

Scrap: Essays by readers

We gave our readers a one-word writing prompt: “Scrap.”

Readers Write in the [April 20, 2022](#) issue



(Source photo by Jazmin Quaynor on Unsplash)

*In response to our request for essays on scrap, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **Disguise** and **Hinge**—[read more](#).*

Twenty-five years ago, on a meandering stroll through the side streets of the French Quarter in New Orleans, I came upon a makeshift folk art gallery. The exhibition space had a temporary feel, as if it had appeared overnight and could just as easily disappear should circumstances, or zoning authorities, warrant. I wandered around the modest space, absorbing the perspectives of the outsider artists whose work was displayed. Just as I was about to leave, a compelling portrait caught my eye. On a strip of battered sheet metal, unassuming to say the least, someone had painted

the image of Freddy Fender.

The Mexican-American singer's rise to fame in the 1970s was fraught with familiar obstacles, ranging from addiction to unscrupulous money managers, domestic turbulence, IRS skirmishes, and institutional racism. I was intimately acquainted with his life story because it had been my privilege to comanage his career in the 1990s, during his tenure with the Tex-Mex supergroup Texas Tornados. I spent countless hours on airplanes and tour buses, in hotel rooms, recording studios, dance halls, clubs, and concert venues with Freddy and his bandmates.

Born Baldemar Huerta, he rechristened himself in honor of Fender guitars, choosing Freddy because he liked the alliteration. From humble origins as the son of Mexican immigrants in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, Freddy's unique vocal stylings and engaging stage presence led to a breakout career. His "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" and "Before the Next Teardrop Falls" are both classics.

But during an especially troubled period in his life and career, Freddy served nearly three years in Louisiana's notorious Angola state penitentiary—for possession of marijuana. It was the lowest point in his life. On this scrap of metal, I came face-to-face with a primitive portrait of Freddy, captured for the ages in his prison blues. The artist, known only by the initials D.M., had misspelled his subject's name, but the prisoner's identification number—inmate #LA16660—was historically correct. I was taken aback by the vulnerability of the portrayal, the artist's choice to present someone in his prison garb who was far better known to millions as a barrier-breaking entertainer.

I groped for my wallet and walked away with the unwieldy scrap, careful not to cut myself or unsuspecting pedestrians. When Freddy Fender died of lung cancer in 2006, he was a Grammy-winning Latinx pioneer with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. But his legacy of records selling in the millions and successive generations of admiring fans came at a personal cost. This scrap is a reminder to me of our shared need to focus not on how low we've been brought but on how far many of us have managed to come.

Cameron Randle
Virginia Beach, VA

A scene of devastation lay before me, a swath of destruction spread across the grassy field, starting at the back of my pickup truck and ending, if it ended at all, at the tree line 50 yards away. Everything I owned had been in the back of that truck, packed in for a move into a new home, a new marriage, and a new life—a future into which I had poured all of my hopes.

I'd shut the tailgate of my truck, but the camper door above it I'd left open. We'd been gone about an hour, and now my past lay shredded before me as if a tornado had sucked my possessions from that camper shell, run them through a blender, and scattered the scraps across the pasture.

The tornado was my yellow Labrador retriever, just a year old, and aptly named Truck. He tried to follow me as I stepped onto the path of ruin.

"Stay!" I shouted at him. He stayed, and so did Peter. Neither one of them knew what to do with my shrieks and tears.

Each step I took brought recognition of a new loss: a piece of my beloved tweed jacket, a scrap of the afghan my aunt had knitted for me, the tattered remains of photographs, shredded pages of my journals, and fragments of shirts, shoes, and books. So much of who I was seemed to lie in pieces before me.

It's been more than 40 years since that canine tornado wreaked his havoc. I no longer vividly recall the losses that lay scattered across that field. Truck is long gone now, and so is Peter, who succumbed to cancer in 2014. I've known much larger heartache since that day. What matters now is only the memory of it: of that dog, of my old pickup, and of the man with whom I would live the next 30-plus years of my life.

I left our farm two years ago, handing the fields and forests over to our daughter, who is raising her own family on those magical acres. The possessions I packed up this time filled far more than a Toyota pickup. As I thought back on that long-ago small move while making this huge one, I realized that the destructive dog had done me a favor. He pared down my possessions. He separated me from my past so I could move more fully into my future. I don't know how to do that now.

So many times I've wished away the grueling decisions that still lie ahead about what to give away, what to keep, and where to put all this stuff. Every item saved is a scrap of a life, and my boxes contain a story—of my life, and of Peter's—that will

be recalled for a while, and eventually forgotten.

Susan Gladin
Hillsborough, NC

From Frederick Buechner's novel *Godric*:

When a man leaves home, he leaves behind some scrap of his heart. Is it not so, Godric ? . . . It's the same with a place a man is going to. Only then he sends a scrap of his heart ahead. —St. Cuthbert to Godric

Elkhart, Indiana, was once known by some as “the band capital of the world.” Several different companies turned out everything from pianos to high-end flutes. Many of those factories are now closed. My first appointment out of seminary was to a large congregation in Elkhart, and among the members of the parish was a retired United Methodist pastor named Ralph Holdeman. Even late in life, Ralph was a high-energy guy. He sometimes looked like he had dressed in the dark with both eyes closed. Ralph spoke with his hands, and his words came in quick bursts. When he walked, he walked fast.

It would have been easy to write Ralph off as a rather eccentric older man—if you didn't know that he'd been director of evangelism for the National Council of Churches and had worked with Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama.

He was also an artist. The music instrument companies, like all manufacturers, ended up with pieces of unusable material. These unfinished pieces of musical instruments would go in the garbage bins behind the factories. Ralph, in his late 70s and early 80s, would go dumpster diving, salvaging the incomplete or damaged bells of trumpets, trombones, sousaphones, and more. He'd pound out some of the dents, reshape the bells, polish them, and then use the pieces to create something beautiful.

Out of those scraps he formed the beautiful cross that hangs in the narthex of Trinity on Jackson UMC in Elkhart. Ralph titled the work *Doxology*. In that early chapter of my ministry, I often noticed it. I would study the broken, discarded pieces and how the artist had made something beautiful out of them. I might think of the stories told in Luke 15 about the woman who searched for her lost coin, the shepherd who went looking for his lost sheep, and the father who ran to the son who had been lost.

Doxology spoke to my heart, and I saw God dumpster diving to find me, cast aside because of my troublesome ego and failure of nerve as a pastor. I saw the aching loneliness I had carried with me since the catastrophic losses I had experienced as a child. I thought of the people I served and the people I loved and the messiness of all our lives, and I thought of Ralph, who looked like he got dressed in the dark, and I gave thanks for a dumpster-diving Redeemer.

Mark Owen Fenstermacher
Auburn, IN

I am 80 years old. When I was seven or eight, my father grew fields of peas for the local canning factory each year. Peas are an early crop, ready for harvest in June. He would cut the pea vines and load them on our truck for the seven-mile trip to the canning factory in town. I would ride atop that mound, along with our English shepherd, Kip.

In the afternoon, my mother and I would sit on the front porch, pulling the pods off the vines and releasing those green globes from their shells. It seemed like we shelled peas the entire afternoon. I endured that because I knew what was coming. Supper that night would be peas fresh from the field that morning, served in milk and butter with a fresh loaf of white bread Mother had baked, slathered with butter that she had churned. A feast for the gods!

This is a quaint memory of a long-gone way of life, but when I place this scrap of story in my family quilt, it takes on significance enhanced by other childhood memories. Farm life was hardscrabble and unrelenting. Affection did not flow as easily as it seems to in families today. One of my nieces asked me what my parents' marriage was like. I replied that I wasn't sure. But I do remember the day of harvesting and eating peas.

In Greek mythology, Philemon and his wife, Baucis, worked side by side all their life. They found fulfillment, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tells us, when the gods Zeus and Hermes visited the couple, disguised as weary travelers. They welcomed the travelers into their humble cottage and shared their meager provisions. The gods revealed themselves to the couple and granted them their greatest wish: to continue to live on the land, even after their deaths. The gods granted their wish, and they became trees, a sturdy oak and a graceful linden planted on either side of the temple's entrance. Anyone who came to worship could see them.

My parents loved the land they cultivated. They knew its rhythms and their fellow travelers on paw, hoof, and wing, each creature a part in the grand design. My father teased a living from the rugged and often capricious land, and my mother improvised with their meager resources. They made a life from scraps, and there must have been times when they wished it was not so grandly difficult. Yet they lived in such intimacy with the source of all life, the good earth. They played their part in their time. Their rewards were as simple as a supper of fresh peas and daily bread and as magnificent as serving the great feast of creation poured out every day for those who stopped to consider it.

Elaine Eachus
Plantation, FL

Because I am determined not to waste anything I bring into my kitchen, I dilute yesterday's icing with today's milk, add a pinch of salt, and stir in some leftover brown rice. The first bite is amazing; the next few are a bit cloying. But I am still glad to have practiced the art, the responsibility, of seeing possibility in the guise of scraps.

As I finish that bowl of sweetened rice, I think back to my childhood aspirations of actually and literally saving the planet. As I've come to appreciate what a knotted ball of yarn the world is, my heart and mind grow weary of grand plans, and I find myself making rice pudding out of remnants from my fridge. It's not redemption; it's not kingdom come, no choirs of angels cooing at lions and lambs, no drastic change from the hurting world that I woke to. But the world never asked for a savior. I think the world only asked for listeners, for lovers, for reverence.

Caly M. McCarthy

Washington, DC

I am always on the lookout for discarded pieces of metal. Sometimes I sort through the garbage. I watch along the road. On bike rides, I stop to pick up aluminum cans. I've also picked up a catalytic converter shield, a strand of barbed wire, and a salad fork, all of which were tossed or lost along the way.

When my collection bin is full, I take it to a nearby salvage yard. To me it's scrap heaven. Mountains of twisted steel and aluminum—old air conditioners, siding, tire rims. Giant mechanical jaws load the metal into huge trailers to be hauled to foundries, where it is melted and recast to reenter the manufacturing process. There, I trade my collection of junk for just a few pennies on the pound. I catch a glimpse of the massive cleanup and recycling work so needed in a wasteful world.

Near the farm where I grew up, there was a neighborhood dump. Our dad would take us there regularly, after chores, to search and to salvage. We always brought home stories and treasures—sometimes to my mom's dismay. But looking back on those adventures, I see that it was in scrapping with my dad that I learned a reverence for everything and gratitude for it all.

Tom Babler

Naperville, IL

Among the many songs for which Dolly Parton is justly famous is one that always brings a lump to my throat. Her song "Coat of Many Colors" so poignantly calls to mind how poor people make do, then and now. Autumn is nigh, and a little girl has no warm coat. Her mother pulls out a box of rags—scraps of material—and proceeds to patch them together while telling her children yet again the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. Wearing her new coat to school, the girl feels rich despite her family's poverty and the teasing of other children, because her mother made this coat for her and blessed it with a kiss.

Scraps—of cloth, wood, tin, and what have you—were the currency of my childhood. My parents were born shortly after the start of the 20th century. Married at the

height of the Depression and starting their family on the brink of the Second World War meant my parents and the rest of the population had to make do with the rationing of gasoline, tires, and meat, among other things, salvaging metal, planting victory gardens, patching hand-me-down clothes, and keeping the old car running. It meant working long hours for minimal pay, spending one's off- hours fixing whatever had broken, and pulling the shades down and turning off the lights whenever the sirens sounded for the next civil defense blackout. It meant dire news on the radio and gathering the family around to create their own entertainment.

I remember being sent to the old sea chest in which my mother's grandparents had packed their scant possessions when they sailed from Germany to America. That was where Mom stored her scraps of material, and I was to pick something out to patch my clothes. Like the girl in Parton's song, I knew my parents had no money to spare, but I too felt rich at times. I felt rich when Mom mended my shirts with elbow patches long before I had any sense of style. Sometimes it has seemed to me that what we and our neighbors did with the scraps and detritus of our lives was as miraculous in its way as the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

Herb Evert

Cottage Grove, WI

Sometimes in my childhood when visiting the home of my Grandma Happy and her mother, whom we called Grandma Great, I'd watch Happy cut an array of colorful fabric scraps into smaller shapes. She was preparing pieces for a scrap quilt. Scrap quilts are made from remnants of fabric leftover from other things. They hold memories—Aunt Laura's kitchen curtains, Dad's handkerchief, Mom's apron, a neighbor's tablecloth. Grandma Great, Grandma Happy, and Happy's sister, who lived two houses over, all loved to quilt. They created beautiful, love-filled quilts on a large quilt frame upstairs, hand-sewing tiny, uniform stitches. When my mother was a baby, she could choose any color or size scrap, which she'd put in her mouth as she crawled around them. She had to keep her mouth shut to hold the piece, thus staying quiet.

A couple years after Happy died, I became a quilter. Though I didn't learn quilting directly from her, I did inherit her high expectations for herself. When Happy made a noticeable (to her) mistake, she would redo her work, knowing her handwork would

outlast her and witness to her craft and care.

Fortunately, I discovered that quilting can be forgiving. In the overall scale of a quilt, uneven stitches don't matter. Running short of a fabric invites inventiveness. Misplaced colors simply create an unanticipated composition. You don't need to know exactly what a quilt will look like when you start; the design surprisingly unfolds as you go. Innovating stirs up energy, often with a good outcome.

Much of the challenge and fun is figuring out what can be done with what one already has. Whenever I begin a project, I first look through my accumulated stash of fabric remnants to discover what I can use. I become mesmerized playing with colors and doing the math for the amount available.

Using what we already have opens abundance. In asset-based community development, communities build on resources and assets already within their neighborhoods. When organizations use appreciative inquiry to discern direction, they focus not on gaps and limitations but on strengths and gifts they already hold. Scraps are brought together to nurture body and soul. This blessed orientation to life has made me, and my grandma, happy.

Victoria Curtiss
Chicago, IL