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Artist-in-Residence Application
Mountain Lake Biological Station

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Watermelon (complete short story, published by [Lost Balloon](#) under pen name Ellen Ellis)

When I was four, we grew a watermelon in the backyard garden, under the split-trunk oak. Every morning the screen door would rattle from the passing of my two velcro sandals and the neighbor's dog would bark as I squatted, square knees and dirty hands, to inspect that watermelon.

It swelled like summer passes, hair grows, knitting knots, so slow you couldn't tell it was happening until one day it was bigger than I was. Sweet striped shell, vine and leaves. The critters ate all the tomatoes but they left that watermelon alone. Indomitable watermelon, under the sun and the tree and dog's crossed eyes.

Kelly says I would sit out there next to the watermelon in my little yellow dress, toes in the dirt, talking at rocketship speed to my variegated friend, making squares with my two sky-sweeping hands. Outlining that craggy four-year-old universe to a very good listener.

July I tried to catch it in the act – get up early, tiptoe down the stairs, edge the screen door open far enough so that (holding my breath) I could fit my round kid belly through the gap. The moon, enormous, hung in the hot air. It probably knew how that watermelon just kept growing, but Mom's following feet kept me from asking.

One morning it sat smug in the sunlight, self-satisfied in its mysteries, and the next it was a crater in the August earth, a severed stem trailing leaves. Our biggest white bowl overflowing with red flesh, a spill staining the tablecloth. Kelly put a whole slice in her mouth at once and the juice ran down her pufferfish cheeks, dripped in red rainspots onto her turned-up collar.

Mount Turn (excerpt from a novel)

This was flyover country, and the landscape didn't come right out and demand you love it. You could see right to the edge of the sky, and all there was in any direction was farmland and little houses and gatherings of trees, skeletal and snow-covered.

Resting on the side of a gravel track, Anthony saw a flash of color in the grayness of the landscape around him. Using the end of his scarf, he brushed the snow away from the rotting remains of an old tree. Mushrooms were growing from the exposed edge of the stump: flat orange caps, clustered twenty or thirty thick, bright and soft and improbably alive. The color was bright, decadent, entirely out of place here where gray fields met gray sky. Carefully, disturbing as few of the stems as possible, he pulled one free and shook off the rest of the snow. It was cold and a little damp in his pocket, and he held it gently, careful not to crush its delicate gills.

That night when he returned to his house, he laid it out to dry it on top of the oven and found an empty coffee tin. With the outside of an envelope and some tape, he labeled the box *Field Things*. A few days later, when the moisture had gone out of the cap and left it shriveled and browning, he started his new collection.

At first treasures were rare in the frozen fields, but, slowly but surely, the temperature rose. Slush stood ankle-deep on the roads, and trees that had been brown and dead were suddenly coated in bright green buds.

The paths he'd come to know became lush tunnels, grown over with hardy birches that met overhead. In the sudden sunlight of a windy afternoon, Anthony would pause in their shadows, digging his water out of his backpack and listening to hidden cicadas churr in the branches. Wildflowers poked out of the scrub at the edges of vast plots of corn and soy, tiny bright spots among the long grasses. There were no sequoias, no deep-earth forests, but there were clusters of trees that had gone unvisited for years except by teenagers who went there to smoke. Aspens and maples and ash and the occasional oak, holding onto each other's roots for dear life.

He continued to collect little things: stems of grasses gone bronze in the late summer, flaring purple flowers in clusters so vibrant they seemed almost otherworldly, caps and stems of white and brown and red mushrooms that furrowed the embankments on the edges of the fields. He would have said, if pressed, that California had more interesting flora than this flat place, but once he started looking, particular wonders were everywhere.

Mount Turn (excerpt from a novel)

May 21, 1983: Every day now I find encroaching down the banks of the hollow a veritable army of a very particular mushroom, sending their cobwebbing white roots from the grass to dangle in the shifting surface. On my first spotting, I thought they were some kind of dead thing and nearly tripped over my own feet. Once I had regained my head and given it closer inspection, I determined the little clusters to be in fact a type of fungi I have never seen before. In the center of each mushroom, rather like the head of a flower, is a soft white orb; stretching around it on all sides are fin-like growths that resemble the arms of a starfish. There are now more than ten of these mushrooms steadily colonizing the little hollow. Levering one from the ground on the end of a stick, the little creature's fronds drooping, it looked like a mutated jellyfish washed up on the shores of some foreign land. I am not sure if they are poisonous so I have avoided touching them directly, but as I continue my work here, I feel as though they are keeping me quiet company, perhaps humming gentle songs in a register I cannot quite hear. Well, I am getting very sentimental.

Later: With a portion of the stipend provided me for my scientific research, I have sent away and received from a bookstore in St. Argo a fine book on fungi: *The Forager's Guide to Mushrooms of the United States*. I must admit that I was dizzied initially by the sheer number of entries, most of which have nary a sketch nor photograph to help me identify them in the wild, but rather only a brief physical description ("gray, moist, bulbous") and a note on the effects of ingestion ("may cause stomach upset," "edible but unpleasant," "very lethal"). But as I write now, after some time in my cramped bed with the book and a brandy, I believe I have found the likeliest categorization for my companions. They are, I think, *barometer earthstars*, the solemn and lovely *Astraeus hygrometricus*—Astraeus, of course, who is the ancient god of dusk, of the moment when we witness the emergence of the stars.

The following day: Another more wonderful discovery about my fungal companions, Meredith—I have observed that they shift lazily with the passage of days as though they had musculature and nervous systems of their own. Yesterday it was bright and cloudless and I saw that their petals were tightly closed around the central node, but today when a sudden rainstorm soaked us all, they spread their arms wide like children in a downpour. Though my book does not say so explicitly, I assume that this odd behavior is the source of the organism's common name—that is, my little barometers let me know when it rains.

Worm Season (excerpt from a short story)

They went up north every summer since Marie was 2; before that they didn't have the money. When Marie was 12 the lake dried up but that didn't stop anybody.



“WORMS,” Marie’s father declared in his thigh-high waders. “THEY LIKE THE MUD SEE HERE.”

Marie saw here: a lump of oncelake pocked with tiny holes like snakes or termites lived within.

“WORMS,” the nodding head said. “ONLY JUST ONE WAY TO DRAW EM OUT.”

“Dynamite?” Marie hazarded.

“MILK,” her father said, and in that way Marie learned about riddles.



“Well you’re going to need to do better Paul,” the haze of smoke over a chopping carrot knife said. A landline on speakerphone was propped against the fruit bowl. “Don’t be such a fucking pussy.”

Marie offered her bowl of worms for inspection, but the cloud waved her away. She caught a glimpse of her mother’s aquiline nose as the fog momentarily cleared.

“They’re sucking us fucking dry, Paul,” it said and beheaded a carrot.



There was a cave under the lighthouse at the beach, just big and nice enough for one Marie. This hole is mine, she told the bowl of worms. The walls were etched with mementos from all the years she’d been here. Some were latecomer memories she’d added in year seven, the year she began her project. It was also the year she learned to write: she was what her father called a late-bloomer and her mother called slow.

Year 12 was already a dense one. Weeks before, the news had announced that the lake had dried right out. Nobody knew why, according to Marie’s father; she wasn’t allowed to watch the news, so decided to trust the secondhand reports. In any case, lakes drying up squared with the sideways logic of the universe she had come to expect. The world had a way of falling into the ocean and vice versa. Mandy from school’s stepfather used to be a rich Hollywood producer until a smoker burned down his house and a hundred square miles around, and now he was dead.

Walking King (excerpt from a short story, published in the [Bristol Short Story Prize Anthology](#))

Nested like the yolk in an egg, wick in a lamp, ball in a dog's mouth was a house with four windows. The east and west windows were for seeing the sun rise and come down again; through the north window they kept a lookout for the winter winds.

It was a lovely house, in Leïd's opinion. You could see everything there was to see about it by standing in one spot and turning in a circle.

Things weren't like that outside the house. Depending on the spot you stood, everything changed places: the light, the time of day, the creatures and the trees. You could plant your feet and turn in a circle and by the time you were facing the same way again everything would have shifted.

The forest had two landmarks: their four-windowed house and the river. "There never used to be a path here," Gerde would say as they walked the dirt track between the two. "That king wore ditches in the ground, walking back and forth."

Red lichen grew underwater on the river's banks and reached towards the current like a drowned woman. If they didn't keep their laundry away from the shore it would stain their things deep rusty brown.

Their forest was old pine. It was quiet—that was something a traveler would always say. "It's so quiet here," they would say, and pull their coat around them. Or, "I bet you sleep well." And then toss and turn all night.

The forest swallowed sound: you walked out between the trees and sank into pine needles up to your ankles. It didn't want you to sing or whistle or talk as you walked (on this Gerde and the forest agreed). They used pine needles for tea and for starting the stove, and in exchange they didn't sing or whistle or talk when they passed under the trees. Only the river ignored this: it laughed like a crazy man through their sheets and buckets.

Night came down more quickly in the forest than anyone expected, even Leïd who had spent her whole life here. You tried to time out dusk and the sun went down an hour earlier for spite. That was the use of the west window: you could keep an eye on the sunset from a safe vantage point and make sure it didn't pull any tricks.

Artist Statement

In my writing, I explore the hidden, sprawling natural phenomena that underlie the veneer of civilization and in certain places erupt through. Artists and scientists utilize specialized languages that can be mutually unintelligible, but often investigate similar subjects: understanding the world around them, uncovering the things that are not easily seen, illuminating the hidden reasoning behind the visible world.

My work began with a fascination with the power and strangeness of Lake Superior and the weirdness of growing things. My novel-in-progress, inspired in part by the Humongous Fungus of the Malheur National Forest, follows the development of an industrial town built above a fungal network and beset by lightning storms, and investigates the relationships communities hold with the landscape around them. In my short stories, including *Worm Season* and *The Walking King*, humanity is confronted with natural forces that we struggle to understand and rarely even see.

My process is one of inquiry and discussion, seeking inspiration in nature and expanding it into human stories contending with our place in that environment. It is important to me to evoke the natural world in a way that feels meaningful, and the best way to do that is to write surrounded by scientific practice, wildlands, and people who love that work. It is mutually reinforcing to communicate across the languages of art and science, to learn and share the insights each can glean. I hope to contribute to what both fields excel at—identifying and illuminating the hidden patterns of our world.

Residency Proposal

I am planning a project built around the unseen things of the forest in the style of a field journal, incorporating images and drawings of what the protagonist encounters in the woods. This story follows a character from my novel-in-progress, who leaves her home in the Great Plains to pursue mycology and finds herself captivated by the mosses and beetles, bogs and hemlock of the Appalachian woods, and the people working with her there. The story will incorporate the spooky and the unknown, the atmosphere of an unfamiliar place expanding as you realize how little you know about it—but, especially as my character is a biologist, it is important that the scientific components are real and rigorous. In particular, the project's presentation as a field journal relies on creating realistic scientific artifacts and evoking accurately the ecosystem—literal and emotional—of a space.

The only thing I need for my work is a place to write, pen and paper, and a way to charge my computer. I plan to spend the first week of the residency outlining and writing, and the second seeking feedback on the drafted piece. In a past residency at STAGE, I built experimental theatrical works around in-depth interviews with scientists, and would like to do something similar here. But the opportunity to share a space with passionate experts offers the even more exciting opportunity to learn by immersion—by chatting over a meal, wandering the woods for frogs, and living with work in progress.

Ellen Wiese

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EDUCATION

M.A.	University of East Anglia (Norwich, UK): Prose Fiction, <i>Merit</i>	September 2022
M.A.P.H.	University of Chicago (Chicago, IL): Humanities, <i>Honors</i>	June 2017
B.A.	University of Chicago (Chicago, IL): English Literature	June 2017

AWARDS, HONORS & WORKSHOPS

Bristol Short Story Prize Shortlist	Oct 2022
Brick Lane Short Story Prize Long-Longlist	June 2022
Guest speaker for Surrealist Short Fiction, Hollins University	Jan 2022
Best Microfiction Nominee 2020, <i>Lost Balloon</i>	Nov 2019
<i>Glimmer Train</i> Very Short Fiction Top 25	July-Aug 2018
Writing workshop with MJ Kaufman	July 2018
MAPH Thesis Award Finalist	Sept 2017
Olga and Paul Menn Foundation Prize	June 2017

PUBLICATIONS & READINGS

<i>Jet Lag</i> (short story)	Nov 4, AGNI Magazine
<i>The Walking King</i> (short story)	Oct 15, Bristol Prize Anthology
<i>Light-Trick</i> (flash fiction reading)	Nov 2022, Dragon Hall
<i>Andromeda in the White Room</i> * (microfiction)	Nov 2019, Bookends Review
<i>Watermelon</i> * (microfiction)	Sep 2019, Lost Balloon
<i>Noise</i> * (microfiction)	Feb 2019, Wigleaf Magazine

* Published under pen name Ellen Ellis

THEATER WRITING

Two-Legged Ghosts

- Full-length play initially developed at the University of Chicago under the instruction of Evan Linder
- Received at reading at AstonRep Theatre Company's annual Writers Series in Nov 2019
- Received an independent reading in Sept 2019 directed by Gwendolyn Wiegold

Entanglement

- Devised play written in collaboration with STAGE Lab at the University of Chicago, focusing on quantum entanglement and kung fu
- Received a July 2019 workshop at City University of Hong Kong & the Martial Arts Living Archive

Secondhand Time

- Full-length play devised in collaboration with director Julia Santha and Trap Door Theatre ensemble
- Produced in February 2018 at Trap Door Theatre

last bus

- One-act play presented as part of the University of Chicago's May 2017 New Work Week
- Under development with illustrator Jacob Goodman for adaptation into a graphic novel

EMPLOYMENT

UChicago Arts	Chicago, IL
<i>Writer</i>	Dec 2019-present

- Conducted interviews with field-leading artists including Anne Carson and Winfried Ritsch
- Developed and wrote blog posts highlighting the arts and fostering interest in further programming

Project Manager & Chief Writer

Jan 2021-Aug 2021

- Developed a new philosophy for the future of the arts at the University based on conversations with faculty, deans, and administration
- Produced a strategic plan to accomplish the University's goals around the arts

Steppenwolf Theatre Company

Chicago, IL

Script Reader

June 2016-present

- Read and evaluated three to five scripts a month for consideration by the literary department

Project Manager

July 2018-Nov 2018

- Aggregated data and disseminated information for The Mix, a new play initiative focused on plays incorporating characters of varying and intersecting identities
- Communicated with playwrights and agents on behalf of the Director of New Play Development

Literary Apprentice

Sept 2017-June 2018

- Compiled and communicated dramaturgical information for all season shows
- Selected a short list of plays for season selection, focusing on non-male writers and writers of color
- Facilitated the script selection process, including communication with agents, professional script readers, ensemble members, and artistic staff members

The Smart Museum

Chicago, IL

Development Assistant

Dec 2019-June 2020

- Supported development efforts by writing and editing donor communications and grant applications
- Coordinated donation solicitation campaigns and drafted communications to individual donors

STAGE Lab at the Pritzker School of Molecular Engineering

University of Chicago

Inaugural Fellow

Jan 2019-Oct 2019

- Wrote and devised theater pieces organized around scientific topics including quantum entanglement, information science, and the evolution of the internet
- Provided dramaturgy for the developing theater pieces and projects of other fellows

The Doppelgänger by Matthew-Lee Erlbach, dir. Tina Landau

Steppenwolf Theatre

Script Supervisor, Research Associate & Assistant to the Playwright

Feb-June 2018

- Collaborated with literary department to create and synthesize notes for the playwright following rehearsals
- Provided extensive dramaturgical materials to the cast, crew, and playwright and assisted in producing new play drafts
- Compiled and distributed playwright edits over the course of the production process

BLKS by Aziza Barnes, dir. Nataki Garrett

Steppenwolf Theatre

Dramaturgical Assistant

Oct 2017-Jan 2018

- Researched and created a dramaturgy blog for the production, including a summary of the playwright's other artistic work, excerpts from articles by scholars of race and gender, and recommended reading

SKILLS & INTERESTS

Technology	Proficient in Google Drive, Dropbox, Microsoft Office, Slack, Mailchimp, Squarespace, Final Draft; knowledge of archival software, multimedia organization & library systems. Experience in motion capture software including Blender, MotionBuilder, and Unity 3D.
Language	Conversational in Japanese; basic knowledge of French.
Production	Experience in carpentry, props design, Isadora projection software & lighting.
Music	Change ringing, Taiko drum, French horn, trumpet, mellophone, piano, voice.
Misc.	Three years of circus experience (acrobatics and silks); five years of experience as Dungeons & Dragons DM

References available upon request