



“The most memorable summer road trip I’ve been on was when I was a teenager, traveling to the southeastern coast, with my dad. Our original destination was the Oconaluftee Indian Village in Cherokee, North Carolina. Here we browsed the tourist grounds and enjoyed the outdoor presentation called “Unto These Hills.” I’ve always held a closeness to the Native American culture, and so that visit really made a lasting impression on me. But the joy wasn’t over yet. We progressed on to the coast of South Carolina, to Folly Beach, where my dad sometimes still reminds me of how he’s pretty sure I swam and enjoyed the water for about six hours straight!

What a wonderful road trip that was for me! I’ll never forget that time with him.”

H. JEAN PARISH (University of South Carolina Upstate), tank fuel transport driver

“Last year, I took a trip to Virginia to visit Shenandoah Mountain. It was so beautiful. One of the most memorable experiences was driving along Skyline Drive, where I was treated to breathtaking views of the rolling hills and vibrant autumn foliage. The crisp air and the stunning scenery made the entire journey unforgettable. We encountered a family of deer along the way, a magical moment.”



SHAKIRA WINT (University of Maryland Global Campus), U.S. Navy, retired

UP FOR DISCUSSION asks Phi Kappa Phi members to answer a question related to our *Forum* issue’s theme, and then we publish a sampling of the responses. Answers may be edited for clarity and length. Other responses are online at link.phikappaphi.org. If you haven’t joined our Link community, which has other ways to connect with members, be sure to check it out. Link is free for all active members.



SOMETIMES, YOUR BEST WRITING TOPICS ARE RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR

I grew up on a plant nursery that included five greenhouses where the stock was grown. It was a workplace rather than a showplace, but it was home for me, and I cherished it.

A visitor stopped by when I was a teenager, curious about my plans to become a writer. “You’d have to go someplace interesting and find your subject,” she said, meaning an iconic spot like Paris or New York where fashionable people did trendy things.

That brief conversation came back to mind recently when a new edition of Theodore Roethke’s poems crossed my desk. Roethke grew up in Michigan, where his family operated a 25-acre greenhouse that produced all sorts of plants to sell. It must have been an unassuming landscape to most eyes, but the greenhouse became Roethke’s muse. For him, it was a tropical stage where life and death, work and wonder all played a role. Many of his poems, such as “Child on Top of a Greenhouse,” “Old Florist,” and “Flower Dump,” were inspired by Roethke’s early days among the cannas and carnations, verbenas and cosmos.

I don’t mean to compare my modest abilities with those of Roethke, whose beautiful poems earned him a Pulitzer Prize. But his example points to a basic truth about writing and what sparks it. Put simply, there are really no dull places on the planet. By paying attention to what’s around them, good writers can find inspiration anywhere.

Last winter, I got lost within the pages of *In the Merrimack Valley*, Jane Brox’s memoir trilogy about her family’s New England farm. You might

remember Brox from a graceful essay she wrote about a favorite state park for the spring 2024 issue of *Forum*. Readers can find the essay in our digital archives at phikappaphi.org. Here, in a passage from her memoir, is how Brox describes what winter can do to greenhouses in her part of the world:

Last November, a night wind tore the plastic sheathing from the ribs of the greenhouse, and the exposed frame became one more stark contour in a land of bare trees and empty fields. The inside froze and filled with snow. Now, after a month of melt and spring mud, I can walk through what remains.

I love this passage, in which something as homely as a workaday greenhouse achieves a mythic quality in winter’s wake, like a shipwreck tossed to the shore.

None of this is an argument against travel, which can bring its own forms of enrichment to a writer. Often, visiting new places is a good way to see your familiar world back home more clearly. I’ve found this to be true in my own life, and perhaps you have, too.

But if you’re waiting to live in a more exciting place so that your writing can thrive, you’re probably wasting time. With enough imagination, you can often find your subject right where you are.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he’s taught writing to university students.