

## CONFLUENCE OF CREATIVITY: RALPH SNEEDEN REFLECTS ON HIS MACDOWELL COLONY FELLOWSHIP

I had been searching for a place like the MacDowell Colony for about 10 years. After I completed my Master of Arts and Master of Fine Arts in the early '90s, I was burnt out on writing workshops and the communities of “writers’ conferences” (like Bread Loaf at Middlebury College). Though I understood and valued the resources and inspiration of those settings, I was ready for something different; I just wanted the space and solitude necessary to take my work in a different direction.

Ironically, to do that, I had to step outside of the existing, ready-made intellectual environment of Exeter. What made this possible was the privilege of a sabbatical, without which my writing life would lurch from summer to summer without any chance for a sustained “descent.” I had been working on a longer personal essay about California and expanding my second book of poems (tentatively, *Sheep May Safely Graze*) during the fall, so when I began my residency at MacDowell in December, I hit the ground running.

Located in New Hampshire’s Monadnock Region in Peterborough, MacDowell is the granddaddy of artists’ colonies in the United States. Since 1907, its list of alums includes giants like Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Thornton Wilder, Milton Avery, James Baldwin, Willa Cather, Oscar Hijuelos, Studs Terkel and Alice Walker. So, having a two-week residency in such a place was humbling, not only because of its ghosts and legacy, but also because of the people who were in residence *while* I was there: established filmmakers, animators, novelists, painters, composers and sculptors.

Before I arrived at MacDowell, I had aspired to become the ultimate misanthrope—making shadowy appearances at dinner, maybe skipping breakfast altogether. This turned out not to be the case. As my residency progressed, I found myself lingering a little longer at dinner in the

main building, maybe even staying for a presentation or reading afterward, and then loitering after *that* for a game of pool. Wherever I intersected with fellow colonists during the day or night, there was unspoken and profound respect; it permeated the atmosphere. Somehow, our curiosity for each other’s work was not intrusive, and though each was at a different stage of his or her career, hierarchy seemed obliterated. Only art mattered; the divergence of our media and disciplines, our Borgesian “forking paths” always seemed to lead us back to one another.

MacDowell is famous for the hand-painted picnic baskets that appear at the door of your studio every day at noon—a generous strategy to ensure solitude, momentum. Even so, about halfway into the 20-minute starlit walk from my studio to the main hall for the evening meal, I began to wonder how I’d explain any triumphs I might have had that day. I was anxious to know how one woman’s documentary on Mexico was going, or if the sculptor had navigated around the obstacle he’d been describing the night before. I began to sense I was a part of something bigger than my own writing, and the uncanny confluences among us were unanticipated gifts at the beginnings or ends of long, incredible days of being alone, working.

—Ralph Sneed, instructor in English



*Ralph Sneed '98 (Hon.); P'07, P'09, Bennett Fellow Program director and instructor in English, was awarded a fellowship at the MacDowell Colony, where he worked on his second book of poems during his sabbatical.*