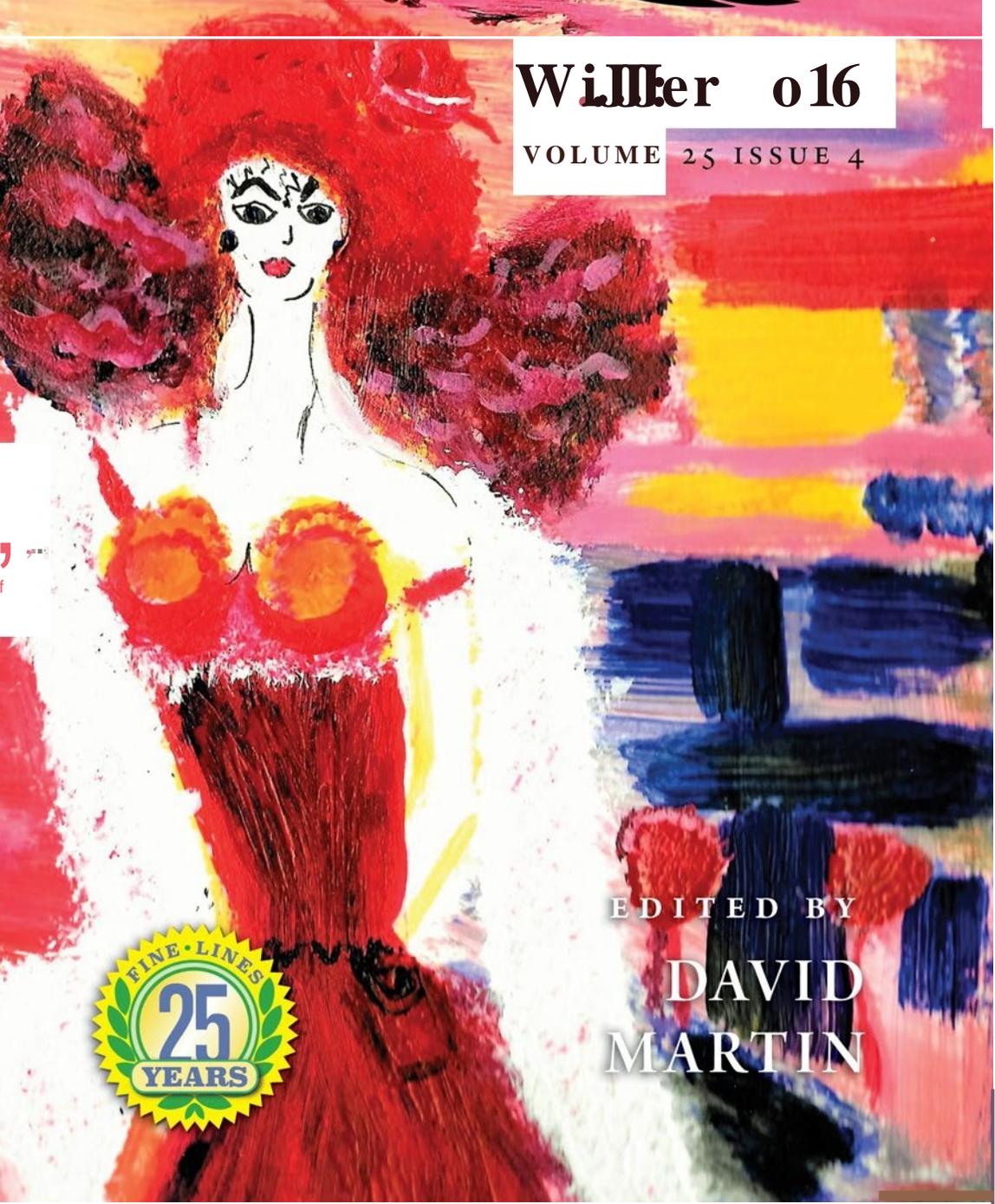


# *Fine Lines*

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VOLUME 25 ISSUE 4



EDITED BY

**DAVID  
MARTIN**

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~ Winter 2016 ~

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*Edited by*

DAVID MARTIN

# You Are Worthy

DESHAE E LOTT

As a kid, I transformed many rooms into classrooms, but none proved more satisfying than the table in my grandparents' travel trailer. When they'd pull up behind our house for their extended visit, I rejoiced. At that time, it was the classroom of my dreams. For months, I would carefully prepare hand-written workbooks dozens of pages long in the anticipation of working with my favorite student, Mimi.

Mimi, my maternal grandmother, would sit in the travel trailer's booth facing me and these prepared assignments. For hours, I would instruct her, and for hours more, she would intently complete each task I placed in her view. Such a willing, eager, diligent, and loving student, she proved for years that I failed to realize what a gift she offered by humoring me for those prolonged periods. We both knew we were at "play," but she revered the process as a serious investment in me, while she allowed me to practice my passion and to believe that I was lovingly guiding *her*.

Some years later, as I began to outgrow game-playing with younger cousins, I realized what patience Mimi possessed to spend so much of her time directed by the whims of a child, nearly five decades younger than she. I felt her love in the process of our play, but it magnified for me even more when I realized her willingness to invest in whatever most mattered to me, because she loved and supported me. Even more remarkable, I was by no means the only one to benefit from this engaged love of hers. Her legacy was left to many. As Mimi knew from her own upbringing, advantages like these I describe prove too few in some people's lives. Her example, I want to believe, fostered in countless others an urge to follow her lead, whether subconsciously or consciously, to make loving investments in others.

We witness the power of coordinated efforts among discrete members with specialized roles, whether we watch ant farms, team sporting events, war films, natural disaster volunteers, and response teams, or other families and medical teams facing crises. Regularly, individuals with either common or unique goals merge their efforts for mutual melioration. Sometimes, we only retrospectively recognize just how beneficial was a specific positive influence that came our way at a particular time. When it comes to loving forces like Mimi's, we may, like I did as a child, benefit from another's more mature vision or larger sense of purpose than our current perspective permits us to see. And that's ok. We're worthy of kind and encouraging contributions. Ideally, we offer this to others. It's wonderful and important when we can offer return support to someone whose presence blesses us, but there are many ways to honor an investment someone makes in us.

My friend, John J. McDermott, often poses this question to his philosophy students: "Are you a goal person or a journey person?" Reconciling those two concepts rather than treating them as dichotomies appeals to me. Nonetheless, I heed McDermott's point: were we to spend all of our time and energy putting our experiences, as we lived them into a broader perspective, we could miss out on a great deal. From my school days, I remember classmates who agonized incessantly about potentially failing exams, when they might have improved their performance significantly had they directed more of their energy toward studying instead of worrying. We make such choices throughout our lives, whether to spend more time fretting about our possible botches and fearing our conceivable losses or whether to commit to living fully in the moment.

Self-reflection is a labor of love, but excessive self-condemnation and trepidation is a death wish. When we renew our commitment to or rededicate ourselves to the path before us, we wisely govern ourselves and our resources. We maintain what benefits us; we release or detach from what no longer does. Self-affirmation and self-direction celebrates our worthiness for every positive presence and opportunity

in our lives; it embraces our capacity to learn from any negative presence in our lives. When we commit to exerting effort, we acknowledge our journey includes surprises, good and bad, and we will welcome the difficult, as well as the easy encounters.

In *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder's deceased character Emily, looking down upon her loved ones, asks, "Does anyone ever realize life while they live it... every, every minute?" Emily's recognition of transiency can inspire us to maximize our opportunities and resources rather than squander them, yet we can paralyze ourselves when we focus too much on what we don't yet know and may be unable to do. We don't have a historian's perspective, while we're engaged in creative living.

Life, as we live it, involves respect for the process, as it unfolds. Furthermore, respecting that process entails embracing each moment for its own wonder. I am glad that before I required a ventilator to breathe I was not unduly concentrating on my mortality or on what limitations vent-dependency would impose. If I feared where my body's disease process would take it, I doubt I would have done much of what I did when I could. My education, cultural awareness, and relationships all would have suffered had I consumed myself with thoughts about what would not be while it still was. When my pulmonologist intubated me, saving my life, I am glad that I felt grateful for my life rather than distraught by the challenges ahead, including ones that I did not know awaited me but might have dreaded too soon; likewise, I could not have known the new positive adventures and relationships ahead of me, either, each made possible by the team that converged to prolong the life of my body that November day.

It's great when we do say, "Thank you," to those who help us and love us, but it's uncommon for any of us to truly understand the ways others bless our lives, to ascertain just how much enhanced our life is because they are investing in us as they do. More often, we notice what's missing and what we lack than what we make opportunities to celebrate and appreciate our bounty. When I first began using life support, I daily noted the presence of those doing their best to help

me. I thought of people with worse fates, like those who die alone or from violence. I thought of famous persons using ventilators, like Stephen Hawking, Christopher Reeve, and Mattie Stepanek. I mitigated my discomforts and assuaged my fears by embracing the love around me and thinking of courageous souls before me who encountered similar life-altering situations. Rather than delving into dismay over my mortality or depression over the end of the easier lifestyle that was once mine, I accepted I had to move on into uncharted, unexpected, undesirable terrain and find a way to love it and to venerate the efforts of those now helping me make it possible to do so, as well as those whose past presence instilled in me strengths I would use to learn to love this new me.

The potential for beauty usually exists even in the worst of circumstances. When something feels terrifying or violent and so overwhelming that it seems too huge to protest with constructive ends, we might ask ourselves what we can build in the wake of the irreclaimable loss. A key factor in our ability to ask such a question requires us to deem ourselves worthy of partaking of and being a part of the good in the world. This staunchly differs from a passivity that allows others to walk all over us. It also differs from entitlement. It is not asking someone else to make up for our grievous losses. It is not about trying to change past events or others' attitudes and behaviors. Instead, it involves asking ourselves why we're valuable; it entails finding a sense of purpose. When we find a sense of purpose, we tend to use all that we are—the positives and the negatives—to translate that vision into something constructive in the world. Those formative, shaping positives and negatives will include all of the investments others made in us. We translate them into something beautiful, good, and healing.

When it comes to those who invest in us, temporarily or long-term, reverence emerges from a balance between appreciating the relationship, as it abides, and understanding that we don't have to know ahead of time all the benefits another's life brings to ours. When a grandparent, parent, partner, child, friend, teacher, or colleague dies and

the beloved one's physical body no longer nurtures us with its time, smiles, kind words, thoughtful deeds, careful listening, wise counsel, or gentle hugs, are we capable of thriving in the absence of what once bolstered us? Are we worthy of what was once offered us, if only in its absence the depth of the gift intensifies in ways we never understood or expressed while knowing the individual? For me, the answers to those two questions are unequivocally, "Yes." When my mother died, I felt the best way to respect her tremendous past gifts to me in a future without her would be attempting to express my steadfast gratitude for my life and upbringing. To honor an investment someone makes in us, we needn't necessarily provide an immediate or a direct exchange with them. It's never too late to honor the concept of "exchange," so integral to healthful living.

Often, we know what we want in a given moment. We have an idea, a need, or a desire. We look for ways to make our dream our actuality. It's easiest to achieve when we speak of worldly things. We might, for example, qualify for a loan that allows us to purchase an object or service or to partake of an experience. We take out the loan, and we gradually pay it back. For loan approval, we locate a source of income, most often a job, or collateral, a former investment. To afford the granted loan, we arrange our budget so that finances cover the monthly principle and interest; we develop a method to regiment our payments. Thus, we avail ourselves of something, now, but we also earn that something by working for it, as we go.

Sometimes, relationship investments have a similar dynamic. My grandmother plays school with me as a child; I grow up to become a teacher, family member, friend, and citizen, who invests in others' lives and minds, as she did in mine. I partook and later could hand down the kind of love once donated to me. Mimi's investments in me, my mother's investments in me, others' investments in me lose no power because they did not live to see the full exchange, the full return. It is for each of us: our kind and generous investments matter whether we ever know the recipient's name or see our loved one or student

or colleague reveal their understanding and reverence for what we shared. Our investments are our legacies, and our legacies will matter to others. In time, they will pass on something we shared.

In contrast, other relationships involve simultaneous effort from both parties to reach a desired goal. The involved parties mutually contribute. Such involvement operates less like a loan and more like a crop. To gather ripe summer tomatoes from your garden and bring them to your table, you first prepare a plot of land or pot of soil; then you sow seeds or transplant miniature plants in the nourishing earth; you water the plants; you support the stalks with posts or poles and tape; you watch round greenness expand into balls; you wait; green yellows, oranges, reds; you go out and pluck the red orbs from the stems; you prepare the tomatoes for consumption; finally, you place the redness into your mouth. That is, to benefit from the fresh home-grown food, you involve yourself in a co-creative process. You can partake because you invested yourself in a process, as did your partner or, in this case, your plant.

We don't always see our relationships with others as exchanges: loans to repay, gardens to tend, inheritances to bequeath to the next generation. However, to fully embrace a gift granted, we recipients at some point also must welcome the inherent responsibility to offer something of ourselves in return. We best return a favor in the way that suits our own skills, talents, and opportunities. It's not a matter of tit for tat or trying to fit into someone else's shoes and retrace all of their footsteps. We must invest in ourselves for it to be a true exchange, and that requires something unique that we bring to the mix.

We don't have to endure the extremes of human impoverishment or cruelty to recognize our frailty or our mortality. Many challenges with family members or co-workers or nature can remind us of how interdependently we move through our lives: that everything in the universe—so much of it out of our control—can affect our situations and require us to react. Sometimes, acknowledging the people and circumstances that fail to match our expectations, hopes, and dreams

becomes too hard. We hear about war veterans, Holocaust or natural disaster survivors, disabled and abused persons, resentful spouses, and envious co-workers so immersed in grief that they develop sustained post-traumatic stress disorder. Some people cope by developing patterns of distraction and self-deception. Other people, having undergone extremely adverse situations, feel driven to become positive forces in the world as citizens, leaders, neighbors, family members, and friends.

For our own well-being, the important aspect of grateful exchange has much less to do with when we “return a favor” than with the fact that, at some point, we choose to become creative realists who embrace the gifts granted us and multiply them by sharing such gifts in some nook of the world. We can help cultivate the harvest all along, or we can help reap the harvest in the final hours involving labor. We’re creative realists when we recognize there’s something valuable to gain from this difficult journey, when we see the value alongside the challenges, and when we choose to co-create our own good and to create beauty for others by stepping into the dirty garden so plentiful in color and texture, tastes and aromas, critters and fellow harvesters, rhythms and cycles, growth and decay. The important thing is not precisely when our garden grows, but at some point, we claim a role in it that we can cherish and others benefit from, just as we benefit from gardeners before us and benefit from gardeners around us.

How does our garden grow? We know that we are worthy, and others are worthy, and we’re all in this together. One day, through our own caring choices, we can express gratitude to those who bequest their love to us or who revealed to us how very lacking the world is in love. Now is not too late to know you are worthy of love and capable of bestowing more of it wherever you go.

An abstract painting with vibrant, expressive brushstrokes in shades of red, orange, yellow, green, and black. The composition is dynamic and layered, with a prominent vertical black stroke running down the center. The overall effect is one of energy and artistic freedom.

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