

INTERVIEWS – NEWS – EVENTS (INE) ©2018

INE Note: All links to the listed works are at the end of the interview.

INE: Welcome all. Today I'm very lucky to interview Russell Streur, editor of Plum Tree Tavern, an online poetry journal.

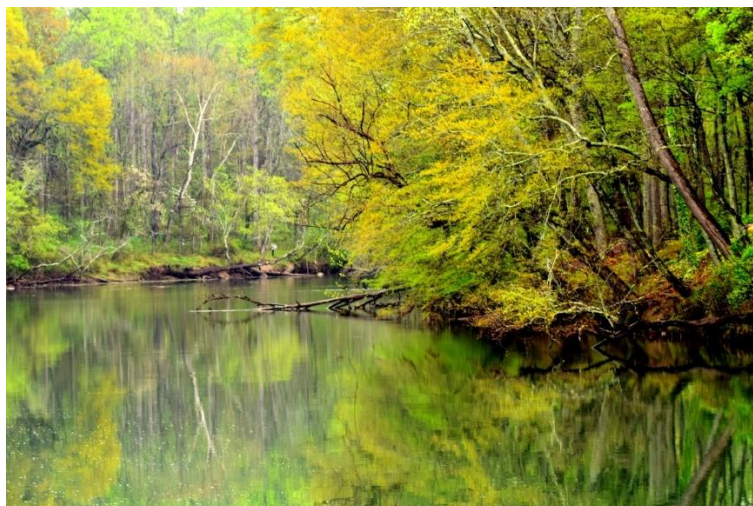
INE: Hi Russell. Thank you for agreeing to this interview.

RS: Thank you for the invitation. I see you recently interviewed my friend Amit Parmessur. I like his work, lots. First saw it in 2011. There's an ecstatic serenity to his poetry that I really enjoy. Ecstasy and serenity sort of contradict each other, but in his work, it's more like yin and yang, not closing a circle, opening one. And his Pangolin Review has a real inclusive vision that's good to see. So, there you go, Amit. Drink up. You can buy the next round.

INE: Tell us a little about yourself.

RS: Born in Chicago in 1954, lived in the north for fifty years then headed south to Georgia. I am never moving back north, I am done with those winters. But I miss the sound of snowplows, which is goofy, and I miss Lake Michigan to the bones, which is not. Father of two grown sons, one on the east coast one on the west. I am always up before the sun, love the early morning. Job—I analyze American health care data, a total chaos, no wonder it's expensive and doesn't work. A crime against the people. Outside the paycheck, I am blessed by the presence of a persistent Muse and I paint and take photographs.

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Springtime on the Chattahoochee photo © Russell Streur

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First and foremost, I have had a lifelong commitment to poetry since grade school days. I was ten years old when I read *On Looking up by Chance at the Constellations*, by Robert Frost. It begins

*You'll wait a long, long time for anything much
To happen in heaven beyond the floats of cloud
And the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves.*

And I was hooked. That simple.

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High Falls

photo © Russell Streur

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Tennessee Route 68

photo © Russell Streur

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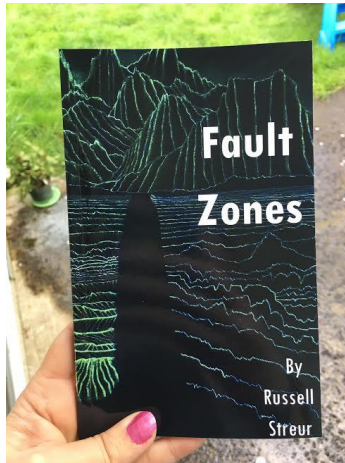
INE: Do you have any publications yourself?

RS: I have some things. “Fault Zones” was published by Blue Hour Press last year. It’s available from the Blue Hour Press bookstore.

So, drink up and go buy a copy. I’ll get the next round.

The link to the Table of Discontents, in PDF format, by Ten Page Press is below.

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And not one I wrote, but one I published, A Cup of Storm by Taufiq bin Abdul Khalid.

Drink up and buy that too. But the next round is on you.

INE: Tell us what inspired you to start Plum Tree Tavern?

RS: Plum Tree Tavern grew out of The Camel Saloon, which I opened in 2010 and ran for five years as the World’s Original Online Poetry Bar. Far as I know, it was. I never got sued for using the phrase. I remember sitting three stools from the end of the bar at a local joint one afternoon in the early spring that year when a number of thoughts came together. I had gotten a lot of my work published in the preceding couple of years and I felt that it was time for me to move on into something else. I was also becoming more and more personally interested in global free speech and self-expression issues and principles.

And with the next sip, reminiscing about my friend Danny Harmon, rest in peace, and how he and I would go to one particular bar and work on poems together and try out lines not only on each other but to other customers and the staff sometimes, a very social place it was and it all felt, safe, to write there, in all the noise with the ball game on and the jukebox playing and all the bustle of the place. So out of all that came the resolution to start giving back, to start standing, and to do that in a social environment, and it felt like a bar would be a fine place to do all that in, especially since I was in one in the first place, online though.

Why the Camel? I was reading Persian poetry at the time, and camels appeared here and there in the poems, and there was an unrelated article I read on the value given the camel in Bedouin poetry, and it seemed fitting for a journey to have a mode of transportation, and so the Camel, which is a real interesting animal in the first place as it turns out.

The Saloon worked out just like I wanted it to, with a bunch of regulars submitting work and a real vibrant community and a lot of fun and a lot of work. And not a labor of love, a labor of commitment.

After five years, it all got—noisy—and I wanted to do something quieter and more meaningful. With the planet going to hell and the ecosystems collapsing, I thought an eco-poetic journal would serve a different crowd and serve a different and maybe bigger purpose. Certainly, a more focused purpose. And there weren't that many eco-poetic journals back then, and still aren't, and it seemed a good idea. So, I closed the Saloon in 2015 and opened the Tavern.

INE: When you started, did you think your wonderful idea would grow into the online journal it is today?

RS: With the experience of the Saloon, I thought I had a formula for growing the Tavern: start with some of the Saloon contributors, get listed on Duotrope, set a publishing schedule, let everything take care of itself and only spend a few hours a week on the project. Didn't turn out that way. I wanted the place to be self-sustaining from a submission perspective, with enough numbers and quality I wouldn't have to go begging for submissions or issuing calls for work. But after a year and a half, submissions had really dropped off, quality too, and viewership was down, and I was content to close the doors and move on. A few months later, I decided to re-open the place in June of 2017. And the joint is finally self-sustaining and the numbers and the quality are reasonable.

INE: Do you have a themed submission, or is Plum Tree Tavern open to pretty much any form and genre of poetry?

RS: Plum Tree Tavern is solely interested in poems of nature and ecology. The intent is to de-emphasize or eliminate the observer and to concentrate on the image of nature in the physical world, not the metaphysical world of human nature. The selfishness, arrogance and ignorance of the human ego wrecks the planet. The planet by itself doesn't need the human ego at all. It can get by just fine without it. Same with a poem about nature. The river speaks for itself. It can get by just fine without the poetic ego. There's a difference between "The river speaks in older words" and "I hear the river speaking older words." One line gives the river dignity. The other line advertises the poet.

INE: What writing would you like to see more of in the submissions you receive?

RS: Specificity. Specificity extends to season, place and color and other tactile elements.

One writer sent a poem that focused on a turtle on a rock in a stream. If somebody wants to write about that, he or she better state the species of the turtle, the type of rock, and the name of the stream.

Specificity creates credibility. Without specificity, an image isn't a poem. It's a greeting card. More than anything else, the honesty of the image. An honest poem has a certain sound to it, a deep, brass ring to it. Something that vibrates into the spine.

INE: Do you have any advice for authors on what to do before they submit their writing?

RS: I am going to repeat that the intent of Plum Tree is to focus on the nature of nature, not on the nature of human nature. The Tavern is interested in the wonder of the world, not in how the observer describes his or her relation to a wonder in the world.

INE: What is your favorite quote?

RS: I said before that I am blessed by the presence of a persistent Muse. She knows who she is. So, two of my favorite quotes are about the Muse.

One is by Robert Graves: "The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the exaltation and horror that her presence excites." Good advice.

The second is by Loren Estleman, in his fine novel of Prohibition-era Detroit, *Whiskey River*. He compares two main characters in the book, the beat reporter Tom Danzig and his gangster brother, who adopted a name more in tune with the speakeasy jazz of the time—Jack Dance. "You could see Tom think," Estleman wrote, "while everything Jack did came straight out of left field, as if some shadowy muse had whispered a course of action into his ear right before he took it."

I know that muse, both in her ethereal and her physical forms, and I listen to her.

INE: Who is your favorite poet?

RS: Favorite changes all the time. Right now, I have two sets of favorite writers. One is the poets of the Greek austerity, who are witnesses to Euro-capitalism's collapse in that country. Two collections: *Futures: Poetry of the Greek Crisis* (Penned in the Margins 2015). It's available through Amazon and the usual places. (The publisher's page is listed below.).

And *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry* (New York Review Book 2016) Especially Jazra Khaleed.

The second group is Latin American women writers, there's a collection, *Short Stories by Latin American Women: The Magic and the Real* (Modern Library Classics 2003). I'm way behind the times on that.

INE: Is it true cats are banned from Plum Tree Tavern?

RS: Yes.

INE: Why?

RS: The mice tip more.

INE: How can readers discover more about you?

RS: Come by and visit the joint: <https://theplumtreetavern.blogspot.com/>

And while you're there, click on any image in the right-hand column. Those are the doors to the speakeasies. But don't tell anyone.

Fault Zones by Russell Streur, Blue Hour Press:

http://bluehourpressbookstore.bigcartel.com/product/fault-zones-by-russell-streur_

Table of Discontents by Ten Page Press:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4G1h48QKjw7ZGVjOTBiZDktNzI5ZC00YzAyLWlzMGMtZTM4ODAwNDE1M2Ni/view>.

A Cup of Storm by Taufiq bin Abdul Khalid: <http://www.lulu.com/shop/taufiq-bin-abdul-khalid/a-cup-of-storm/paperback/product-15931525.html>.

Futures: Poetry of the Greek Crisis (Penned in the Margins 2015):

<http://www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk/index.php/2015/10/futures-poetry-of-the-greek-crisis/>.

Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry (New York Review Book 2016):

https://www.nyrb.com/products/austerity-measures_

Short Stories by Latin American Women: The Magic and the Real (Modern Library Classics 2003): <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/195558/short-stories-by-latin-american-women-by-edited-by-celia-correas-de-zapata/9780812967074/>.

INE: Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to interview. Best of luck and much success for the future.

RS: Thank you. Whose turn is it to buy?

INE: To suggest more interviews for INE – provide event news – or suggest a general topic you would like to read on this blog, please add your name to our contact form with a brief note in the comments box found at www.lcoakes.jimdo.com.

Please follow us on Twitter by selecting the ‘follow me’ button on our website, or by logging onto Twitter and selecting @oakes333.

We are now also on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/laara.oakes.9>

~end~

INE Note: answers are provided by the interviewee and are not altered by INE unless the response is deemed inappropriate for a general audience.