hot spring

slides into the cold rapids

of the muddy river.

A sunburst of moths

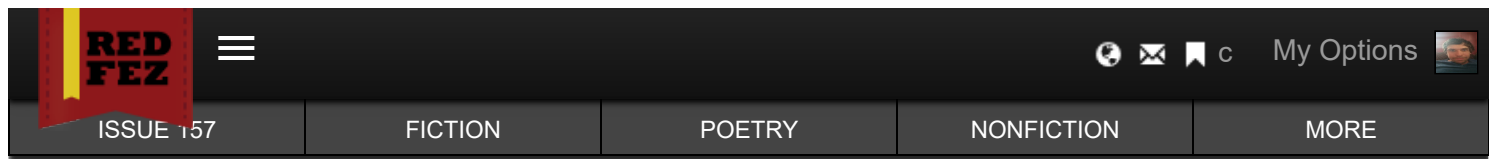
awakens at the bend

between the canyon

and dark mountains

ahead in the distance

of another land.

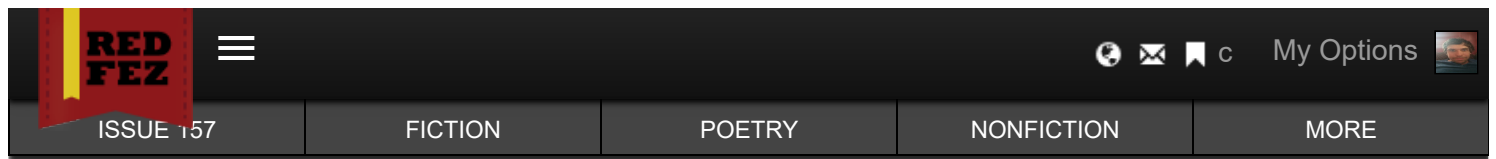


and lions on the wall
transforming in red light.
I brought the pure water
to my eyelids
watching the wild dogs
emerge from the rock.

Shaman John and his companion find themselves at a mineral spring around which grow river cane, a species of bamboo traditionally used by the Cherokee for hunting weapons, basketry, medicine and dozens of other uses. This places the poem in the Southeastern quadrant of the United States, east of the Mississippi River and south of New York. But nothing in the text places this poem in the contemporary or modern world. Shaman John walks a timeless landscape.

The waters of a lithia spring are infused with lithium salts. In psychiatric medicine, forms of lithium have been used in ameliorating the effects of bi-polar disorder and other mental illnesses. An acquaintance of mine took lithium to quiet the voices in his head. But the form of the mineral

(lithium chloride) based on the elements in this spring were









patients.

Prehistoric peoples, especially in what is now Europe, painted a great many animals on the walls of caves. The poet has chosen deer and lions, the most timid and the most ferocious, as representing the entire spectrum of the animal kingdom. These caves were generally not dwelling places. We now believe that the paintings had a ritualistic function and the few humans depicted to be shamans performing magic, perhaps to assure a successful hunt or perhaps to increase the number of game animals available. Here is a reproduction of the most famous cave painting shaman in the guise of a reindeer ...



... and it is no coincidence that this theme is mirrored in Bree's cover illustration to *Under the Mountain Born* where Shaman John dons the guise of a bear.



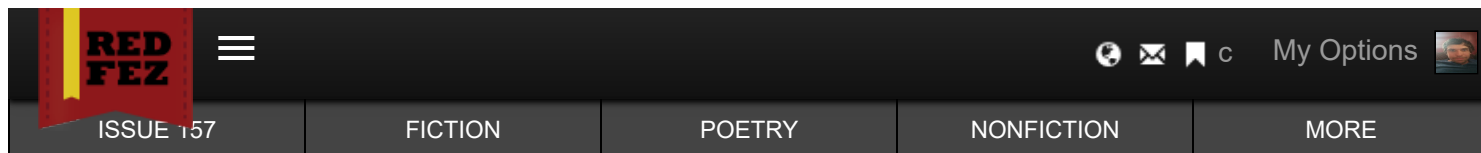
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reach the spring on his way to the mountains in the dark country. The sun points the way making luminous the nimbus of moths, a commonplace phenomenon as I have seen many times a moth glow like an ember under a strong halogen lamp. Nature conspires to help him but first he requires the use of a gift or boon to complete his quest.

Wells and springs are considered sacred sites and are usually guarded or presided over by a deity, usually a goddess. By bringing the water, most pure at its source, and here we may extrapolate that its mineral properties of lithium may be most potent, so potent as to be toxic, but as in Frank Herbert's *Dune* where Paul is able to transmute the toxic Spice, so too can the true Shaman be able to receive the sacrament of the spring. By washing his eyes, or perhaps ceremonially ingesting the water, he achieves a clarity of vision. Shaman John can now see the wild dogs who were always there. They may be guardians or hellhounds much like Cerberus. And they, in turn, are prepared to help guide him to the the dark country, or at least not hinder him, and there he may complete his quest, returning with the knowledge necessary to help his people.

Let's not forget that we are dealing here not with a real quest but metaphor in the service of poetry. So what does lithium, which helps those with disordered minds, have to do with



against chaos. This is the role of the poet, this is the role of the shaman.



What sounds first in the nature poetry resounds in the mythological register. Read every John Swain poem as if his alter-ego narrator were a shaman.

“Effigy of the Giving”

Parting before autumn

a kingfisher came

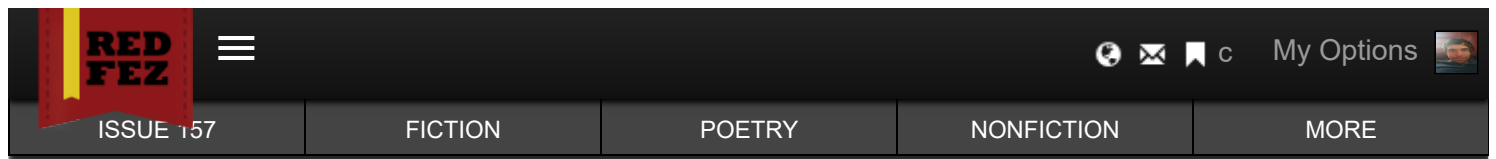
like a sorcerer

from the blue fire

of the bay.

I ate the pomegranates

and kept the seeds



to mourn the corn's daughter.

The field bares stones

to raise an effigy

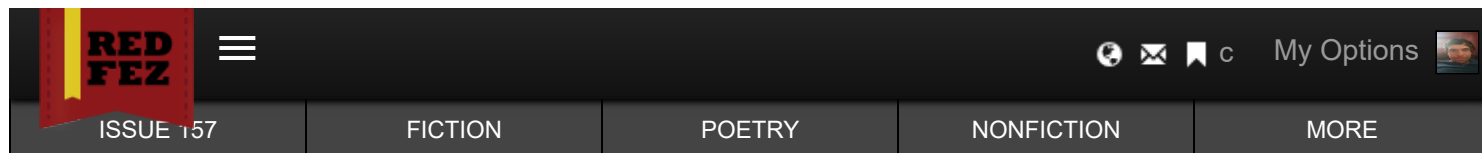
of the giving

and of our aspirations

shattered like a harrow.

Birds figure in many of Mr. Swain's pieces, and in the tradition, they are often daemons, messengers from the source, the unknown realm, the collective unconscious. The kingfisher, known to the Greeks as Halcyon connotes to us the halcyon idyllic days that draw to a close in the Fall, the death of the year, when Persephone, daughter of Demeter (or Ceres from whom we get the word cereal, in this instance, corn) is taken to the underworld. The world is barren and the harrow will shatter trying to turn the earth that yields nothing but stone.

Like poetry, one of the roles of mythology is to show us how we fit in the grand scheme things. It, too, is a stay against chaos. But applying the mythological layer of meaning to his canvas is just one more means to an end. Every poem in this collection is like a picture frame, and within the frame there



knowledge and personal transformation.



They stride on two levels, Mr. Swain and Shaman John, sometimes one and the same, sometimes twain. There is a sense of doubleness threaded throughout the book, reflected most visually in the illustrations by Bree. The writer's curse, always looking over the shoulder of oneself, shows in the matter of fact tone when conveying the fantastic image. Mr. Swain knows nomenclature and maps and facts. Shaman John perceives a transmutable and sometimes phantasmagoric world. Mr. Swain travels the continent with camera at the ready and ...

... and Shaman John ...

... he be trippin' ...



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☆ I like this

♥ I love this

Discussion

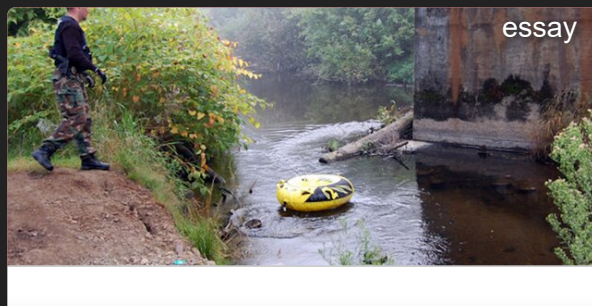
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



What did you think?




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Following
view profile


which made a splash in the media with its unusual modus operandi
2 ★ 2  **Doc Sigerson**


Christmas was not wr
9 ♥ 1 ★

Issue 79

 **Issue 79**

 nonfiction

I am Still Green
I have been writing on a regular basis since I was nine years old when I rode my bicycle to the Hallmark store in Wichita Falls.
1 ★ 7  **Misti Rainwater**




TI
It is estim million / p scrambling looking / f
2 ★ 5

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

 poetry

smoke, fire, wind, mud, darkness, and old liars
Baking dark bread is only a crime / when the old firemen are left hungry. // Ants will carry crumbs if it
♥ 2 ★ 1  **Kelli Allen**



I watched it \$250 on thr and a vint sister. She
♥ 1 ★ 2

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ne thought a fire no disagreeable object, and therefore determined to approach it. When he came nearer he saw a large

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Pagan in the oldest sense of the word, a person of the country, uncorrupted by the metropolitan, a

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ne thought a fire no disagreeable object, and therefore determined to approach it. When he came nearer he saw a large

I Lost My Damn Hands


... We re-affirmed the remarkable ability of the phrase "FUCK IT!" to chase the doubts away that hold us back from whatever it is we feel like

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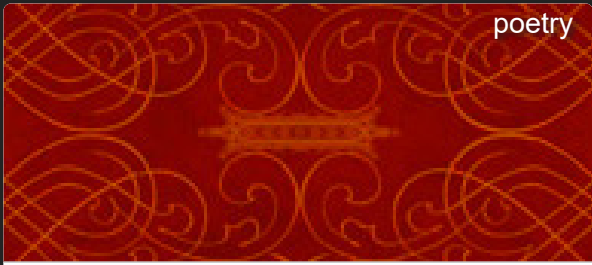
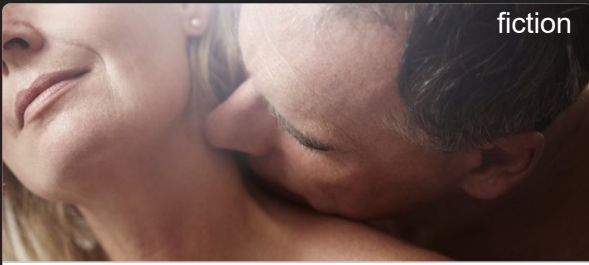

ne thought a fire no disagreeable object, and therefore determined to approach it. When he came nearer he saw a large

Strawberr

... I heard and my trib changes y









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<p>... he saw at some distance a great light, which seemed to come from some prodigious fire. Jack did not know what this could be; but, in his present situation, he thought a fire no disagreeable object, and therefore determined to approach it. When he came nearer he saw a large</p> <p style="text-align: center;">nonfiction</p>	<p>... he saw at some distance a great light, which seemed to come from some prodigious fire. Jack did not know what this could be; but, in his present situation, he thought a fire no disagreeable object, and therefore determined to approach it. When he came nearer he saw a large</p> <p style="text-align: center;">nonfiction</p>	<p>... he saw at some distance a great light, which seemed to come from some prodigious fire. Jack did not know what this could be; but, in his present situation, he thought a fire no disagreeable object, and therefore determined to approach it. When he came nearer he saw a large</p> <p style="text-align: center;">nonfiction</p>
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Pagan in the oldest sense of the word, a person of the country, unaccounted by the metropolitan...

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ability of the phrase "FUCK IT!" to chase the doubts away that hold us

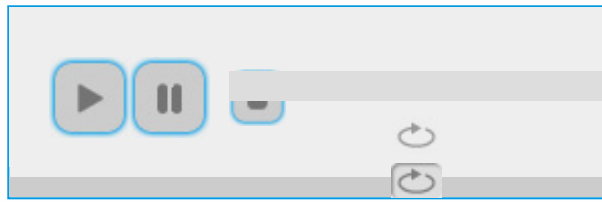
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John Swain