

Interview for Jacob Butlett

From *Cold Creek Review*

Nonfiction: “Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water”

1. When did you first learn that you loved to write?

- a. I first learned that I loved to write back in middle school. Up until the second half of sixth grade, I attended remedial reading and writing classes. I couldn’t read well, I couldn’t write well—detriments to any writer, especially an aspiring writer such as myself. But that didn’t stop me. Eventually I graduated from remedial classes and learned to write creatively. I experimented with my prose, all the while cultivating a deeper love for storytelling.

2. Do you recall the first piece you ever wrote and shared with others?

- a. I wrote several stories in middle school, though I never shared them with anyone. To me, they were mediocre, yet humbling, attempts at writing something halfway sophisticated. It would take me until high school to write short stories that exemplified my budding talent as a writer. During my first year of high school, I wrote and got published my first official short story, “The Keeper of the Cane.” Having grown a lot as a writer since high school, I now know the faults in the story, even in the published version—poor pacing, poor word choice, poor grammar. But I love the story. I love it not because it’s great—it really isn’t—but because it shows my passion for storytelling.

3. You state in your brief biography that you hold a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing. Where did you attend school, and who were some of the professors from which you learned?

- a. I hold a B.A. in Creative Writing from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. I was fortunate, if not blessed, to have been taught by a wonderful trio of creative writing instructors: Dr. Philip Pollock, Professor William Jablonsky, and Dr. Kevin Koch. Dr. Pollock taught me poetry and, more than that, encouraged me to express myself more openly and proudly in my work. Which I did, openly and proudly. Professor William Jablonsky taught me fiction writing. He gave me invaluable skills about the storytelling process, skills I’ll take with me when I apply to graduate school a year from now. And Dr. Kevin Koch taught me nonfiction, drilling in me the importance of concrete detail in creative nonfiction, an importance that guided me as I wrote “Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water” for one of his classes. Dr. Pollock, Professor Jablonsky, and Dr. Koch helped me grow as a writer, as a student, as a human being. And for that I owe them a debt of gratitude.

4. You are a former editor of *Catfish Creek*. What was that experience like?

- a. I was the poetry editor of *Catfish Creek* during my last year in college. Professor Jablonsky, the supervisor of the journal, made the experience fun and informative. In fact, all the other editors also made working for *Catfish* fun and informative. We talked about the amazing (and not so amazing) submissions we received, we talked about the direction of the journal, we talked about the publishing process itself, we talked about our own creative pieces—our poems, our short stories. I was part of a

team of fantastic writers. I was part of something magnificent. Something unforgettable.

5. Who are your biggest influences in your style and craft of writing?

- a. That's a toughie. After I let authors influence my writing, I quickly unlearn or remaster my writing style. So my style is always changing. For a long time I wrote like William Faulkner and Jane Austen, a strange combination for contemporary audiences. My workshop classmates in college didn't like my writing style, my professors didn't like my writing style, I didn't like my writing style. And yet my classmates and professors told me I wrote well. I took that as a heartfelt sign to write more naturally. Today I am influenced by more contemporary authors. Some of my favorite contemporary authors are Scott Russell Sanders, Ethan Canin, A.A. Balaskovits, and Tim O'Brien. (On a related note, my essay, "Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water," comes from a line in "After the Flood" by Scott Russell Sanders.)

6. We accepted your essay "Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water." Why did you decide to submit this piece to *The Shallows*?

- a. I hoped my essay would be a fitting addition to *The Shallows*, since the journal accepts work that incorporate "heartfelt purposes and their destructive outcomes." My essay, "Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water," exemplifies that dual conflict—our carefree desires and their negative consequences. In "Muddy Expanse" I discuss the stoicism I felt when I vacationed at the Wisconsin Dells. In a matter of speaking, my stoicism was my desire: to enjoy the trips and nothing more. But upon reflection, I realized that I took my family vacations for granted—the consequence. When my family faced several shocking events recently, I reconsidered my priorities on life. I wrote about my new perspective. The outcome? "Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water."

7. Your essay is told from a second-person perspective. What made you choose to write this piece from such an uncommon angle?

- a. Writing in second-person came easy to me, though I understand not too many editors appreciate the allure of second-person. "It's gimmicky," they argue. I sympathize with their concerns, but as a writer who desperately wants to learn more about the craft, I decided to give second-person a try, to see if I *could* write from such an underutilized perspective. Which I managed to do.

8. "Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water" is shared in vignettes. Does a single vignette stand out to you over others?

- a. The last vignette touches my heart more strongly than the others, which are more like thematic threads that guide the reader toward meaning. The last vignette ties the essay together. It humanizes the threads until all you have is sadness and a speckle of hope.

9. "Do not be afraid to wade through the waters of the past." is repetitive throughout the essay. Is there a particular reason you wanted this phrase to stand out in your essay?

- a. I've learned that if you want a message to linger in the minds of your readers, you should consider employing refrains when appropriate. Because "Muddy Expanse" comprises many sections, having a refrain helps the reader attach meaning and purpose to the essay as a whole. *Do not be afraid to wade through the waters of the past*, my essay's central refrain, encompasses many of my essay's themes, and it offers advice to the reader: Study your past. Sounds simple enough. But it isn't. The refrain also invites readers to reevaluate their lives by studying their pasts. I apply the refrain's recommendation in the essay's final vignette. I invite the reader to do the same in the essay's last two lines.

10. "Muddy Expanse of Annihilating Water" ends with a shift into the first-person perspective. Does this mean the narrator of the essay is different from you, the writer of the essay?

- a. In the essay the purpose of the second-person narrator changed after each major revision, but its principal purpose remains: to distance myself from the more raw emotions in the essay. I became someone else, a second voice inside my head, a person who could talk about my altruistic past from an enlightened standpoint without revealing too much about how much I've grown, not until the end. I employed second-person to talk about myself without feeling the brunt of a blithe, yet morose, past and present. In brief, writing in second-person was like having a conversation with my younger self. By doing away with second-person at the end, I was able to address my hopes more directly. I wanted to illustrate my essay's key messages, its conglomeration of motifs—the changing present, family bonds, the act of storytelling. I offered myself a possible plan for the future. Have children. Take them on vacation to the Wisconsin Dells. It might sound simplistic, but it's realistic enough, given the direction of the essay.

Thank you for trusting us with your work, Jacob.

Best,
Cold Creek Review