



SONGS FOR  
SALAMANDERS

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CAT DOSSETT, EDITOR

A HAWK & WHIPPOORWILL POETRY CHAPBOOK

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## From the editor...

Under logs and rocks, near lakes and ponds, salamanders live secret, slimy lives. From woodlands to vernal ponds salamanders take up residence, eating pests, spawning young, and repelling predators with their bright coloring and patterns. The state of Massachusetts, where this publisher is based, is home to eleven species in all.

Yet as their habitat shifts with human population, as roads increase and suitable environments for salamanders decrease, salamanders suffer. Already three species in the state are protected under the state's endangered species act.

This chapbook is in dedication to salamanders. It is a plea for better care of their habitats, and it sings praise for the environment that nurtures them.

- CLD



**Blake Campbell**

## Aquashicola

I tuck my jeans into my socks  
against the ticks. Your yard  
becomes a wood and then a wetland.  
We cross a creek and crouch  
at its edge, looking in at a bend  
where the current has slackened.  
What is that gelatinous  
ghost at the bottom, or what  
did it use to be? I fish it out  
with a stick for your inspection:  
a northern red salamander,  
no longer red, but blanched by death,  
its black spots fading  
into the pallor of waterlogged flesh.  
We let it sink back into silt,  
look up. Fresh from the chrysalis,  
spring azures and gray hairstreaks flit  
like animated petals. A single  
insomniac spring peeper sings.  
We push through cattails  
for a look at the pond,  
and bulbous bullfrog tadpoles,  
some sprouting legs,  
scatter toward the center.  
Fresh flowers—wild bleeding heart,  
trout lily, lesser celandine—

wink from dead vegetation,  
where a basking black racer  
evades your camera as we draw near.  
The dry and trampled rushes of last year  
crackle as he slithers off, unseen.

**Jessica Conway**

## Under Each Brick

In a rented backyard  
dank with rusted lawn chairs  
and weedy, false-plaster pots  
my child and I flip the bricks  
lining flowerbeds.

We are looking for bugs—  
roly pollies  
creepy crawlies  
ants spiders beetles worms.  
At eighteen months  
her words start to pile and pill.  
Under each brick  
a sediment.

Instead of bugs  
one day three salamanders  
slick and new.  
ooo ooo, she coos, pumping a wiry arm,  
crouching, swooning, still.

Their moist slip hit with a shock of sunlight,  
then hidden in our shade.  
We replace their blanket and return on tiptoe  
the next morning, the next.  
Marveling, rejoicing.

Recalling them,  
the longest word, *sal-a-man-der*,  
forms on her lips, lingers.  
A treasure sunk to the bottom of the brain.  
Under each brick  
a sentiment,  
a record.

**William Doreski**

## *Ambystoma laterale*

Under the log I rolled away from your garden

*Ambystoma laterale*.

Most eloquent length of blue:

stained glass suitable for some tiny chapel

where the littlest critters worship.

I picked it up so gently that perhaps it thought

it had ascended into another world.

I cupped it in my hand and walked it

to the marsh where gusts of frog-spawn

glittered in the shallows,

and cries of late spring peepers

still struck elegant chords.

I'll try to remember the rubbery feel of it

to ease me into extinction.

**Marnie Heenan**

## Salamander Pantoum

As snow melts, journey to the vernal ponds,  
attach eggs to fronds, wait for larvae,  
hide in leaf litter, feel the forest's breath  
through your skin, sleep in damp burrows,

attach eggs to fronds, wait for larvae,  
wiggle and shed until renewed, secrete mucus  
through your skin, sleep in damp burrows,  
eat the snails, slugs, and bugs under the tree,

wiggle and shed until renewed, secrete mucus,  
know the maple and birch, traverse the furrows,  
eat the snails, slugs, and bugs under the tree  
in your tunnel, dream, and wake to the moon,

know the maple and birch, traverse the furrows,  
hide in leaf litter, feel the forest's breath  
in your tunnel, dream, and wake to the moon  
as snow melts, journey to the vernal ponds.



**Rodger Martin**

## Radio Telescope

The salamanders' bulbous eyes gleaned  
The flash of methane here, little removed  
From the time their ancestors,  
Ionized from primal mist, slithered  
Through dim forests of fern, leaving  
Mucous glistening on their starlit trails.  
Now, the environmental wars have exploded again.

And this place has turned firebase ringed with wire.  
Flame keeps out the night; a dungeon bunker  
Lies beneath pocked mud and mows down  
Wood until it falls away from the mire.  
A dozer's steel splinters every form  
That tries to stand forcing the undines  
To dig in and spy from beneath the leaves.

An electrical hum reminds the jungle of what  
It's lost. Darkness darkens again. A giant  
Metal hand reaches from the concrete,  
Cups a skeletal eye, stretches toward the stars.  
It opens to light so dim, so old it might blink  
For amphibious time, might wobble for a pulsing  
Chloroplast, but will hardly wink at bipeds,

Weapons slung between legs, who scar  
The loam and scorch their village to save it.

The salamanders creep out and up the bunker walls.  
Bipeds lock and load; they strain over screens,  
Squint through slits into the black. Listen  
For the slither and hiss of lidless eyes and miss  
The slime that moistens the back of their dreams.

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*Previously appeared in the journals Anemone and Ad Hoc Monadnock.*

**Susan Edwards Richmond**

## One log per visit, never the same log twice

In the dark and damp, deep places beneath  
the surface of our play, lurks a lesson  
in gratification deferred. Shadow  
creatures blue as caves and midnight, or red  
as blood worms, mud worms meander, spotted  
with toxicity. Some days only ants,  
a spider hiding a sac. Other days  
millipedes curl or centipedes scurry  
or ubiquitous sow bugs crawl along  
bark and roots and offered arms. But the prize  
awe is the vertebrate who at first glance  
appears as wet and spineless as a slug,  
but on second, unwinds in graceful curves,  
spreads tiny frog feet and paddles the earth.

**Joanna Williams**

## Seasons

sleeping through the winter  
then spring beauty bursts forth  
violet wood-sorrel, purple cress

marbled salamander  
to crawl out, to wander  
to feed, to find a mate,

to breathe through skin  
and absorb the rain  
to live eight years blissful

under log and leaf, hunting  
slugs and centipedes and  
spawning descendants

**Emily Wheeler**

# Festival

In unfeasted New England towns  
in late gray winter, as spring lurks,  
blue-spotted salamanders

step through protected tunnels,  
wiggle under underpasses  
and skate across asphalt,

to join like-minded celebrants  
at the nearest vernal pool,  
and turn their attention to  
each other. When their carnival  
ends, they return to the mud flats  
on the other side of Henry Road,  
old skin sloughed off  
after a series of body ripples,  
that in another species  
might be called dancing,  
or even exultation.

# Contributors

Blake **CAMPBELL** lives in Boston and works as an editor. At Emerson College, he received the Alike Perroti and Seth Frank Award from the Academy of American Poets. His work has appeared on poets.org, *The Emerson Review*, and *The Road Not Taken*. // Jess **CONWAY** has worked with and written alongside high school-age youth, English teachers, and teacher candidates in Arkansas, New Mexico, and New York. She is a doctoral student and instructor in English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, serves as co-director of the Mentmore Fund focusing on decolonizing wealth and environmental justice, and is as a board member for Hudson Valley Seed. She lives with her partner and two children in Beacon, NY. // Marnie **HEENAN** lives in Fort Myers, Florida with her husband and their young son. Her work is forthcoming in *Changelings and Fairy Rings*, an anthology from Three Drops Press, and has appeared in *Kudzu House Quarterly*, *Riding Light Review*, and in several Alliance for the Arts projects. // Rodger **MARTIN** is the recipient of an Appalachia Award for poetry, a New Hampshire State Council on the Arts award for fiction, and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities. His work has been published in literary journals and anthologies throughout the United States and China. His books include *For All The Tea in Zhōngguó* and *The Battlefield Guide* (both from Hobblebush). // Susan Edwards **RICHMOND** is the author of the collections *Before We Were Birds*, *Purgatory Chasm*, and *Boto* (all by Adastra Press); *Increase* (FootHills Publishing); and *Birding in Winter* (Finishing Line Press). Her poems have appeared in anthologies and journals, including *Appalachia*, *Blueline*, and *The Iowa Review*. She is poet-

in-residence at Old Frog Pond Farm & Studio in Harvard, MA, and teaches in Mass Audubon's Drumlin Farm Community Preschool. Her children's picture book debut, *Bird Count*, illustrated by Stephanie Fizer Coleman, is published by Peachtree. // Joanna **RADWANSKA-WILLIAMS** teaches English at the Macao Polytechnic Institute. She loves to explore different cultural and intercultural spaces. Find her on LinkedIn at @onhajrw. // Emily **WHEELER**, after twelve years in Jena, Germany, returned to settle in Jamaica Plain. Poems she translated have appeared in the Germany issue of *Atlanta Review*; and poems she wrote, in *Orion*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Contemporary Poets of New England*, and others. Now semi-retired, she works as a literary janitor and is hoping to become a better birder.

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## CRITICAL PRAISE

(FOR SALAMANDERS)

"EYES SET WIDE IN THE LEAF HEAD / SMALL  
BROAD CHEST, A LITTLE TAPER OF FLAME FOR TAIL."

- MURIEL RUKEYSER

"SLOW, GENTLE / THE BLACK AND YELLOW SALAMANDER /  
CREEPS TOWARDS DAYLIGHT." - CHARLES MADGE

"EMBER-RED BUT COLD, BORN NEW  
AND BLIND, NAKED EARTHLINGS."

- A. K. RAMANUJAN

"IT IS THE SALAMANDER AT YOUR FOOT WHICH  
INTERESTS ME / THE MOST." - DIANE WAKOSKI



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