



“BREAKING DOWN WALLS”

AN INTERVIEW
WITH DAVID GESSNER

by *Dominique Marshall*

WITH ART
BY JOAN MANSFIELD

Almost a century and a half ago Henry David Thoreau wrote, “In wildness is the preservation of the world.”¹ David Gessner has a strong connection to this statement and often writes about the wildness that is lacking in present-day nature writing – a primal feeling, according to Gessner, that comes from deep within us, a wildness that compels us to advocate for the natural world.

Gessner complains that, in its current form, nature writing is far too reserved. The genre lacks sufficient wildness to inspire people to start making their own connections with nature, connections that impel human beings to deter nature’s destruction. It is not that Gessner rejects the label of nature writer so much as he believes the current meaning of “nature writing” is, as he says in *Sick of Nature*, writing “essays praised as ‘quiet’ by quiet magazines.”² Gessner himself is far from a quiet writer. He incorporates the sort of wildness that was a source of both inspiration and conflict for Thoreau in *Walden*. As Gessner balances the natural with the deliberately and cultivated beautiful, he also accepts frankly the hypocrisy of human beings.

In *Into the Gulf: A Journal* Gessner asks, “So why say anything or why try to do anything at all?”³ His answer is simply that we need to refuse to let this stop us in our efforts to move forward. Instead, Gessner says, we need to imagine something new. And this is what, in both his writing and life, he has tried to accomplish.

With the journal *Ecotone*, Gessner has attempted to cultivate and inspire connections between the literary and the scientific. In his own work, he provides these same types of connections. His work is not just environmental: it is also human. Even though his writing is about nature and landscape, he incorporates what connects him to the world; and through his writing, he attempts to create environmentalists of his readers who, as amateur naturalists, can start making their own connections to the environment.

Gessner has reimagined the nature writing genre and refused to write “quiet” essays. Instead, he incorporates what he says will create a new climate in literature – “wildness.”

David Gessner was born and raised in Massachusetts, and his first book, *A Wild, Rank Place*, is a memoir about a year he spent on Cape Cod tending to his dying father. As both tribute and opposition to traditional Thoreauvian-type nature writing, this book combines poetic language with dark themes to describe the beautiful Cape Cod landscape that serves as a backdrop for his emotionally devastating year. Gessner continued to write about place in *Under the Devil’s Thumb*, a collection of essays that charts his time spent in the West during his own recovery from cancer.⁴

Intrusion (watercolor, mixed media) by Joan Mansfield