FAILED MUSICIAN

A Best American Poet

"Remain curious – to life itself, to nature, to the world."

That's the advice Professor Stuart Dischell, whose work appears in "Best American Poetry 2023," gives to his students.

The vision of a poet as a hermit living away from everyone else is cliché, he adds. "Poets walk among you."

For the last 30 years, Dischell has walked among the English students in UNCG's MFA Writing Program. In that time, he has released six books of poetry with prestigious publishers such as Penguin and the University of Chicago Press, secured two National Endowment for the Arts grants, and won a Pushcart Prize and National Poetry Series award. He also held a Guggenheim Fellowship, two Ledig-Rowohlt international writer's residency fellowships in Switzerland, and a North Carolina Arts Council fellowship.

Dischell is widely recognized for his astute portrayals of how people interact in their environments. Restaurants or war zones, mountain summits or ships at sea, alleyways or boulevards, each poem's setting becomes another character in his work.

"The idea of location in poetry is really important to me because it grounds the characters," Dischell says. "It can clarify or complicate the situation."

In the case of "After the Exhibition" – originally published in the Birmingham Poetry Review and selected for this year's Best American Poetry anthology – the location is a hotel room. Two characters at odds with one another have just returned after a day touring a city. It's been raining, and they take their places in different parts of the room.

"I like the idea of a hotel because it's a blank space," he says. "The bed itself is like a stage, and the bathroom is off-stage. Because it's rented, there's no ownership."

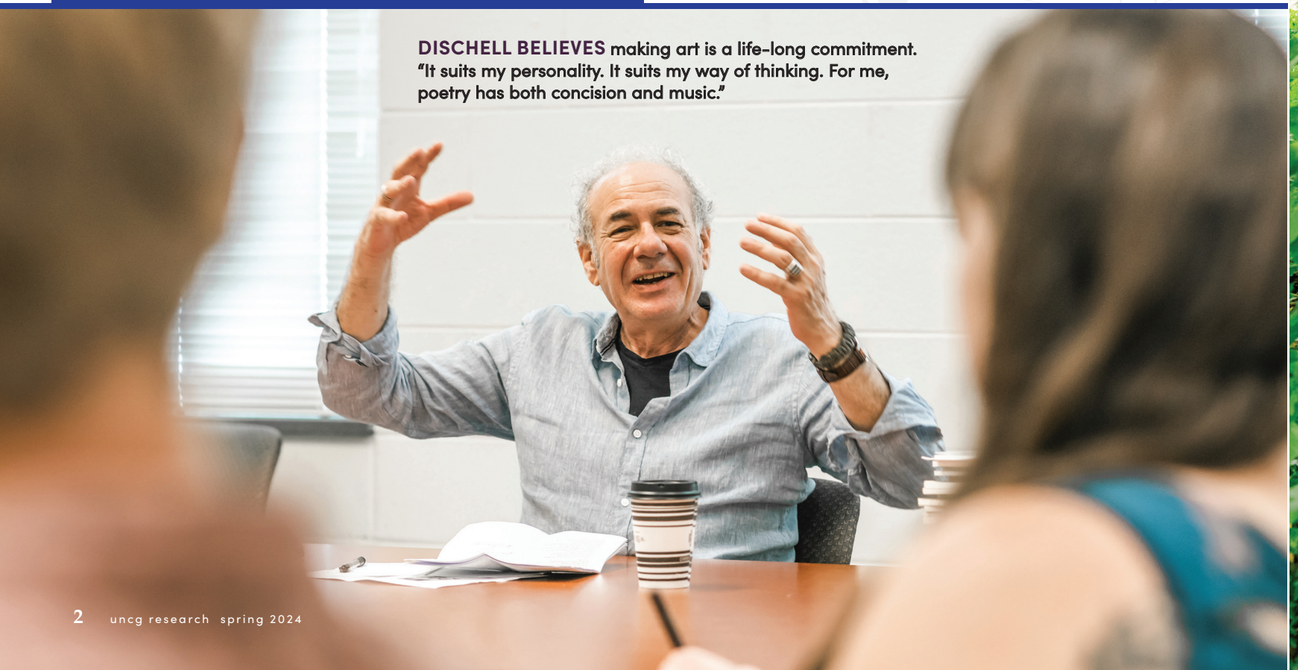
Despite Dischell's awards and accolades, he is proudest of the bookshelf in his office, filled with dozens of books by former students. "For them to take great talent and transform it into published books is very gratifying."

He takes his advice to "be curious" seriously and believes the best authors are the ones whose inquisitiveness, both natural and honed, propels their careers. "I learn a huge amount from my students – their curiosity and their willingness to learn and go beyond themselves. They have a willingness to read and a dedication and love for what they're doing."

Dischell traces his own enthusiasm for poetry back to high school when he began to write and perform songs. He laughs when he shares that he wasn't encouraged to dedicate himself to the craft of music.

"As it was put to me, the way I played the guitar and sang wasn't so good." But the lyrics resonated with listeners. "So I dedicated myself to the craft of poetry."

by Robin Sutton Anders
learn more at ***english.uncg.edu/dischell***



DISCHELL BELIEVES making art is a life-long commitment. "It suits my personality. It suits my way of thinking. For me, poetry has both concision and music."

IN THE FIELD

BIOLOGY PROFESSOR GIDEON WASSERBERG collects ticks and chiggers in the field with mentees Reuben Garshong – who graduated with his Ph.D. from UNCG and is now a postdoc at NC State University – and Noah Holland.

When Dr. Gideon Wasserberg and his students began collecting chiggers across North Carolina, they didn't expect to find disease-causing bacteria typically only seen in the Eastern Hemisphere.

But that's just what they discovered. Their observation of Orientia bacteria in North Carolina chiggers – part of a collaboration with NC State University – was published in Emerging Infectious Diseases.

The scientists were tracking the statewide prevalence of chiggers, mites that feed on human and animal skin tissue while in their larval stage. They were also assessing what – if any – disease-causing bacteria these parasitic arachnids host.

"We tested for Orientia because it's really the only known pathogen of medical concern to be vectored by chiggers," Wasserberg says. "But we did not really expect to find it because scrub typhus, the disease associated with Orientia, is typically seen in south and east Asia and northern Australia."

Scrub typhus is a potentially lethal disease that can lead to headaches, muscle pain, and mental confusion, and affects approximately 1 million people each year.

The unexpected findings have stirred media interest about potential implications for North Carolinians who spend time outside and may encounter these chiggers.

"We still don't know if the Orientia we found is capable of causing disease," Wasserberg says. "This is part of the next phase of our research."

CHIGGERS AND TICKS OF NC

While still unfolding, their findings have the potential to make a big impact – particularly for hikers who hope to avoid insects and arachnids that could make them sick.

Wasserberg led the data collection component of the study, traveling with UNCG graduate students, including study co-author Reuben Garshong, to state parks across North Carolina. The scientists use everyday items to collect the tiny bugs, simply placing a small black tile on the ground and waiting for chiggers to emerge from their hiding spots.

"Chiggers are known to occur near sheltering items like logs, bricks, and rocks in shaded areas," Wasserberg says. "Once they sense a host, they come crawling out searching for it like little zombies."

Rather than a host, these chiggers encounter a tile and a scientist, who uses a fine paintbrush dipped in alcohol to transfer the chigger to an alcohol-containing vial.

This relatively simple sampling technique, followed by laboratory analysis at NC State, led to their exciting discovery. Now, Wasserberg and biology master's student Noah Holland are working to better understand where and when chiggers appear across North Carolina – and where and when they carry Orientia.

Wasserberg is also conducting CDC-funded research in collaboration with the NC Department of Health and Human Services to track ticks across the state.

"Our findings indicate that blacklegged ticks – some carrying the bacteria that causes Lyme disease – are most prevalent in the northwestern counties of North Carolina," Wasserberg says. "We also sporadically see them in the Piedmont and coastal regions."

SOLITUDE AND SCIENTIFIC SUCCESS

To study insects and arachnids, Wasserberg spends a good deal of time outdoors – a passion he developed in high school at a remote boarding school in the deserts of Israel.

"There's a meditative solitude in nature," he says. "It helps you to see things clearly."

During long hikes as a student, Wasserberg would keep a close eye out for sand flies. A bite from a sand fly infected with a protozoan parasite can cause a disease called Leishmaniasis, commonly characterized by severe skin lesions.

Little did Wasserberg know that the sand flies he was avoiding would become a cornerstone of his career.

Over the past two decades, his research on sand flies and Leishmaniasis prevention has been funded by the National Institutes of Health, Department of Defense, National Science Foundation, and North Carolina Biotechnology Center.

Wasserberg's work has netted over $2 million in funding, which is not surprising given that Leishmaniasis affects an estimated 1 million people each year in tropical and arid regions of the world. One form can even be fatal if left untreated.

SUPPRESSING SAND FLIES

Studying the ecology of Leishmaniasis and its primary vector, the sand fly, has led Wasserberg to several potential methods to control the disease.

As part of a prestigious NIH R01 project, he and collaborators at NC State have identified chemicals, visual cues, and bacteria sources that entice egg-bearing sandflies to lay their eggs, with the goal of creating attract-and-kill traps.

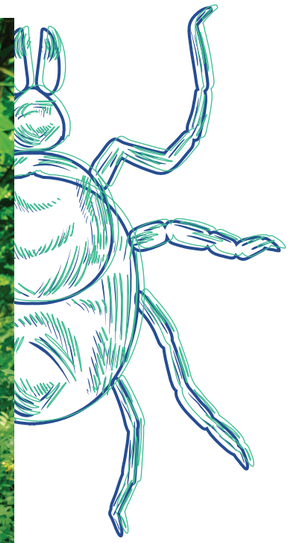
Sand flies must feed on blood to produce eggs, so egg-bearing – or gravid – sand flies are most likely to carry the Leishmaniasis parasite. "By attracting gravid females to a lethal trap, we can simultaneously impact sand fly population and Leishmaniasis parasite transmission," Wasserberg explains.

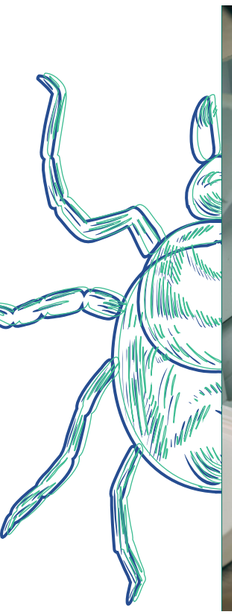
He and collaborators in Israel are also targeting the rodents that sand flies depend on. A rodent burrow in the desert is a hotbed of sand fly activity, serving as a shelter and a place where females feed on rodent blood and larvae feed on rodent droppings. That's why the scientists are field testing an insecticide-laced rodent bait.

"It's a trojan horse approach," explains Wasserberg. While the insecticide is harmless to the rodent, it's lethal to the sand flies waiting in the rat's burrow to feed on it.

So far, the researchers have observed decreased sand fly numbers in treated burrows and decreased Leishmaniasis infections in treated areas.

"This work will not eradicate Leishmaniasis in the world, but it could be helpful in reducing human exposure in affected areas," he says.





LITTLE BITS OF WONDER

To advance his research, Wasserberg maintains a sand fly colony in his laboratory here at UNCG. It's not easy, but Wasserberg says he enjoys working with the fascinating creatures.

His passion is infectious, and his protégés – from the students working with sand flies in the lab to those tromping through the woods in search of arachnids – are equally enthusiastic.

"He, like me, is someone who can just kind of enjoy a little bit of wonder and seeing things you don't necessarily expect," Holland says. During one fieldwork day, Holland and Wasserberg stumbled upon a dung beetle trying to roll a dungball uphill. "We both sat there for maybe five minutes watching and tried to help it get over a stick."

While Wasserberg spends extensive time conducting lab work and writing papers, fieldwork has a special spot in his heart.

"Sometimes I joke that science is an excuse for me to be out in the field," he says. "When you're in nature, it's fascinating and raises questions of why things are working the way they do."

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCHER
Chelsea Akabueze was trained by Ph.D. student Dannielle Kowacich-Swaney to assist with the maintenance of the sand fly colony. "I took Dr. Wasserberg's class last year, and we learned about how environment, vectors, and hosts interact. Humans affect their environment, and there are consequences from that."

by Rachel Damiani & Sangeetha Shivaji
learn more at ***biology.uncg.edu/wasserberg-lab***

NATIONAL TOUR COMES HOME Parsons, UNCG nursing student Michelle Villanueva, and history graduate student Azariah Journey set up "Care and Custody" in UNCG's Nursing and Instructional Building, the exhibit's first stop when it arrived in Greensboro.

For Dr. Anne Parsons, the issue of how society has treated people with mental health conditions falls well beyond academic interest.

That's because it impacted her family.

"For me, it is a deeply personal issue because my grandmother's sister had a major developmental disability," Parsons says. "She was institutionalized in an asylum for 40 years. At that time, it was often the only option for treating people with major disabilities or mental health conditions."

The UNCG history faculty member recently curated "Care and Custody, Past Responses to Mental Health" for the National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine.

The banner exhibition and companion website explore the treatment of people with mental health conditions throughout history, especially in the United States, bringing to light the tension that exists between care and custody.

On a national tour, the exhibit has already visited Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Virginia. It arrived in Greensboro on October 23rd for display first in UNCG's Nursing and Instructional Building and then the Greensboro Project Space downtown.

Visitors learn about the history of mental hospitals since the mid-19th century, with depictions including how they were places where care was provided – and where people were kept against their wills.

"I believe strongly that it is important to understand the past in order to change our present," says Parsons. Her projects, she says, seek to unearth history and build community.

Parsons' latest book, "From Asylum to Prison: Deinstitutionalization and the Rise of Mass Incarceration after 1945," co-won the 2019 Disability History Association's Outstanding Book Award. Research she conducted for the book at the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland became the foundation for "Care and Custody."

"It is incredibly saddening that there were not more opportunities to keep my great aunt in the community instead of in a far-off asylum," she says.

"She stayed there until 1969, when she died, at the very moment of change."

Parsons hopes that exhibit visitors will better understand how the country has moved away from custodial forms of treatment toward more inclusive approaches, and how advocates have worked to protect the rights of those with mental health conditions.

"It's important to take the history seriously because it can lead to change – to finding ways to help close to home, instead of merely incarcerating people."

by Mark Barnes
learn more at ***nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/careandcustody***