

A MOVEABLE FAMINE by John Skoyles UPDATE

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Living "grant-to-mouth"

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a *MOVEABLE FAMINE*

We were
hell-bent to
become poets
and all poets
stood in
our way.

John Skoyles

★ A Moveable Famine

John Skoyles. Permanent, \$29 (296p) ISBN 978-1-57962-358-6

Poet and *Ploughshares* editor Skoyles (*The Smoky Mountain Cage Bird Society*) launches this crackling autobiographical novel with a brash preface "bemoaning... the wasted lives of everyone who [does] not see the world through the lens of poetry." This passion for the poetic life is treated with both mockery and sympathy, as we follow Skoyles from Queens, N.Y., to the famed Iowa Writer's Workshop in Iowa City; the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Mass.; and the Yaddo artist colony in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Witty vignette by witty vignette, drink by stiffer drink, this leisurely paced autobiography chronicles the peculiar codes of the "claustrophobic," competitive workshop culture and the "extracurricular activities at poetry's finishing schools." Its structure is pleausably slack, casually zooming in on those writers living "grant-to-mouth." One mild-mannered poet plays with his food by stamping out dactyls (smashing one pea, leaving the next two untouched), a classmate's propensity for malapropisms energizes his verse, and a drunken Alan Dugan manages to throttle a graduate student and trip over a seagull in one action-packed night. Quietly emerging from this raucous, entertaining book is a portrait of the aesthetic education of a poet and a fond tribute to his "colony-hopping" fellows: "Many were eccentric, some were slightly mad, but all were thoroughly human." (*May*)

Publishers Weekly – May 19, 2014

A Moveable Famine ([Starred Review - Pick of the Week](#))

Poet and Ploughshares editor Skoyles (The Smoky Mountain Cage Bird Society) launches this crackling autobiographical novel with a brash preface "bemoaning... the wasted lives of everyone who [does] not see the world through the lens of poetry." This passion for the poetic life is treated with both mockery and sympathy, as we follow Skoyles from Queens, N.Y., to the famed Iowa Writer's Workshop in Iowa City; the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Mass.; and the Yaddo artist colony in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. Witty vignette by witty vignette, drink by stiffer drink, this leisurely paced autobiography chronicles the peculiar codes of the "claustrophobic," competitive workshop culture and the "extracurricular activities at poetry's finishing schools." Its structure is pleasurable slack, casually zooming in on those writers living "grant-to-mouth." One mild-mannered poet plays with his food by stamping out dactyls (smashing one pea, leaving the next two untouched), a classmate's propensity for malapropisms energizes his verse, and a drunken Alan Dugan manages to throttle a graduate student and trip over a seagull in one action-packed night. Quietly emerging from this raucous, entertaining book is a portrait of the aesthetic education of a poet and a fond tribute to his "colony-hopping" fellows: "Many were eccentric, some were slightly mad, but all were thoroughly human." (May)

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JULY 3, 2014 WGBH-TV GREATER BOSTON

MUST-READ BOOKS OF THE SUMMER

<http://wgbhnews.org/post/must-read-books-summer>

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Booklist May 1, 2014

A Moveable Famine. Skoyles, John (Author)
May 2014. 296 p. Permanent Press, hardcover, \$28. (9781579623586).

Skoyles (*The Situation*, 2007), a poet, memoirist, and the poetry editor at *Ploughshares*, presents an autobiographical first novel recounting a moving and uproarious literary journey. It begins in working-class Queens, pauses at an undersexed all-male Jesuit college, and then surges on to the booze-fueled excesses of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center, and Yaddo, with the protagonist's desire and drinking moderated, briefly, during a semester teaching in Dallas, Texas. Skoyles' title, meant to evoke the ambitions of the Lost Generation, skewers Hemingway's pretentiousness while signaling his narrator's haplessness: poetry is serious, and he is serious about it, yet lust and longing keep interrupting, hilariously. Drinking with Raymond Carver or Robert Creeley, or listening to the story of how the beautiful girl he pines for refuses John Cheever's weird advances, Skoyles' hero remains unsentimental and positively allergic to nostalgia. "Always Eros," [a friend] said. "Backward, it's Sore!"

So it is. Skoyles' prose is very fine, almost epigrammatic, and **it's hard to believe that a funnier novel will be published this year.** — *Michael Autrey*

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Fore**Word** Reviews Summer 2014

LITERARY

A Moveable Famine John Skoyles
The Permanent Press 978-1-57962-358-6 (May 23, 2014)

Skoyles presents a sharp snapshot of an era while employing thoughtful themes of self-doubt and the search for mentorship.

Poet John Skoyles's autobiographical novel, *A Moveable Famine*, reveals his coming-of-age as a writer, from his days at the Iowa Writer's Workshop to his fellowships at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and at the Yaddo mansion in Saratoga Springs. Brushes with literary icons, including Allen Ginsberg and Raymond Carver, seamy anecdotes from the early 1970s and '80s, and everyday collegiality as well as rivalry merge to create an episodic tale of ambition. Through the stories of real and composite characters, poetry, which Skoyles once felt "was invisible," becomes a viable art.

As graduate students in awe of multiple talents, Skoyles and his companions encountered plenty of hijinks. The author recounts the infidelities of a professor, meetings with women who moonlighted as amateur strippers, outings at the neighborhood bar, surprising readings given by visiting writers, and the comedy found at the Iowa poetry workshop. Amid the competitive nature of the program, the band of aspiring poets began finding a measure of success. The most poignant thread involves Skoyles's Iowa professor, poet Mitch Lawson, a formalist with a slim output whose intimidating demeanor belied a complex figure. Skoyles's time as Lawson's research assistant reveals his own growth as a writer who shed his New York influences to forge his own style. The transformation from being a beginner, who learned "by stumbling," to becoming a writer whose work was published in journals is presented as a series of gradual shifts.

Chapters set in Provincetown take a leisurely, slice-of-life approach. Skoyles emphasizes social gatherings rife with non sequiturs, along with sexual misadventures. Scenes with writers such as Alan Dugan, Gregory Corso, and Robert Creeley underscore the work center's high-spirited environment. Stanley Kunitz in particular emerges as a well-drawn guide given to making wise remarks, including the advice that the ending of a poem "should be a door and a window" and that poets should "live in the layers / not on the litter."

The book's focus on the inner sanctum of a masters-in-fine-arts program and on the wilder side of elite residencies may seem narrow, but Skoyles seldom preaches to the choir. With a narrator who is seemingly shepherded along by luck, *A Moveable Famine* offers a gently

satirical, funny take on a world marked by eccentricity. —*Karen Rigby*

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Boston Globe

BOOK REVIEW

‘A Moveable Famine’ by John Skoyles

By Max Winter | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 28, 2014

Writers, in groups, have a reputation for displaying certain behaviors: incestuousness, alcoholism, competitiveness, eccentricity, and pretensions. They have earned this reputation fairly.

If you want first-hand evidence of the basis for this reputation, look no farther than John Skoyles’s “A Moveable Famine.” The autobiographical novel by the Emerson College professor and Ploughshares poetry editor follows Skoyles from his New York City youth to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop to the Fine Arts Work Center at Provincetown to Yaddo to academia.

Skoyles, by his own admission, has invented certain characters and blended certain events, but this reads much like a memoir. It is a work of fiction as much as the Hemingway memoir the book honors in its title might be considered (according to Hemingway’s own label) “fiction.”

Imagination is used here where necessary, but novelistic trappings are hung on Skoyles’s own life story. The book strives for accuracy in describing an era and its author’s state of mind, and it succeeds.

It’s impressive to watch Skoyles mature as he moves across the American literary landscape of the 1970s, beginning to process his surroundings rather than being processed by them. In New York, the young poet takes classes at St. Mark’s Poetry Project, rubbing shoulders with Anne Waldman, Dick Gallup, and others; Skoyles is impressed by these poets’ comfort with pop culture, adopting it briefly in his own work.

He then describes entering the Iowa workshop, that bastion of intellectual ferment in the prairie. Skoyles depicts Iowa as place of intensity beyond intensity, in which whatever topics emerge in poetry workshops, athletic drinking sessions, or even relatively casual conversations are important and about Art.

This chatter gets a bit too heady for its own good at times, but luckily the reportage/narrative moves so deftly that any momentary preciousness can be forgiven. Of course, there’s other conversation, as well.

In Skoyles’ telling, the men at Iowa are testosterone-crazed and the women tough-mouthed and engaging; when one poet writes a piece describing a female fellow student’s body in detail, the concern is less about objectification than about the relationship implied.

The professors are intellectual den masters, the students energetic acolytes, in search of sex or better financial aid or both. Depictions of literary celebrities add to this rigorously kaleidoscopic portrait: There’s the young Denis Johnson, walking barefoot through the hallways; or John Cheever, who took taxicabs everywhere and had a discerning eye for cocktails.

At Provincetown, Skoyles has more of the same experience, though perhaps with more wounds involved. He's more grown up, at this point, as are his relationships with others.

Alan Dugan and Stanley Kunitz reign over the program like monarchs, indelibly portrayed here as, by turns, a wizened and begrudging chain smoker and an unpredictable master of ceremonies. The drinking is intense and hardened; Skoyles describes one drinking party that lasts all night and well into the following afternoon.

Skoyles paints Provincetown as an isolated, moody place, where you struggle until you've figured out how you'd like to progress, artistically. To Skoyles's credit, he does not make the colony sound like paradise; its slings and arrows are depicted in sharp focus.

The last portion of the book, taking Skoyles from Yaddo to a succession of teaching jobs, moves fairly quickly but wittily: Skoyles chooses what details to give us to sum up an experience, such as a writer at Yaddo who keeps self-consciously casually referring to "m'editor" at The New Yorker.

The delirium pervading the rest of the book tapers off here, as Skoyles shows us how he has come into his own.

When he sympathizes with poet Jack Myers, who goes out for lunch with fellow faculty member Skoyles when he has neither the money nor time to spare, we get a sense of empathy we did not see in the brash younger student. All the deep talk, competition, and moments of pretension come to shape our hero, then, ultimately make him stronger, capable of writing this book with a firm, humane, and always genial hand.

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LIBRARY JOURNAL

Top Indie Fiction: 30 Key Titles Beyond the Best-Sellers List for Spring/Summer 2014

Skoyles, John. *A Moveable Famine*. Permanent. 2014. 296p. ISBN 9781579623586. \$29. F

In the era of Allen Ginsberg, a working-class lad from Queens joins the crowd "hell-bent to become poets" and fends off his insecurities to find art, sex, and community at St. Mark's Poetry Project and beyond. The poetry editor of *Ploughshares* has an inside track on this story. VERDICT Not the dark and moody work you might expect but shot through with a sense of humor—and wonder.

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New York Journal of Books review of **A Moveable Famine**

His narrative feels alive. And satisfying, too. If not a feast, no famine, either. Recite his words aloud and a reader tastes them on lips, teeth, tongue. Yum.”

John Skoyles’ “autobiographical novel,” *A Moveable Famine*, whose title pays ironic homage to Ernest Hemingway, illuminates one poet’s journey from his childhood affinity for verse to a life devoted to its crafting.

A series of anecdotes both laugh-out-loud humorous and searingly poignant, Skoyles’ narrative is at once fast-paced and poetic. From a Queens childhood to an all-male Jesuit university in Connecticut, at Iowa’s competitive workshops and storied bars, in Provincetown with poetry’s aspirants and gurus, and finally to a long professorial career, the narrator relates his personal and professional comings of age.

He does so within the tumultuous contexts of the Vietnam conflict, a sexual revolution, and thoughtful reassessments of his traditional upbringing while among the practicing literati.

Early on, the narrator tells his readers, “We were hell-bent to become poets, but we were students. Those who taught us were hell-bent to become poets, but they were teachers. We were all hell-bent to become poets and all poets stood in our way.” This refrain pervades the work, illustrating the constant tension between the solitude every writer needs and the community every writer desires.

While competition reigns supreme in Iowa, generosity prevails in Provincetown, though both locales serve up a handful of revered mentors (Harvey and Lawson in Iowa, Kunitz in Provincetown), temporary lovers or longed-for bedmates (Jeanne the former, Belinda the latter), rivals-turned-friends (Barkhausen and the dead-too-soon McPeak), and—oh, yes—lines and lines of verse.

Skoyles is both modest about his accomplishments and adept at noting them in understated prose: “I met with Stanley [Kunitz] when he came to judge the applications. He said he heard I had a lot of girlfriends. I joked that I loved women. ‘You must love poetry more,’ he said.”

Poetry’s rigor and lingering cadences grace Skoyles’ confident prose. Upon receiving a ten-dollar check for “In Van Gogh’s Room,” Skoyles learns that the line, “Crisp flowers show their teeth,” helped ensure his place in the Iowa workshop.

Of his yearning to impress and bed Belinda Schaeffer, he writes: “Everything she did was refined, calm and graceful, but the careless way she placed her books on the bar, almost recklessly, gave me hope that perfection was not something she demanded from others. She might tolerate someone like me, common as well as harmless, like a water stain.”

A particularly poignant series of episodes in the narrative illustrate the devoted relationship between Skoyles' poet/professor Lawson and a maimed dog named Uncle. As Lawson's assistant, Skoyles finds himself clipping the dog's toe nails, his own relationship with his mentor deepening as he realizes the depth of emotion Uncle evokes in Lawson. Lawson both covets and endures the pain the dying dog inspires. And Skoyles tells the reader "Uncle left behind a scent like a rainy day in autumn—decay, wet leaves and mud." Both the man/dog relationship and Skoyles' reflections about it remind the reader that poetry lurks about the mundane and the daily.

While at Iowa, Skoyles still reacts with surprise when a woman named Wendy refers to him as a poet. He shows his friend Ridge acceptance letters from *Chicago Review* and *Poetry Northwest*. When Ridge smiles, Skoyles reveals his own tentativeness, telling the reader: "I needed the physical proof for myself. Everything else about poetry was invisible—it wafted around and sometimes through us. So seeing a concrete thing, even a slip of paper I'd toss to the wind on my way home, and even if that paper clung to the base of a litter basket, it was no longer an idea or a feeling, but something real."

Fame, or its more modest brothers, respect and admiration, pop like air bubbles above the narrative's ebb and flow. Men and women who have been elevated to "personages of poetry" visit classes, declaim and sometimes ape at readings, and mingle some or intimately with their prodigies. They are, to the narrator's eyes, feasting. But Betty, an instructor at Dallas's McGuire University, where Skoyles first teaches, is nearly starving. She tells Skoyles she is retiring: "Over the years she had occasionally taught composition, until displaced entirely by those from Yale. She stared glassy-eyed out the window and quoted Gogol on his stint as a university professor with words that scorched themselves into my [Skoyles'] brain.—'Unrecognized I mounted the rostrum, and unrecognized I descended from it.'"

Recognized for sure, and perhaps one day to join the lexicon of the most anthologized, John Skoyles, poet, editor of *Ploughshares*, and Emerson College professor inhabits and influences the world of verse. In his poem, "Autobiography," printed in *The New Yorker* (March 31, 2014), he writes: "I did not lead my life/although my life followed me,/ . . . Yes, it rained/but there were not a lot/of tears,/only a very large one/breaking over everything."

Like readers of *A Moveable Famine* and his assorted verse, this poet/professor/man dwells in the certain uncertainty of human life. Perhaps he is sustained by his mentor Stanley Kunitz's mantra, "When we are uncertain, that's when we are most alive."

His narrative feels alive. And satisfying, too. If not a feast, no famine, either. Recite his words aloud and a reader tastes them on lips, teeth, tongue. Yum.

Mary Donnarumma Sharnick is the author of Thirst, a novel of 17th century Venice. She also teaches writing and chairs the English Department at Chase Collegiate School in Waterbury, Connecticut.

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ASSOCIATED PRESS

BY RON BERTHEL

JUNE 30, 2014

“A Moveable Famine” (The Permanent Press), by John Skoyles

In an autobiographical novel, which parts are fiction and which are fact? Only the author knows for sure. But when such a work is as entertaining as John Skoyles’ “A Moveable Famine,” it hardly matters.

Skoyles is a professor at Emerson College in Boston, with several volumes of poetry and a memoir to his credit. In this, his first work of fiction, he invites readers to join him on a romp through 1970s academia, from his bath-time introduction to poetry in his parents’ white-collar home in blue-collar Queens, New York, to his circuit of post-grad poetry workshops and classes, from Texas to New England.

Nearly everyone is at least a little quirky _ these are poets, after all! _ including one particular master of the malaprop, who refers to “a chug of wine” and that staple of Russian literature, Pushpin.

These poets, students and teachers alike do plenty of bed-hopping and bar-hopping, with occasional breaks for poetry-related activities—you know, reading it, writing it and teaching it.

And as if academic and social stresses weren’t enough, Skoyles seems always to be confronted with some new health dilemma or short-circuited romance.

Skoyles’ prose is chock-full of images that must have been drawn from the poetic corner of his creative mind: a woman he admires “passed through ... like a fragrance”; a teacher’s goatee “hung from his chin like the tongue of a shoe”; and a Chihuahua’s “eyes bulged as if overinflated.”

Although much of the narrative focuses on offbeat goings-on and their equally offbeat perpetrators, Skoyles includes an oddly touching episode about his role as research assistant to the highly respected poet and teacher Mitchell Lawson, who is staunchly devoted to his neighbor’s decrepit dog (named Uncle) and inconsolable when the pooch’s demise seems imminent.

There may be no rhyme in Skoyles’ poetry, but there’s every reason to read his delightful book.

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"*A Moveable Famine* is a quick, sly, outrageously funny novel about poets and poetry. I laughed out loud more times than I could count. John Skoyles writes with great humility and wicked wicked wit. I love this book."

—Robert Boswell, author of *Tumbledown*.

"In this rangy, beautiful memoir, John Skoyles—page by page, word by word, paying close attention to the particulars of this world—becomes a poet before our eyes."

—Nick Flynn, author of *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*.

"Holden Caulfield in an MFA program? John Skoyles' *A Moveable Famine* is a picaresque and hilarious tale of youth regarded from a distance, a novel of romantic, literary and social misadventure and initiation. I think it would be impossible for any writer to read this book without breaking into frequent fits of laughter, as I did, at the cluelessness of our narrator, learning the ropes. It is also one of the best accounts that I know of writerly culture in the time of the seventies and eighties. Did I mention that *A Moveable Famine* is hilarious?"

—Tony Hoagland, author of *What Narcissism Means to Me* and *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft*.

"In his autobiographical novel, *A Moveable Famine*, John Skoyles recounts an anecdote about a student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop who rates stories by their number of laughs. It's a method I'd employ in rating Skoyles' novel except that I lost count of the laughter long before I was halfway through the book. In his personal account of the collision between life and art, Skoyles writes with candor, energy, irreverence, and the high spirits that remind me of a trilogy I have long considered the standard for American comic fiction—Henry Miller's *The Rosy Crucifixion*." —Stuart Dybek, author of *I Sailed With Magellan*.

"To John Skoyles, his improbable life among poets, would-be poets, and ex-poets may have been a famine, but for the reader his memoir is a rich and delicious banquet. Those of us who write non-fiction are so much more boring (and somewhat more sober) than the poets in Skoyles's world -- but I wish Skoyles would write about us, too. This book is funny, revealing, wise... and did I say funny?"

—Daniel Okrent, author of *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*.

"For anyone who's interested in the process of becoming a writer—not to mention that of becoming a man—John Skoyles' *A Moveable Famine* will be a must read. I wish it'd been around when I was young and still trying to figure out how to do both."

—Richard Russo, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Empire Falls*

How My Wine Turned to Water

By JOHN SKOYLES JUNE 21, 2014



TRURO, Mass. — MY email inbox startled me with the subject line: A Voice from the Past. The last email I received with that heading was from Peanuts LoBianco, a deranged former high school classmate who claimed he had learned to walk on water, change water into wine and then walk on the wine. For all that, he still needed money from me.

This time it was an old girlfriend, from 1979, when I was 28 and she was 20. Thirty-five years ago! She wrote that she was helping her teenage daughter with a literature project for school, and had come across a poem of mine in *The New Yorker*. An Internet search showed she had become a lawyer. She also sculpted in her free time and

maintained a website showing her artwork. We began a correspondence.

She was always a great reader. At one point she mentioned that *The New Yorker* made her think of John Cheever. In fact, she had just read a book about him, Raymond Carver and other alcoholic writers. I told her I had known both of them in graduate school at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, but that I wasn't much interested in the topic of that book. "It's a little too close to home for me," I said. "I'm always trying to cut down on the martinis, but they only get bigger and stronger."

She wrote back that she, too, could not have read that book a few years ago, that she had struggled with alcoholism her whole life, was genetically hard-wired for it. But her mother had been sober for 30 years now, and she for four. She apologized for taking the fun out of the exchange and said she hoped she had not been too serious.

I thought back to our time together. It was in Dallas; we drank pitchers of margaritas and frequented liquor stores that in those days had drive-through windows. (When the clerk would hand over the bottle, he would also offer "go cups" — plastic tumblers of ice.) We didn't actually eat much on our dates. Just drank: When I'd offer to order dinner, she'd say, "No, I'll just be a fish," and so would I.

I told her about the memoir I'd recently finished writing, which covered, among other things, my days as a student in Iowa. She said the book sounded as if it was mostly about drinking. I said no, not really, but then I paged through it with her words in mind.

In Iowa I used to drive around with Ray Carver in his old Ford Falcon. One morning, after a long stretch of barhopping together into the early hours, Ray phoned me and asked if we had had an accident the night before. Remembering little myself, the most I could say was that I didn't think so. He said he couldn't understand it: When he woke up, he found one side of his car caved in. "Cheever and I could hardly get it together today to call a cab to take us to the liquor store," he said. Cheever, too, drank heavily then, and at a party one night we all stared at him with concern as he danced alone in the living room, after numerous martinis and as many glasses of wine, his hand over his heart.

I recorded similar conduct over the years in other cities, every city the same in this regard. My stories were mainly about the follies and tragedies of getting smashed: like cruising around in Malibu, thinking I had two flat tires on the same side of my car, stopping, getting out and realizing I'd been driving with two wheels on the curb. Or my friends who kept track of every two-for-one drink night; the one who gashed his forehead walking into a stop sign; another maimed by a train as he drank on the rails.

My old girlfriend was right. "A Moveable Famine," my memoir, is all about drinking. Though it may record a famine of nutrition, funds and fame, my thirst always seems to have found a way to be quenched. Sometimes, at cocktail hour at my house, my friends would take an eight-ounce measuring cup, fill it with water and pour it into my empty oversize martini glass, which held it all, no lip room, just to show the staggering amount of alcohol that went into my drinks. It always got a big laugh. But two of those enormous martinis would just get my evening started.

I discovered the same subject at the heart of a new book of poems I am putting together. One piece, "Saturday Night with my Dead Friends," has me pouring drinks for those long gone: Alan Dugan, Larry Levis and Michael Sheridan. I even refer to myself as "their understudy" as I raise a toast to their ghosts.

This voice from the past, my ex-girlfriend's, awakened me to my own voice, which had been lying to me about my problem. I saw myself through her eyes, clear eyes once as glazed as mine. When I'd gone 30 days without a drink, a small but significant milestone, she sent me a coin from Alcoholics Anonymous stamped with the number 1, marking a single month of recovery. Unlike the last voice from the past, the classmate claiming the power to turn water into wine, she made my wine into water. I'm no longer tempted to walk on it. Walking a straight line will be enough.

John Skoyles is the poetry editor of *Ploughshares* and the author of the memoir "A Moveable Famine."

A version of this op-ed appears in print on June 22, 2014, on page SR8 of the New York edition with the headline: How My Wine Turned to Water.

