

In Conversation with Elizabeth Rosen

MJ: Every story begins somewhere, so I was curious about the origin of your piece in our issue, “A Man Dragging His Dog Over a Snowy Field.” What inspired this story for you one and what drew you to explore these characters and themes?

ER: There’s a huge field alongside a highway that I frequently drive, and it does have transformers in it. Passing one day, I saw what I thought was a man dragging a dead animal behind him on a rope. I don’t think he was, but the misinterpretation made me think What If?

MJ: As someone who formerly lived in New England and now lives in the South, with you being from New Orleans and then living in Boston for a little bit (and you now living in Pennsylvania), I am curious about if/how do you think these two very different parts of the country, the North and the South, have influenced your writing?

ER: Such an interesting question. One thing that strikes me about Boston and New Orleans is that, at least for the United States, they are both old cities, yet their founding sensibilities are so different. It’s their settings and sensibilities that have probably most influenced my writing, though, to be honest, I don’t write too many stories set in New Orleans because I don’t think I have yet figured out how to write about my hometown.

MJ: Can you talk a little bit about your time in Boston, and how being in the city may have influenced your writing and your growth as a writer?

ER: Well, there’s the fact that I took my first creative writing class there, of course, but Boston is my favorite American city. I still miss it even though I haven’t lived there since I graduated from B.U. It’s a city that belongs to a certain period of my life, so the stories and images I pull from there belong to a younger, less seasoned person, but one who was taking it all in with the wide-eyed enthusiasm and idealism of someone that age. When I think about the stories I’ve set there, and the characters who inhabit it, I see that most of those stories are usually about the concerns, experiences, or the points of view of someone who would be that age.

MJ: You recently had your chapbook, *Survival Skills*, published. What inspired this collection, what is it about, and what do you hope readers take away from it?

ER: At heart, I'm what you would call a catastrophist, and because of that, I've always been fascinated by what it is like to go through or survive something terrible. How does a traumatic experience, or even the threat of a traumatic experience, change the way we see the world and people around us? What do we have to do either physically or psychologically to survive and keep going? The stories in this chapbook are really about those questions.

MJ: What role does revision play in your creative process, and what kinds of changes do you typically find yourself making? With both your short story in the issue and your recently released chapbook, do you want to talk about the revision process with those projects (if there was any)?

ER: I love some parts of revision and find others more frustrating. I really enjoy noodling with language, so the wordsmith part of revision is a pleasure. Trying to figure out why a story isn't working on the macro-level is less pleasant, simply because it's not always clear, and meanwhile, you're excited about this new story you want to tell, but it's not landing, and you're desperate to figure out how to nail it. Sometimes it takes putting distance between the writing and revising to see it. Sometimes you need readers to help you see where the story needs propping up. Sometimes the story just defies you, and it goes in a drawer. I've got a few of those. Every now and again, hopefully not often, you write something close to your heart that you feel really stubborn about and have to wrestle with your ego about changing it.

MJ: In terms of your influences, which poets or writers have most shaped your sense of some of the themes we've previously discussed? Do you see yourself writing in a tradition of New England poets and writers, or do you feel your influences come from elsewhere?

ER: I can't really point to anyone specific as an influence because I'm someone who attaches themselves to particular stories/books, rather than

a body of work by an author. I read a lot, so the influence comes by seeing how other people tell their stories and learning what is possible in fiction-writing. In terms of tradition, I think my writing probably takes more from the baroque and lyrical writing I associate with New Orleans, which is itself a mystical, ornate, and deeply complicated place.

MJ: What are you currently reading?

ER: A poignant novella-in-flash by Sumitra Singam called Mother Karma, and a hilarious short story collection by Dave Housley called Looney, as well as Julie Otsuka's When the Emperor Was Divine, which I fully expect will have me bawling at the end, as I have for her other novels.

MJ: What are you currently working on, creatively or professionally?

ER: Two collections, one called The Maryland Stories, which is realism and set in a community around an estuary there, and the other some kind of genre hybrid where a non-human entity is the glue that holds the pieces together. But ask me tomorrow; you might get a different answer.