Skipjack Review

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From the Editors...

Today, the late August sky can't make up its mind. It might rain—or maybe just a nap instead. If there's time. Farmers making hay scramble in the smolder, tempting fate, taunting me. What have I done lately? Words on a page rise up and offer instruction: how to construct wings and escape this maze.

Note to self:

Do not fly away when the seasons change. Tend the garden of perennial anxieties on your hands and knees like the altar it is.

- Em, M, Jim

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Jim Daniels

lights its brilliant red fruit
in surreal haze like the first
slow drops of blood
from your favorite cut.

Resist the impulse to say
they don't belong here.
You just didn't notice
the delicate white flowers

in spring. So tender,
you can't buy them in stores.
They don't travel far.
Those without imagination
call it the strawberry tree.

I have gorged on them for years
but don't even know how
to spell it. Sure, the outside's
dry, tasteless, impossible to peel.

But the inside spills in sweet luscious
sin. One at a time like red punctuation,
momentary gift, spontaneous
stolen kisses.

Growing Garlic

Jim Daniels

requires no skill. Like imagining wings.
Each fall, I crumble dried seed heads
and fling them casually across the garden

and forget until spring when they rise
tall/thick/green/relentless. Their stalks curl
in on themselves to create another seed pod.

Etcetera! Oh Etcetera, obscure, forgotten
goddess of imaginary wings and real garlic,
you taught me to love stink's eruption

in a backyard the size of the devil's snow angel
in Pittsburgh where we once loved the stink
of money from the mills even though we knew

most of it was not ours and that we'd end up
singing a cappella, jiggling fistfuls of change
at a cigarette machine while the fat-cat choir

laughed all the way, yes, to the bank. Etcetera,
I rub your stink against my own. Etcetera,
the never-ending garlic, impossible to kill.

Pulling apart your cloves, I feel like I'm handling
my own brains. Etcetera, the never-ending sadness.
Stoic of the onion family, strong enough to inhabit

me—breath, pores. Like me, you burrow down.
Unlike you, I'm not coming back, so do your stuff.
Spread your stinky wings.

The Previous Owner

Jim Daniels

planted tulips in the tiny yard
while his wife died on the couch.
They bloomed our first spring
34 years ago and counting.

My wife survived one cancer
and counting. The tulips still
send up green floppy leaves
each spring, though few bloom

on their wobbly stems. We plan
to be previous owners soon.
Dig up those old bulbs
my wife says. Their For Sale
sign rusts in a basement corner.
I hear spring is the best time

to sell—perennials and their myth
of eternal return. Today, snow clumps
on one of the two rhododendrons
they planted. The other died.

I pulled up its dead roots.
In its place, a bare portal trellis.
Nothing climbing it
this time of year.

When we walk through it
we'll disappear.

Down in the Bog

Elisabeth Harrahy

On a bed of moss
I long for you, here beside
pink lady slippers

Cave

Fern G. Z. Carr

Stalactites drip droplets
of mineralized water
like a leaky faucet

their eerie echoes
amplified by limestone walls –
droplets drip, drip, dripping

into alkaline pools
whose ripples are interrupted
by stalagmites in the rock matrix.

Fissures teem with arthropods
and amphibians dependant
on the roosting inhabitants

suspended upside down,
their bony wings
cloaked around furry bodies,

their presence betrayed by
the guano below –
a treasure trove

for the crickets, salamanders,
millipedes and roaches
luxuriating in its richness

in the depths of a cavern
abounding with geological secrets
and the love of spelunkers.

At Rest

Diane Webster

A rowboat at sunset
rests ashore
with only the grass
blowing in the wind
to remind it
of waves
rocking its hull
in lullaby rhythm.

Hallie and Jane

Michelle Cacho-Negrete

They met in 1968 at The Ripple Natural Foods store and Café and were soon inseparable, the path between their rented cabins at the foot of a Maine mountain trampled flat by their footsteps. Hallie had a three-year-old son nicknamed Punch because he punched things gently as if to test their solidarity. Jane had two sons: five-year-old Aden, a sprite of boundless energy, and seven-year-old Willy as curious as a squirrel. Both women were twenty-four and had transformed living on the financial edge into a virtue; sharing food, clothes from the thrift shops that dotted the area, and sometimes stealing without compunction. Jane sold woven items she made from jute, linen and beads. Hallie sang obscure folk songs at festivals and bars and coffee shops. There was never quite enough to make it, but they always did.

Years later Jane would remember their lives together as though they were myth, the certainty of their relationship to the mountain where they lived, to the trees, to million-year-old boulders that rose around them, but especially the carelessness with which they handled their youth. She envied the absolute rhythm and flow of their lives as though they had belonged to other people she'd known, even understanding that memory can be transform the past into what we wished it to be.

From early spring until Christmas they worked craft shows in played-out little mill towns. Jane reined in her tangled blonde curls with silver-starred bobby pins and wore long velvet dresses whose bodices shimmered with tiny mirrors. Hallie wore tight jeans, scuffed brown boots and embroidered blouses. Her wavy black hair flowed down her back. The solemnity of her closed eyes, quiet face and rich voice endowed every song with importance; Jane believed that Hallie, in her purest musical moments, lifted them both above who they were, two young hippies in a town filled with them. After each show they went to the local pizza parlor to count their earnings.

They spent nearly all their time together: food shopping, clothes washing, cooking. Jane crafted her jewelry to the strum of Hallie's guitar. At night when the kids slept they burned patchouli incense and smoked dope, the thin sweet smell of both suffusing hair and clothes and the Indian print tapestries thrown over everything. They lit dozens of candles on end tables of crates. In the shadowy fingers of the blue flames they reminisced about growing up; fathers who worked long days, mothers who nagged them, embarrassing moments in high school, minimum-wage jobs they'd hated. They listened

to Jefferson Airplane, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, the Grateful Dead, Nick Drake, Janis. They made lists of bourgeois things they'd never ever do: marry for security, treasure a boyfriend more than a girlfriend, eat meat, shop at malls. They sighed about ex-husbands they'd married too early and divorced too late who rarely sent money or saw their children.

They lived seasonally in love with the natural world around them, certain that their lives were made sweeter and more authentic by that world and by each other's companionship; they seemed to agree on everything. In October they picked apples, ironed leaves between wax paper sheets that the kids then strung into mobiles that stained light scarlet and gold, wound smooth river stones in linen thread for necklaces. They made miso soup, grainy bread, stir-fried vegetables, fermented yogurt in jars. At Christmas shows, they handed out cookies they baked and flirted with men they later rebuffed. They gave the kids quarters for chocolates, believing their sons the best things they'd ever created, loving them with an aching awareness of their bodies lengthening and their questions growing wiser

In January they dressed the kids in oversized snowsuits, mismatched mittens, and waterproof boots and dressed snowmen in peace-sign tee shirts, with yarn for dreadlocks. They built snow forts that the setting sun blazed into labyrinths of amethyst and indigo before darkness enveloped the day.

It snowed all of one day in late March, great trembling veils that wrapped everything in white. The kids filled bowls for sugar on snow. They twirled and caught flakes on their tongues, eyelashes cottony and cheeks red. Jane made soup on the woodstove while Hallie boiled down maple syrup in a big iron pot, the rich dramatic scent leaving them ravenous. They trailed thickened amber syrup over frozen white, ate obscene amounts of the brittle sweet strands. They played Candyland and go-fish and read to the kids until they slept. Jane wondered how her life could be so complete. At midnight the snow finally stopped. A full moon hung long shadows over the frosted landscape. They shared a joint, checked the kids, banked the stove, pulled on snowshoes and heavy sweaters and went out to the mountain.

The world was new and dreamy, rising up out of yesterday. Jane's snowshoe caught in a buried root and she fell, trapped until Hallie tugged her to her feet. With the translucent depth of that after-smoking state, when everything is outrageously funny and time is magically suspended, they doubled over in hilarity then continued climbing. The snow muffled an owl's feathery swoop onto some scrambling prey and hollowed the whoosh of their snowshoes. On the hilltop, they looked down at rivers of white-shrouded pine and spruce and balsam. The air was luminous and peaceful and carried the poignant scent of wood-smoke.

"Grace," Hallie whispered, moved by their intimacy with the mountain.

Jane repeated, "Grace." They smiled at each other in the conspiracy of those who travel the wilderness by night. On the way home fine floating mist of breath froze on their faces.

Late April brought impatient buds, little hopeful pockets on the rough thin twigs of the trees. Fields of blue Quaker-Ladies blurred into the horizon. Sometimes one brought a man home while the other baby-sat. They broke each winter's celibacy with the casualness of eating a cheap meal, labeling these men "The one with two gold hoops," or "The one who wore old hiking boots," or "The one with the funny voice," conferring an anonymity upon them that supported the importance of their own relationship.

One afternoon, at an early June craft show, in a field flooded with clover, a man with thick graying hair, tiny gold stud in his ear, Grateful Dead tee-shirt and patched jeans swayed and harmonized with Hallie in a fine tenor voice. She asked him to join her for the final song and tipped her head toward him as she strummed and hit the final high note. He matched her range and they finished with closed eyes. After they were done he took her hand introduced himself as Mesa, asked what they were doing next and if he could join them. Jane was astonished and a little wounded when Hallie agreed, but she smiled and shook his hand as well.

Later in the truck, disquieted by Hallie agreeing he could join them, Jane said lightly, "The one who knew all the obscure songs," but the tone of her voice couldn't conceal her uneasiness.

Hallie laughed and nodded, but there was something in her eyes Jane hadn't seen before.

At the pizza parlor Mesa balanced his chair on two legs.

"I'm thirty-six." He laughed, "But I'm still not an adult. I do odd jobs like teenagers do, split and haul wood, repair furniture, sand floors, paint."

Jane thought Mesa's hands were surprisingly delicate for somebody doing that type of things, fingernails scrupulously clean, and she wondered how much work he actually did. He downed beer after beer, gave the kids quarters for the jukebox, spoke about learning Hallie's obscure songs in Greenwich Village and Haight-Ashbury and insisted on paying.

"I'm in between jobs and I could give you a hand with anything you need done." He spoke mostly to Hallie who immediately agreed, "We've got a load of firewood to be split," and avoided Jane's eyes as she told him where they lived. The next day he drank a six-pack while splitting their wood, telling stories about life in the southwest, attempts to find Che in Cuba, work as a bit player in off-Broadway theatre. The kids played around him noisily, picking up wood chips they glued together to make houses and barns. Jane watched him warily as he spoke mostly to Hallie, making sure to glance at her so she was included. The tilt of his head and slump of his shoulders suggested a weary wisdom about the world that she felt was seductive to Hallie, whose eyes shimmered as she listened, bewitched by his nomadic lifestyle.

The kids slept at Jane's cabin for three nights.

Jane, voice light, told Hallie, "If he stays a few nights more, he'll be the

one whose name you remember."

Hallie shrugged but looked away. "No, he'll be the one who stayed an extra few nights."

By the end of the week, Mesa was still there and Punch, missing his own bed, went home. Soon Hallie, Masa and Punch spent most of the time together. The dusty windows, frayed tapestries and half-burnt candles of Jane's cabin seemed poor and sad rather than festive and defiant. Mesa left early each morning to hunt out carpenter work, but his restless presence hovered in empty bottles and dirty shirts on the floor of Hallie's bedroom when Jane came by.

"The one who never left," she said and Hallie had no response.

Two weeks later, Jane arrived to find Mesa stashing clothes from a duffel bag into a Salvation Army bureau. "I'm going to set up a workshop in that rundown storage shack, and hook an extension cord to the house for my power tools," he said and leaned over to kiss Hallie.

While Mesa moved cartons from truck to garage, Jane said, "So he really is the one who never left?"

Hallie shrugged. "He showed up with his stuff. I didn't know what to say."

"You say, I'm not ready to do this. I'm not ever going to do this, actually. It's time for you to go."

Hallie looked at her then turned away when Mesa called to her, asking for some help in moving a few things.

Jane shouted on her way out, "I'm leaving to get some things done."

Neither Jane nor Mesa seemed to hear her but Punch asked to come along and the three kids piled into Jane's old car.

In September, when milkweed blossoms turned to white silk, a man in a crisp cotton shirt and soft wool sports jacket bought a weaving from Jane. His name was Eric and he joined them for pizza, treating the kids to ice cream sundaes. The brusque way Mesa and Eric shook hands suggested an instant mutual contempt. Over dinner, Eric's mouth twitched impatiently at Mesa's stories and he glanced often at his watch. Mesa's shoulders stiffened.

Jane decided to let Eric drive the kids and her home in his truck, telling Hallie with some uncertainty, "See you tomorrow?" Hallie nodded and hugged her, but Jane felt her eyes follow them as they left. Eric's truck was large, clean and comfortable with leather seats. The kids bounced around on the back seat and he drove up the narrow road. Trees were ragged silhouettes in the bright night and the mountains bit into a creamy moon. The road glistened with pale frost. Eric shyly took her hand, his face stippled in light and shadow from passing cars. She felt lightheaded at his touch. His headlights caught a moose lumbering into the thick woods and they laughed at the kids' excitement and beamed at each other as though they'd always been together. Jane wondered at her sudden comfort with him, a man who

certainly bourgeois, but the kid's pleasure at the truck and the sheer pleasure of being in a vehicle where her back didn't hurt was consoling.

Eric drew architectural blueprints for a living. He constructed sturdy new racks for Jane's displays, drove the four of them to shows, while Hallie and her son went in Mesa's pick-up. He took Jane and her sons to the movies and dinner, a luxury she'd rarely had money for. His quiet presence was soothing. He moved in a month later, placing folded clothes from two suitcases into a bureau he brought with him.

"The rest of my furniture is in storage for our future," he told her.

Jane tasted the words "our future" in her mind over and over the next few weeks, taking tiny bites of it as though it were a bar of chocolate she needed to make last.

Eric worked noon to eight, and mornings after the kids left for school they went back to bed, the sweet rotting scent of fallen apples from the near-by orchard mingling with wood smoke from their fire. They talked about the civil rights movement and Vietnam and how they were different than their parents. They agreed not to smoke dope. Jane heard Mesa's hammer outside accompanying Hallie's strumming like a drum, until the frost no longer melted in the sun and they were forced inside. In the ensuing silence, Jane's conversations with Eric seemed more intense, vibrant as blue silk.

In November, after a show, Mesa said he was tired of pizza and wanted Chinese food. The can of beer in his hand and tilt of his hips as he leaned against the wall of the church where they'd exhibited seemed somehow threatening.

"The kids love pizza," Eric said sharply.

The kids glanced back and forth between the two men puzzled and uneasy. Jane felt disembodied, watching Hallie's lips tremble, her uncertain step towards Mesa as Eric stared steadily at him.

Mesa straightened, tossed his beer can in the trash bucket, glared at Eric and took a step toward him.

Hallie took his arm. "Let's get Chinese food. The kids can go with us or with Jane and Eric."

Mesa nodded, but his backwards glance at Eric was victorious. Jane thought the only people he'd defeated were she and Hallie.

Hallie and Jane continued to do shows together, but often she and Eric went out to eat with either themselves or with the kids.

At the end of winter they filled out entrance forms for the biggest summer shows over breakfast at The Ripple. So much was different in Jane's life, but not The Ripple, an unchanging, beloved monument in this small town. Jane loved being there, the peaceful, steady rhythm of it: James Taylor, The Grateful Dead, Bob Dylan on the phonograph, diners in flannel-lined jeans, triangles of sliced fruit pies and chocolate cake with maple syrup icing.

The rich, garlicky scent of bean soup, the Ripple's specialty, dominated the thick steamy air, even in summer. She loved seeing people she knew, exchanging stories about neighbors, talking about rumors that the war was nearly over.

Jane took a bite of her muffin. "I can barely afford these rising entrance fees," she said, brushing muffin crumbs from her hands.

Hallie nodded, buttered her toast, and said in a very low voice, "I've been thinking I need a part-time job."

Jane looked at her and said in a voice equally low, "Actually, I signed up for a couple of classes at the community college. The kids need so much more than I earn at shows. Eric will switch his hours to take care of the kids when I'm in school. Getting a degree in something seems like the only solution." She signaled the waitress for more coffee.

Hallie was silent a moment then said, "You don't need to convince me it's the best solution, only yourself, and Eric's already done that."

Jane looked at her in astonishment. "I made up my own mind. I could feel the same way about you taking a job." She hesitated a moment, then plunged on, "Or pretending to be surprised about Mesa moving in last year."

Hallie flushed. "At least he's not talking me into doing something as bourgeois as going to college."

"You think taking a part-time job isn't bourgeois?" Jane snapped.

They stared at each other.

"What's happening?" Jane asked very quietly.

"I don't know," Hallie whispered. "But let's stop it."

They clasped hands across the table.

"Grace," Hallie said.

"Grace," Jane whispered, but something in her tilted crazily.

By 1973, their days were filled. Hallie waitressed at the Ripple and Jane interned as a student teacher, though whenever possible they met for lunch. Jane was involved in a peace group, Hallie composing protest songs. Coming in from teaching one afternoon, knowing she'd have to go to the school library and finish a paper, Jane thought that The Ripple seemed the last remnant of her old fading life, a small fragrant outpost of the past she visited whenever possible. Something in her ached and her eyes filled with tears. She spotted Hallie at their usual table, slid into a booth and then reached across the table and took Hallie's hand. "I miss you."

Hallie squeezed her fingers and said quietly, "Me too." She shook her head. "It's Eric and Mesa, isn't it? Mesa keeps saying Eric is pretentious, imagining he's better than Mesa just because he has a job." Her face, chalky in the shaft of hard winter sun was mournful, her eyes filling with tears.

Jane stared through the filmy white frost coating the windows. "And Eric says Mesa is a drunk who lives off you."

Her stomach felt queasy, yet some burden seemed lifted, some caution

that had grown between Hallie and her so that their words seemed always measured, carefully thought out. She wasn't sure, however, it was only Eric and Mesa. They seemed to have ignited something in the two of them that had been embers; they were both behaving in a way that their parents might consider responsible and appropriate for two women with children. Indeed, her mother had been thrilled when she said she was going back to school. She sighed; she had once had such a surety about their lives, and now she felt uncertain about everything.

I don't know what to do." She looked at Hallie bleakly.

"I don't know either," Hallie whispered. "It just happened.

"No," Jane told her. "We let it."

"Let's take the kids out of school next Thursday morning and do something fun," Hallie said.

"I can't," Jane said. "I have an exam to study for." She thought of the three women she was meeting at the library. "Next Saturday?" she asked.

"I'm working," Hallie said.

They were silent then Hallie said, "When school is over and you have more time I'll take a few days off and we'll do it then."

Jane nodded, then lifted her mug of tea and touched it to Hallie's. "Grace."

"Grace," Hallie said.

It barely snowed in February that year, not at all in March. Mud season came early. By April buds had broken on the maple trees. Hallie and Jane, on a rare day off at the same time, paused at the small stream in the woods to watch last fall's leaves raft the water beneath the newly splintered ice. Jane caught a large, still-scarlet maple leaf and held it up, delicate veins glowing in the chilly white sun. "Winter vanished this year," she said. "It used to go on till you wanted to get in your car and go somewhere you could see wild flowers growing."

Hallie nodded then took the leaf and held it over her eyes like a mask. "The world is rose-colored," she said.

Her hair was carelessly braided, her eyes, when she lowered the leaf, darkly rimmed. A particular tightness around Hallie's mouth, a weariness to her walk, made Jane sure that there were problems connected to Mesa's drinking. We used to know everything about each other's lives, she thought.

Hallie dropped the leaf into the stream and they watched it float away. "Race you to the park," Jane said.

Hallie took off instantly. Jane laughing, began running and yelled, "No fair. We didn't say ready, set go."

Hallie looked behind and laughed also.

They dropped, panting, onto a bench beside a stand of oaks. Excited toddlers on swings screamed "higher, higher," while chatting mothers complied. A woman they knew from The Ripple nursed her baby on a

bench and waved at them. A five or six year old fell off the seesaw and wailing while his mother picked him up and rocked back and forth with him. Jane experienced a particular melancholia in the restless gypsy scent of impending spring. Hallie lit a cigarette she pulled from a crumpled pack and inhaled deeply, then pursed her lips and blew the match out. She offered the pack. Jane, although wanting one, shook her head. They spoke about inconsequential things, laughed about the thick mud on their boots. The spoke then about My Lai, talk of the massacre unavoidable it seemed.

"It's all everyone talks about at The Ripple." Hallie sighed. "Isn't this ever going to end."

"It has to," Jane said.

They were silent for a while, watching the children swing, the busy mothers wiping noses and zippering jackets their children had opened. Hallie said quietly, "I'm going back to school for a nursing degree. I can get a really good student loan, and some work-study money, and can go part-time and still waitress at the Ripple. The college has a day care center I can count on when Mesa isn't around."

Jane shook her head and said in an equally low voice, "Eric is planning to enroll in graduate school and become an architect. He's been saving for a long time. He says that he's waited long enough and wants me to do my senior year in Boston. He wants to get married."

Hallie crossed her legs and rubbed at the mud on her boot with a twig, then asked, "Do you love him? Truly?" She looked at Jane who, after a moment, nodded.

"Then go." Hallie took a final drag on the cigarette and ground it out under her boot.

"I guess," Jane said. Everything seemed swirling and blurry and in rapid motion.

"OK then," Hallie said.

"OK then," Jane repeated, and felt a deepening sorrow.

Jane and Eric rented a small apartment in a Boston suburb. She felt no let-up from the muggy heat each summer, the blue shade of trees too riddled with lacunae to provide relief. Winters seemed claustrophobic with the high walls of snow and brownstones and narrow streets. Eric graduated and got a position at a well-respected firm. Jane got a social work degree and a job at a public school, timing the birth of their daughter Rachel with summer, when school was out. They bought a large house and took advantage of Boston's cultural scene: concerts, museums, movies, book signings, sculpture gardens, days melting into each other. Jane sometimes felt displaced from her life, wondering where she was, although the feeling came less and less often as she threw herself into work and family.

At first Jane and Hallie spoke every week. Hallie was enjoying school, enjoying the work, happy with both her work-study job at a small hospital in

rural Maine, and with the center Punch went to after school.

"We both needed a degree," she said. "Waitressing and craft shows would never help us pay for our sons' college." She laughed. "Remember when that thought would never occur to either of us?"

"I remember," Jane said quietly.

Hallie continued, "I really can't count on either his father or Mesa to help out."

There was a moment of silence then Hallie said, "He's drinking a lot more, can't seem to find any work, but then, he's the town drunk."

"For God's sake Hallie, why are you still living with him?" she blurted.

"I guess I love him," Hallie whispered.

"I'm sorry," Jane said, knowing that there was nothing she could do. "Listen, when you graduate, why don't you look for a job here in Boston. There are tons of hospitals. You can stay with us."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Hallie.

Their phone calls dropped to once a month and there were times when it went longer than that.

One morning Jane picked up the phone to hear Hallie's Hello. She was about to tell Hallie how happy she was to hear from her and to apologize for not calling, to say she wouldn't let that happen again, but something in Hallie's voice silenced that. "What's happened?" she asked.

"Mesa's gone. He joined AA last year. I thought it would be great, no more drinking, maybe even a steady job." She paused. "He met a woman there and said that I'd enabled him for years to be a drunk and he couldn't live with me anymore. He wanted to be called by his real name, Ed." Her laugh turned into a sob.

"Come here. Come stay with us for a while," Jane said.

"I can't. Not right now. When I get my finances together I'll come."

"Promise," Jane asked.

"Promise," Hallie agreed, but it never happened.

The blaze of autumn became the wrecked traffic of winter streets and soiled snow, then the spring eruption of azaleas and gliding swan boats in the Boston Common melting into the humid heat of city-summer soon swallowed by the crisp air of yet another fall. The few notes and phone calls between Hallie and Jane had grown hurried, shorter, further apart, then petered out. One afternoon when leaves outside her window-stained light like the kid's long-ago mobiles Jane realized how long it had been and called Hallie's number. A stranger answered. She felt dizzy as she hung up the phone, and dropped to the couch. How could this have happened, she thought, she was once the most important person in my life after the kids. She sat quietly, memories flowing through her, climbing the mountain that snowy night, counting money over pizza dinners, Hallie's truck coughing its way up the mountain.

She finally sighed and stood up. She needed to go to an after school

meeting. As she bent to get her purse and jacket she caught sight of herself in the mirror and for a moment was startled. She then stepped closer to her reflection. Her eyes were rimmed with crow's feet, her hair flecked with gray, a certain weariness to her mouth. She thought of a lyric from one of Hallie's songs; "There's blue that's as sad as the good friend you lose."

"You'll always be my best friend, Hallie," she whispered, desperately wishing it was still true and believing that in some way it was.

Goodbye My Sky

Susan Shea

It's that time of year on our woodlands
lot, when our leaves begin to squeeze
out of knots on our branches

sweet relief from our winter grays

fast now they will form a roof of
breezy green above our heads

our canopy will force us to travel to
someone else's
open places to see their sky

as if this handiwork was ours
all ours
for the taking

Musing on Mockingbirds

Alice Lowe

"The mockingbird's invention is limitless.
He strews newness about as casually as a god." – **Annie Dillard**

"There you are. At last." I shout out loud, a cry of glee. Early each year I await the first songs from the mockingbirds that inhabit my San Diego neighborhood. This year, on a Wednesday morning in late January, the unmistakable cheeps and chirrups resound, crisp and clear, from high in a magnolia tree.

Mimus polyglottos, our Northern Mockingbird, means many-tongued mimic. Their presence is year-round throughout the U.S., but mostly in the south. They're claimed as the state bird of Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas. After a cumulative decline of about 30% between 1966 and 2019, they're now plentiful, with a global breeding population of 43 million, no longer of conservation concern.

From Albatross to Lark, a series of streets in my neighborhood are alphabetically named for birds. I live between Ibis and Jackdaw. The street after Lark, which by all rights should have been Mockingbird, is Randolph. I don't know who Randolph was, but I suspect patronage, payback, greasing of wheels.

The Cherokees called the mockingbird cencontlatolly, "four hundred tongues." In creation myths of the Hopi and other Pueblo tribes, the mockingbird taught the people to speak. Others considered the mockingbird a symbol of intelligence. Mockingbirds are said to be spiritual guides, bearing messages from the universe.

Mockingbirds are gray, with dark and white patches on their wings. They're not showy, not noted for their looks, but I search treetops, poles, and wires, often rewarded by the sight of their little bodies vibrating with big sounds. Silent during cold winter months, they burst into their seasonal repertoire at the first signs of spring weather—always early in Southern California—switching to a different songbook in fall, their collective refrains comprising several hundred different sounds. They whistle and screech, chatter and chirp,

trill and rasp, mimicking other birds as well as frogs and crickets, cats and dogs, music and machines, sirens and alarms, doorbells and squeaking gates.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch tells his son: "Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." The accepted interpretation is that mockingbirds symbolize innocence. The idea that it's ok to kill any birds, misbehaving or not, gives the story a sinister edge. Fortunately, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 doesn't set up a double standard, judging whether birds are naughty or nice. It protects all migratory birds from being harassed, hunted, captured, killed, eaten.

Every morning I fill terracotta saucers with birdseed for the finches, wrens, sparrows, towhees, and juncos, the crows and doves too, that forage and feed on my canyon-side patio. But mockingbirds rarely visit feeders or eat birdseed. Their diet of insects and berries comes from dense shrubs and fruit trees, or from lawns and open ground, none of which I can provide.

Two traditional songs feature mockingbirds, with numerous variations and adaptations of both over the years. "Listen to the Mockingbird" is a Civil War-era ballad, a bittersweet song about a lost love and the bird that sings at her grave. "Hush Little Baby" is a traditional lullaby that morphed in the sixties into "Mockingbird," my all-time favorite duet, by Carly Simon and James Taylor.

A group of mockingbirds is an echo, an exactness, a ridicule, a plagiary (as in plagiarists, word thieves). But whatever they're called, they must be rare, as I've never seen a group of mockingbirds. Pairs keep to themselves during breeding and nesting seasons, sometimes stay together for life, sufficient unto themselves.

Closing windows and inserting earplugs doesn't help during the long spring nights when a mockingbird sings all night, night after night, from a nearby station audible from my bedroom window. These are generally young, unattached males or older ones who have lost their mate. I lie awake, hoping he finds true love soon so I can get a good night's sleep.

Annie Dillard wrote in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* about a mockingbird that she watched dive from a four-story building, opening its wings and flying off just before she thought it would crash to the ground. She recalls the scene to describe acts of grace and beauty in nature.

I don't pipe music, news or podcasts into my ears; the mockingbirds' melodies charm and cheer me; they bring joy, peace, and hope to my daily walks.

Notes on Twin Falls Trail, North Bend, WA

J Kramer Hare

A net of cloud had caught the rays of day
and floated by, behind the crest, so as
to form a fringe of flame along the ridge,
atop its prickly fur of conifers.

Below the water tumbled by and broke
upon those stones worn smooth by timeless flow,
and smaller stones were each encased within
a streaming orb, like glassy paperweights.

And set between the crest and stream there were
two white-frothed pillars—how they shook the air!
like two vast cords in thunderous resonance
to shroud the forest in a roar of mist.

Apathy

J Kramer Hare

No concept of malice
do termites posses

when molten metal
pours and fills
the tunnels of interred,
twisting kingdoms,

that the hidden
anatomy may be
displayed to students
or patrons of museums;

to them,
it is merely
an event.

But never speak
of leniency; we
are not forgiven,

we are merely
unaccused.

The Spirit of Life in Your Nostrils

Gaby Zabar

Halfway across the Manhattan Bridge, the Q rocked side to side as it slowed to a stop. A garbled warning hissed through the intercom. Waves crashed against the subway car's doors, and straphangers teemed back as water spilled in. With another burst of static from the intercom, the train's nighttime journey across the East River continued.

Talia and Lauren sat together. Lauren cradled a plain black backpack in her arms, while Talia gestured wildly. "We go in. I light the candle. You grab the garbage and run."

Lauren rested her chin on the top of her backpack and yawned. "The Yankee candle isn't going to work," she said.

"It's strong, really strong. Lavender vanilla." Talia nodded. Her colorful barrettes and piercings flashed under the train's fluorescent lights. "This time will be different, you'll see."

They waited for seven more stops as the train snaked under Brooklyn. When exiting, Lauren pushed her way out through the crowd, a continuous effort, while Talia followed effortlessly in the wake she had created. Crossing the station's growing puddles involved stepping on well-placed bricks and cinder blocks. Algae and unidentifiable slime coated the stairs to the street.

The distance from the station to their apartment building was a half mile, ten minutes spent walking through a fine, warm rain. A red-brick façade emerged through the trees that marked the southern end of the Parade Grounds. Those bricks enclosed their illegal three-bedroom basement setup, the one with a joke of a lease held by an existing tenant and sweet, sweet air conditioning. After seeing the apartment listing, which had been stapled to a rotting electric pole on Church Avenue, Lauren and Talia agreed to rent the remaining two bedrooms despite their reservations—it was the best deal they could manage.

Lauren sniffed as she stepped towards the side door that led to the basement. "Tonight's going to be bad."

Talia grimaced but didn't answer. In their situation, survival depended on nose blindness, rapid acclimation. She produced the keys from her nylon fanny pack; they were bound on a keychain accessorized with a rose quartz crystal and plastic pony beads knotted into the shape of a lizard. With more wrist movement than necessary, she unlocked the door, and the two descended a damp staircase illuminated by a single, dim lightbulb.

Their steps echoed. Lauren peered around the corner into the apartment. "He's not home. Do you think he's avoiding us?"

"Well, we've been avoiding him," Talia responded. "He probably doesn't want to make things awkward." As they entered the common area, the pillar of stench hit. The smell had weight to it, salt and rot, and it could be tasted. The intensity of the air would have been better suited to an abandoned cannery or failed aquarium.

Lauren flicked on the lights and headed straight to the small sliver of a window that was situated above ground level and below the ceiling. On tiptoes, she reached up and vented it open, pausing to notice the swirling rainbow of an oil slick on the asphalt outside. The reflection of a single flame flickered on the glass.

"I lit the candle," Talia said.

Turning from the window, Lauren nodded towards the kitchenette. "Let's get this over with."

Talia frowned. She opened the cabinet under the sink and waited for Lauren. A black plastic trash bag tilted out, and Lauren dove to catch it. Fish bones spilled out. Talia shoved them back in and tied the knot. Lauren lifted up the bag up the stairs and through the door, throwing it onto the street near the dumpster. Their nightly routine was well-choreographed.

Lauren stopped to catch her breath. Then, slamming the door behind her, she rushed back down the stairs to wash her hands. Talia had already scrubbed hers, patting them dry on a hot pink kitchen towel.

"I'm tired of taking out his trash." Fists clenched and jaw set, Lauren flopped onto the damp, threadbare couch. "Have you heard anything from Guy since this started?"

Talia's eyes darted to the refrigerator. "You mean the fish?"

"Yes, the fish."

"He hasn't texted me in a while." Talia produced her phone and scrolled through her messages. "The last thing he wrote me was from right after we moved in and right before all the fish."

"What'd he say?"

Talia imitated a baritone. "'Hey sorry for being MIA while you were unpacking. Had a life-changing experience in the Rockaways.'" She turned the screen towards Lauren to show that she had read the message word-for-word. In her own voice, thinner and higher, Talia continued, "Forgive me for assuming the 'life-changing experience' was ayahuasca."

"So what, he went on a retreat, and now he's a super pescetarian?" Lauren stood up. "We have a right to know what he's doing."

"He might tell us if we just ask."

"He's not around to ask. And if he was going to tell us on his own, he already would have." Lauren sat up. "We have to go into his room."

Talia winced. "I don't want to break any boundaries."

"The fish are breaking my boundaries."

"Let's text him first. At least," Talia said.

"Don't—" Lauren reached for the phone.

Crouching down away from Lauren's grasping arms, Talia completed and sent the message. Satisfied, she displayed her screen again. Two bright text bubbles had been sent back-to-back: hey me and lauren need to go into ur room to check smthng followed by sorry!!! its an emergency. Two siren emoji punctuated the last text.

Lauren groaned as she got up. She stepped into the hallway behind the kitchenette, hovering in front of the first door in a line of three. Her hand rested over the doorknob as she looked back at Talia. "Are we good?"

Talia set her phone down and picked up the candle's glass jar, holding it to her chest. The door to Guy's room swung open. Lauren pushed her way inside, Talia a few steps behind. The smell was worse, but the temperature was a few degrees cooler. His room was identical to theirs, a small box with concrete floors and brick walls. Guy had created a desk, bookcase, and nightstand out of assorted plastic milk crates and bungee cords. In the corner, cement blocks and plywood held up a box spring and a damp mattress.

Lauren gagged at the smell and pinched her nose shut. She flipped the light switch, but all the bulbs in the ceiling light fixture had burnt out.

Talia placed the candle on the desk and squeezed Lauren's shoulder. "Breathe through it. In through your nose, out through your mouth. You'll get used to it. It's better to adapt right away."

"We shouldn't have to 'adapt' to this."

Talia knelt on the floor. Beneath the bed was a minifridge, a humming black cube devoid of magnets or stickers or anything that could reveal a personality. Curiosity overcoming any previous hesitation to trespass, she opened it.

Fish, whole, still-fresh fish, were piled on the minifridge's wire racks, eyes and mouths open and blank. Talia closed the door. "There's more fish." She pressed her head against the side of the mattress and recoiled. "Eesh."

"What?" Lauren asked.

"His bed, it's drenched."

Lauren approached and pressed her broad hands onto mattress. Guy's bed was unmade, wrinkled gray sheets swept to the side. Tilting forward, she then swiped at the brick wall the bed was pressed against. Her fingers traced grout paths. "There's a leak."

Talia remained on the floor. "I wonder if it's from all the rain."

Plastic flip flops flopped off, Lauren climbed onto the bed. "But this place has flooded before, and this isn't that. The floor is dry. It's coming from—" She sputtered. "—Oh, oh. It dripped in my mouth."

Talia rose to her feet. "Are you okay?"

"I really don't know."

As Talia waited for Lauren to recompose herself, she stretched her back and shoulders, examining the ceiling. Talia pointed above Lauren's head and

cleared her throat. “Check the air vent.”

Where the far wall met the ceiling, there was a large, two-by-two-foot vent, sealed with a rusted grate. Lauren gathered up all the pillows on Guy’s bed and stepped on top of them to get closer. Drops of water pooled on the vent’s lower side and ran down the grout. Cool air flowed through. Something silver flashed behind the metal. Lauren stepped back.

Talia snapped a hairclip to smooth her bangs back. “Is it the air conditioning?”

“Yeah.” Lauren, crouched down and climbed off the bed, cautious. “We should call the super.”

“Victor never responds.”

“He likes me. I can tell.” Lauren left the room and returned with her own phone. She tapped a contact labeled Victor (super) and paused long enough for three rings and the start of the default voicemail message to sound. “Mmm, he’s not picking up. You think this is something we should report to 3-1-1?”

“Now? With everything? No.” Talia held her hands up, long fingers with short nails painted red. “They’re not going to care about air conditioning in an illegal basement apartment. Not when the city is sinking.”

“New York isn’t sinking; the ocean is rising,” Lauren corrected.

Talia rolled her eyes and then directed them back up to the large vent.

Hopping off the bed, Lauren breezed past Talia, out of Guy’s room. “I’ll get my toolbox.” Her voice echoed through the hallway.

Talia, left alone, pressed her hip against Guy’s desk and contemplated the flickering Yankee candle. The milk crates, which were filled with organized stacks of water-warped books and plastic toy monsters, cast rippling shadows onto the floor. A large, steel bowl in one of the lower crates glinted in the candlelight, and Talia knelt to investigate. Cloudy water filled the bowl halfway. A small, live fish, an anchovy or guppy, floated in the few inches of water and stared back at her. “Holy shit.”

With the toolbox nestled under her armpit, Lauren re-entered the room, fussing with a plastic flashlight. “It’s not working, and it’s not the batteries, I already checked. Do you have one?”

“A flashlight? No.” Talia faced Lauren, away from the live-fish-in-a-bowl. “I need to get one.” A long sigh from Lauren followed Talia as she picked up the Yankee candle with both hands and clambered onto the bed, holding it near the metal grate. “See? I was right about the candle. It will help.”

“Isn’t it hot?” Lauren asked.

“I can take it.”

“If you say so.” Lauren opened the toolkit on Guy’s desk and took out a flathead screwdriver. Holding it out in front of her like a dagger, she hauled herself onto the bed and stood, braced for the unknown. “We’ll fix this.”

What the candle lacked in scent, it made up for in luminescence. Talia

grasped the candle's jar with comfort, the same way she would hold a large mug of coffee or soup. While the metal grate was coated in rust, it was clean otherwise. The grout and brick surrounding it had started to crumble, and someone, Guy or some other previous tenant or visitor, had drawn a smiley face in ink below the vent. Lauren's hands trembled. She took the screwdriver and wedged it between the grate and the brick wall, prying it away. The grate fell away easily, landing onto Guy's pillows along with grit and dust.

"Huh." Lauren tapped the screwdriver against the brick. "It's meant to come loose, I guess."

"Maybe Guy was messing with it? To fix the air conditioning?"

Lauren judged the milk crates and cinder blocks. "If Guy was a successful HVAC technician, he would not be living like this."

"Fair." Talia moved the candle to illuminate the vent. "But he knows something about this place that we don't."

"That I can guarantee." Lauren took a deep breath and poked her head through the big hole in the wall. The vent was rough, unfinished. Behind Lauren, Talia guided the candle from one side of the hole to the other, angling the light in the best way possible. In the darkness beyond the wall, silver flashed.

"Did you see that?" Lauren asked. "A cockroach? A rat?"

Talia shook her head. "It was shiny. Pretty."

Squeezing in next to Lauren, Talia pushed the upper half of her body through the wall, leading the way by candlelight. Inside, just a few inches below the vent's lower edge, inky water rose and fell in waves under a dark sky. The air was fresh and chilled. Conditioned. There was no floor. There was no ceiling. Before them was an ocean. More silver flashes appeared. They moved together then suddenly switched direction. Each flash had eyes.

"The fish," Talia and Lauren said, together.

Lauren retreated from the sight, but Talia shushed her. "Wait."

A bigger flash, a quarter among dimes, surfaced. A shining, messy amalgamation of limbs and tail and fin shot up from the water, and familiar laughter, Guy's laughter, rang as he swam. His leg-tail arched, scales transitioning to flesh and back to scales again. Muscles and bones moved in the wrong-right places. Their roommate, lover of fish that he was, had become one.

Guy did not see Talia and Lauren, or, if he did, he didn't acknowledge them. He continued on, catching fish and in a netted bag wrapped around his torso. As Talia and Lauren froze in revelation, a particularly large wave approached the vent and crested. As the Hudson River empties into the Atlantic Ocean in the Upper Bay, here the Upper Bay emptied into a basement in Flatbush.

Talia shielded the candle's flame with her body and leaned in further, angling herself so that she could climb through the vent completely. Lauren

recoiled and grabbed Talia's free arm, pulling her away.

"Don't touch me," Talia said.

Lauren let go of Talia's arm. "It's not safe."

Another wave crashed into them, extinguishing the candle. A single silver fish spilled out of the vent along with gallons of water and stray tufts of seafoam. The fish got stuck and flapped in the narrow gap between Guy's mattress and the brick wall. Lauren coughed and wrung out her shirt. Talia set the candle jar down on Guy's milk-crate nightstand, and scooped up the struggling fish. She carried the fish off the bed and to the makeshift bookshelf, dropping it into the large steel bowl with the anchovy or guppy or whatever-it-was.

Lauren sighed. "He fucked with the forces of nature. He fucked with God."

Talia didn't look up from the bowl. "He should've told us."

"What do we do? Do we move?" Lauren ran her hands through her hair, detangling the knots that had formed.

Talia took a deep breath, in through her nostrils and out through her mouth. She didn't register the smell at all anymore. She sat on the floor, splaying her legs out. She mumbled. "We'd only have to move again."

"What do you mean?"

"Even if we moved—and we wouldn't get as good a deal ever again—we'd still have to move whenever the flooding gets worse." Talia reclined, lying down on the floor, stretching her arms behind her head. "It's not like we can control the ocean. It's going to go where it wants to go. It's already here."

Lauren frowned and perched on the edge of Guy's bed. "It's not too late. The city's still talking about building the walls, that dam. Or we can move out of the city. We can leave and go upstate with everybody else."

"Not everybody's leaving. People will stay. Some people have to stay."

"I can't stay, Talia."

"You don't have to." Bringing her hands in front of her face, Talia stretched her fingers far apart as if there was webbing between them. "I do."

"No. It's not worth it. Don't go have a 'life-changing experience' in the Rockaways too, if that's what it takes to stay." Guy's bed sagged around Lauren and creaked at her movement.

"Don't tell me what to do. I'm thinking about it."

Lauren walked out of the room without saying anything else. Talia remained on the floor, breathing deep, seafoam fading into thin veins around her.

A Haiku

Rick Hartwell

moaning notes of geese
victory sign in the sky
airborne semaphore

The Beach Man

Yuan Changming

At another antlike moment
All our footprints may be
Washed away, but the sand
Will persist long after the tide
Retreats to the heart of the ocean

In the Oxbow

Brandon Funk

Even though there is already too much, this too
is about suffering. Maybe it won't be
about that in time, and this creek will erode
enough of its clay bank to form an oxbow
independent of the riparian plain,
and in that bent, shallow, eutrophic
basin will emerge seemingly new life,
frantic spells of paramecium, tadpoles
among the milfoil and alligator weed,
little mudcats a kid catches and thinks
he's caught a tiny flathead, but in truth
a grown fish that subsists in a kid's world;
and surely there will be eels, slab-sided fellows
unable to reach the Sargasso, living
out their days on the crescent depths
eating silversides with the tacit yellow
pinstripe, schools of green sunfish
evading the eel who the bream have known
as one they could trust, unwavering predator
in the gray-green of the oxbow, mistaken
for a watersnake or cusk, the toothy finless
one northern people call dogfish, and when
a fisherman catches one he craters its skull
or wedges a stick in its jaw to drown it,
all without irony, as no death of a bowfin
ever made a midwesterner feel shame,
who casts back to the weeds for walleye
or specks that live out the August heat
in the oxbow sheltering under plagues

of lily pads wide as dinner jackets, blooming
above their leathery floats back to the mudline;
cattails from the litoral depths in the rear
erect their familiar toasted bulbs,
jutting, they catch currents that stir
the blackbirds with a dash of heart-paint
superior to the trailing wing; how other birds
must revel in their sheer numbers and how
the shot-red patch makes their black reflect
even less than it really does while they flout
themselves about lustily in every wetland,
there above the sandpiper
that emerges carefully onto the mudbank,
gaping at waterbugs and slippery swimmers
with a prominent nib and then slips away
silently like heat into the bush, leaving only
its little tri-pointed tracks in the moister silt;
on some years the oxbow floods
at the rate of its mother flowage, and she
spills new milk into it, and along with it
a few mooneye or pumpkinseed,
a few pernicious wingnuts from a maple,
trees that sprout with the vigor of sperm
in the abiogenic epoch of the satellite,
themselves not so different from frogspawn,
a broad number of them dying in the interest
of the narrow few, chosen only by natural law,
or as rumor would have it, by circumstance.

Vagrants

Brandon Funk

Today for the first time I saw a pair
of orioles late in the season. Far
into the long week of an April Easter
before sunset came two full-feathered
black and orange grackles to be fed.
With millet and sunflower seed
I ply them with what I think they want,
who with a lack of provision sent
out of Tamaulipas flappered and spent
in a fresh rotted tailwind off the gulf,
naïve of when to stay put or to send off.

Starlings at Sunset

Terry Tierney

Starling songs expand and bend:
their yearning and vibrant murmurs
pour into silence of parked cars,
grounded jets, muffled whispers
behind face masks and plastic shields.
You trace their chorus in the distance,
discrete notes too high for human ears,
and follow their Rorschach cloud
twisting above wires like flowing ink
projecting images on your skin:
silhouettes of discarded lovers,
tattoos you never purchased,
all those places you lived melting
puddles in the smoke of memory.
Kneading air, the flock folds back,
a film blending past and future,
flaunting their immunity to time,
your fears, like the prayers you scrawl
on vellum and pin to the temple door
until the freshening wind lifts the edges
and swirls your hymn into wings.

Weather

Ronald Geigle

Just inside your promise,
that slight pause, on the half beat,
easy to mistake, miss.

The brilliant morning sky, blue,
not a wisp of cloud.
But by afternoon, the heat always
rises at the ridge.
The threat of thunder never far away.

Bring a hat?
Delay for another day?
Did the little horse once again
give its bells a shake?
What choice?
What choice should I make?

no end

Ronald Geigle

i once read a poem with
no words
just buzzing of cicadas
no rhyme
just sissing of glacier water
no end
just rustling of leaves on
february oaks

January 1st , 47°, sunny, with a breeze

Mary Ellen Shaughan

My old dog, Zeke, and I often
walk along our rural road.
Even without motor traffic, it is never silent.
Today 100-foot trees on either side of the
road bend and sway, brushing fingertips,
whispering to each other like a circle
of old women at a sewing bee.
Every few minutes, someone drops
a needle, which lands silently
on the plush carpet far below.

Summer Leaves Us

Mary Ellen Shaughan

grieving for lost light, lost sun, lost heat,
wanting to curl into ourselves
like the fiddleheads we found
at the edge of the woods
all those many months ago,
or like the unborn child
you carried before the deluge, the flood, the blood,
before the universe re-claimed him,
leaving us with empty arms, empty hearts, empty hands
opening and closing, grasping, swimming
through the vacuum he was meant to fill,
passing each other time after time,
unrecognized and unrecognizable,
strangers on the leaf-strewn path leading to winter.

Brooks Blevins

An Interview with Noel Boyd Professor of Ozarks Studies and Author of *The History of the Ozarks* Trilogy

Up South in the Ozarks, there's a hard-to-put-your-finger-on sensibility in the air that's a rarity in other parts of the US, even, what once might have been called "Southern hospitality." If nothing else, it's a less superficial kind of living, living here—or it can be.

We tend to be more in touch with our roots, our neighbors, strangers, even—or we can be. Similarly, the writing and art being produced in the Ozarks is like a salve for the Hollywood condition, engaging with the world's noise in a manner that is just that: an attack, albeit in self-defense, mostly, not so much to remain relevant as to kindly ask us to slow. down. and take a breath; stop and smell those proverbial roses.

Up South, the pavement recedes like a wave washing back, revealing unexpected treasures down tangles of dirt roads. Yes, we may be barefoot; our necks may be red—sunburnt from long days in the fields making hay while the sun shines—but we wouldn't have it any other way. Join us in conversation with Brooks Blevins, Noel Boyd Professor of Ozarks Studies and author of *The History of the Ozarks* trilogy. We're glad you could make it. Kick off your shoes and stay a while.

Being a native of the area, what was it about your upbringing that cemented your love of the Ozarks?

I didn't realize I'd grown up in the Ozarks until I got to college. I remember finding Milton Rafferty's *The Ozarks, Land and Life* on a shelf in the library when I was twenty-one years old and leafing through maps. My home county (Izard County, Arkansas) was plumb in the Ozarks, but I'd never thought about being someone from the Ozarks before that minute. I suspect a lot of people can relate. I knew we were hill people, and there was always a strong family recognition that our lives and land were much different than those of the people who lived in the flat country of eastern Arkansas, what we called the "bottoms." But my home was not a touristy place and thus not branded with the Big O. When I thought of "the Ozarks" I thought of Mountain View, Arkansas—across White River from us and home of the Ozark Folk Center—or Springfield. I grew up watching Springfield tv stations, and it seemed like everything was Ozark, Ozark, Ozark, all the time. It was a powerful brand but not one we identified with, even though it would take at least an hour's hard drive from the family farm to escape the Ozarks.

That's obviously not an answer to the question you asked. But it's a little foundation for my answer. I've loved history for as long as I can remember—even started telling people in eighth grade that I was going to be a history professor, though I had no idea what that was. But for someone from the middle-of-nowhere Arkansas, a farm kid from a county with no stoplight and who had never been out of the central time zone, standard U.S. history always loomed at a distance that seemed insurmountable. I might as well have been reading about a realm in another dimension. I was first drawn to the Civil War. Nothing notable happened anywhere near where I grew up, but at least the stories tended to take place in locales that seemed familiar to me, in fields and pastures, on dusty trails in the wide-open countryside. I then latched onto Southern history as I groped my way toward something more personal and immediate. But it was an unlikely guide who ultimately opened the gate to the Ozarks. A young professor who had grown up in suburban New York City and had degrees from Harvard and Stanford was the one who encouraged me to write something on the Ozarks for my senior thesis—and that was all it took. I'm sure that vote of confidence in the worthiness of my home region, by someone whose opinion I valued greatly, was a major boost. But there was also a selfish indulgence, a sort of navel-gazing satisfaction, in studying the Ozarks as well. The discovery and exploration of self is a central component of any scholar's or writer's journey, and for me it just happened to turn into a very geographically focused one.

Tell us about the Ozarks Studies movement that seems to be happening.

I don't think I've ever before been asked about the "movement," so it's exciting to hear you identify it. I'm a historian first and foremost, so here goes. People have been writing nonfiction about the Ozarks for about a century now. Carl O. Sauer's University of Chicago dissertation-turned-university-press-book, The Geography of the Ozark Highland of Missouri, was the first major example when it came out in 1920, but the vast majority of works published over the next fifty years were not written by scholars. They were usually by people who chronicled the region's allegedly quaint and unique folkways, writers like Vance Randolph, Otto E. Rayburn, and Charles Morrow Wilson—good, smart writers whose primary goal was to entertain a popular audience and for whom the word "studies" didn't necessarily apply.

I would say the Ozarks Studies movement—as an academically based enterprise—emerged in the 1970s as one of many strands of the so-called New Social History. That movement had many different antecedents—and several of its practitioners were Marxist idealogues—but at its core New Social History was also tied to the folk revival of the era. It was about democratizing history, moving away from the traditional top-down, great-man approach and rewriting history from the various perspectives of the voiceless: women, minority populations of various kinds, the poor, and, in our case, places that were definitely not in the mainstream of American history.

Its locus in the 1970s and 1980s was Southwest (now just) Missouri State University in Springfield, the place that once called itself the Queen City of the Ozarks. Historian Bob Flanders and geographer Milt Rafferty were probably the two most essential scholars in kickstarting the movement. Rafferty's book, *The Ozarks, Land and Life*, was foundational when it came out in 1980. Flanders founded the Center for Ozarks Studies, which sponsored a variety of historical investigations and other projects, including the beautiful Shannon County films of the early 1980s. Flanders also hired and mentored a young man from southwestern Missouri named Lynn Morrow, and Lynn would go on to become the region's first truly productive, scholarly historian. The Center launched a semi-scholarly magazine, OzarksWatch, in 1987, and it continues today under MSU's Ozarks Studies Institute. There were other faculty members in Springfield who devoted scholarship to the study of the region, such as Bob Gilmore, Russel Gerlach, and Donald Holliday.

In those early days Ozarks Studies was most often focused on proving or celebrating the alleged uniqueness of the region. That's still part of the package—there would be no specialized study of a region if there wasn't at least some notion of regional distinctiveness—but in the 1990s and early 2000s scholars who studied the Ozarks tended to follow the national trend in regional studies that de-emphasized regional uniqueness and singularity and highlighted commonalities with the American story in general. Most of my own work has been written in this vein. These broad academic trends almost always follow societal shifts in general. Given the nation's hard turn in recent years toward division and separation, it's probably just a matter of time before the pendulum of interpretation swings back in the direction of regional uniqueness or exceptionalism.

MSU continues to take the lead in Ozarks Studies. The MSU-West Plains campus has for years sponsored an annual Ozarks Studies Symposium. The Springfield campus hired me as the first Professor of Ozarks Studies in 2008; we launched our Ozarks Studies Minor two years later. Under the leadership of Tom Peters, dean of the libraries, MSU rejuvenated its Ozarks Studies Institute in recent years, establishing the Ozarks Books series and co-sponsoring the Ozarks wing of the 2023 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC. Ozarks Studies has extended well beyond the MSU orbit. The new Ozarks Studies Association has hosted conferences in the three main states of the region: Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. A core of faculty and staff at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville have made great strides in Ozarks Studies. In 2016, the University of Arkansas Press launched two book series: the Ozarks Studies Series for new works of scholarship and Chronicles of the Ozarks for edited reprints of various "classics" on the region. Jared Phillips, an Ozarks Studies Series author (Hipbillies) and U of A faculty member, recently created the first Ozarks-specific course at the state's flagship school, and plans are underway to roll out an Ozarks Studies minor in 2025.

"The Ozarks" is hard to put a finger on, not just culturally, but even on a map. In Up South in the Ozarks: Dispatches from the Margins *you seek, in part, to disentangle this region we call home from "the South," "the Midwest," "the Great Plains," etc. We encourage our readers to pick up a copy of the book for a more in-depth answer, but what is it about the Ozarks that makes it so hard to categorize?*

I remember going to the Appalachian Studies Conference in West Virginia years ago. They threw us a bone and let us do a little session on the Ozarks. At the time I was teaching at Lyon College, a small liberal arts school in

Arkansas. In one of the presentations, the presenter played a clip of a video he'd made of an interview with two lead miners from the northeastern Ozarks of Missouri. My kneejerk reaction was to say, "These miners can't be from the Ozarks. They don't even sound like us." I'm from the southeastern part of the region, in Arkansas, and I identify as a Southerner. I grew up around people with unmistakable southern accents. To me, these miners sounded more like they were from St. Louis. And it makes sense, because where they were from is a lot closer to St. Louis than it is to my home down in Arkansas.

Accent is just one of many things that can differ widely from north to south and east to west in the region. The Ozarks just doesn't fit fully and neatly into any of the major American regional divisions. We're a little Southern, a little Midwestern, a little Western. However you identify in terms of national regions—Midwestern or Southern for most of us—you're probably marginal within that greater region. Midwesterners from the heart of the Midwest (wherever that is) might be a little suspicious of the claim to Midwesterness of someone from far southern Missouri, whose accent might sound increasingly Southern the farther north you go. Same for me. I really had my Southernness challenged when I went to grad school at Auburn. We're Southerners in Arkansas, but we ain't nearly as Southern as the folks down in Alabama.

Lately, I've learned a lot about my own ancestry, my family having been scattered primarily throughout Kentucky before moving to Missouri. When did settlers first migrate to the Ozarks? And, while their reasons for coming here initially are undoubtedly pretty obvious—the area's abundant waterways, fertile soil, and versatile hunting options—how has the ecology of the region changed since then?

If we count the hill country near the Mississippi River in places like Ste. Genevieve, Perry, and Cape Girardeau Counties as the Ozarks—and I generally do for historical and geographical purposes, though not necessarily for modern cultural purposes—the first non-Native settlers came in the last few years of the 18th century. Largescale settlement in the hills didn't commence until after 1815, however, and many parts of the Ozarks weren't settled until the mid-1800s.

The ecology of the region has changed in many ways. I would say the most visible change—say, for someone observing from an airplane, which was much more difficult to do in pioneer days—is the presence of manmade reservoirs around the region. The Ozarks is not a place of natural lakes. If you see a body of standing water larger than your car, you can bet it wasn't there 200 years ago. It's a complex topic that entire books can be written about, but the Ozarks, once renowned for its beautiful, clear streams, today has few of those left—at least the ones that flow headwaters to mouth without interruption.

There are other significant changes, too. The virgin forests (both pine and hardwood) that greeted early non-Native settlers are gone, with the exception of a few small, inaccessible stands here and there. Most were cut during a timber boom that lasted from roughly 1880 to 1920, and then the timber companies closed up shop and moved on to the next bonanza region of the country. Despite the absence of virgin timber, though, the Ozarks may be more forested today than it was two centuries ago. The earliest non-Native settlers found lots of open country, vast stretches of rolling, grassy areas pocked with thickets of trees. Settlers often referred to these landscapes as barrens, or "barns" in the dialect of the day. A tradition among Native Americans of lighting the fields and woods on fire shaped the landscape. With years of fire suppression by national and state foresters and the removal of millions of acres of land from cultivation since World War II, trees have taken back much of the rural Ozarks.

Back in my grandpa's day, he made a living by hunting, trapping, and selling furs all over the Ozarks. He gardened, gathered, and canned everything—you name it—from green beans to tomato juice to elderberry jelly to apple sauce. He hunted ginseng by day, fished most afternoons, and took out his hounds and hunted raccoons by night. He knew the names of every tree by their bark and leaves, as well as every bird by its birdsong, without having to lay eyes on any given bird. He was a talented man, albeit talented in ways lost on most of us today. The truth is, the modern Ozarks and modern Ozarkians, myself included, have lost touch with much of our inheritance, even if by no fault of our own. What can we do to remedy this?

It would seem that the answer is simple: slow down; take time to smell the roses. Why, then, don't we? Why isn't it that simple? And what does this mean for the future of the Ozarks? We learn what we need to survive in our world, and, barring some apocalyptic, technology-neutralizing event, the ancestors' skills that we admire and covet are attributes we do not need anymore. Not just in the Ozarks but practically anywhere in our modern world. I didn't know your grandpa, but if he was anything like my

grandpas—and it sounds like he probably was—there were skills that he did not inherit that his grandparents would have known. There were things that he learned that his grandparents never would have dreamed of: how to drive a car, how to manage a checking account, how to work a telephone. That's simply the way of any non-static human society. The vast majority of us adapt to change willingly, even if not immediately; otherwise, humanity would not have survived and evolved the way we have. (With our sentience comes a remarkable ability for self-loathing. Maybe our desire to return to the beginning, to start all over, emanates from our tendency to hate ourselves and what we've become.)

But with our sentience comes a remarkable ability for self-loathing and guilt. I suspect it is a natural human response, at least for a segment of the population, to feel somehow ashamed over what we leave behind. I call it the primitivist urge, and its influence can be seen throughout modern human history, from music to religion, from politics to art. It's what causes us to look back, to revive, to preserve, to recreate, even as we go forward, progress, modernize, change. It is this collective urge or recurring spirit of the times that spurred the folk revival of the 1960s/70s, the rebellion against suburban sameness and mass-produced monotony and the embrace of the rooted and the authentic. It caused disenchanted young people to learn and play the gritty sounds of the Delta and the Ozarks, to ditch their Levittowns for rural communes or remote mountain farmsteads. It's what caused them to envy what your grandpa had to the point that they emulated his existence. It took a while, but that urge has come back around half a century later. For some it is once again prime time to reject modernity and trade the digital for the analog. It's a new era of regret and recovery, rebirth and revival. As with all the ones that came and went before, most will decide that the old days are better left in the past. But some will carry on grandpa's tradition until the next urge and pass it on to a new generation of searchers.

Books, TV shows, and other popular culture tend to paint the Ozarks in a less than flattering light—as a bunch of "hillbillies," "rednecks," or drug users and/or manufacturers, etc. Conversely, histories like those you've compiled over the years provide a breath of fresh air and even breathe life back into the region. Would you mind pointing us and our readers in the direction of other historians, writers, and artists whose work do not rely on the usual, overdone tropes which, in our opinion, take away from the richness of our little corner of the world?

My mentor in the world of Ozarks Studies, Lynn Morrow, was the first historian to devote a career to a sober analysis of the Ozarks, while also critiquing the stereotypes that for years discouraged serious scholarly inquiry. His best-known book is *Shepherd of the Hills Country*, a history

of early tourism development in Branson. Lynn told me once that he'd thought about writing a comprehensive history of the region years ago, something similar to my *A History of the Ozarks* trilogy, but that there were too many facets of the region's story that he couldn't work up an interest in. I questioned the last part when, on many occasions, I contacted Lynn to ask him about some obscure event or person, only to discover he'd already published an article or compiled a fat folder of research. He really is the first dean of Ozarks Studies.

At first blush, novelists Donald Harington and Daniel Woodrell might be mistaken for peddling "overdone tropes," but anyone interested in the literary Ozarks has to start with these two masterful writers. In his best works, Harington skillfully and humorously deconstructs the scaffolding propping up regional stereotypes. His magnum opus, the deceptively titled *The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks*, is still my favorite novel of all time and one of the few laugh-out-loud books I've ever read. Harrington deserves a bigger audience. Woodrell never fails to tell a great story in a high-octane way and with an economy of words. His characters and settings may resemble regional stereotype, but they're never dishonest. My favorite Woodrell book is always the most recent one I've read.

Among older nonfiction books on the Ozarks, you can't do better than Robert Cochran's biography of Vance Randolph. It's one of the first things any student of the region should read. I also have an affinity for a couple of late writers who are mostly forgotten today. Take a look at William Childress' *Out of the Ozarks*—as poetic as prose gets—and Ethel Strainchamps's autobiography, *Don't Never Say Cain't*. The fact that I've never encountered another person familiar with her trenchant humor is terribly depressing. There has been a surge of good nonfiction books on the Ozarks over the past decade or so: Kimberly Harper's *White Man's Heaven* (on race-related violence), Matthew Hernando's *Faces Like Devils* (about the Bald Knobber vigilantes of southwestern Missouri), and J. Blake Perkins's *Hillbilly Hellraisers*, a book that uses sophisticated analysis to provide a nuanced history of rural opposition to the government. Of course, there are now more than half a dozen books in the Ozarks Studies Series at the University of Arkansas Press, which I mentioned earlier. Most are histories, but there is also Phillip Howerton's *The Literature of the Ozarks*, a wonderfully insightful anthology of some 200 years of regional writing, and Sarah Neidhardt's beautifully written, engrossing family history/memoir *Twenty Acres*.

As a journal of arts and letters, we're as interested in creative endeavors as we are with more straightforward academic works. What's one of your favorite Ozarks folktales?

The truth of the matter is I didn't grow up with Ozarks folktales. Like someone from New York or L.A., the only regional folktales I know are ones I've read in Vance Randolph's books. I'm not certain when families quit passing down oral legends of Jack tales and the giant Blinky Bluejohn, but it was before I came along—and I'm almost certain before my parents did. Instead of trotting out a retread from *Who Blowed Up the Church House* or *We Always Lie to Strangers*, I'll share a couple of stories that were told "for truth" in my family, not folktales per se but the kind of story you were more likely to hear in my childhood days in the 1970s and 80s. Living on a little cattle farm, we spent a lot of time building and fixing fence, usually my grandpa, dad, my little brother, and me. It was rare indeed for us to drive posts (pound a sharpened cedar post into the ground with a 13-pound maul on a hickory hand) without my grandpa recounting the story of Aunt Maude. It was Aunt (pronounced to rhyme with paint) Maude's job to hold the post steady in the shallow hole made with the long, iron tamping pole we called a crowbar, until a few licks into the ground allowed the post to stand on its own. One day the maul flew off the handle and struck Aunt Maude right between the eyes. Aunt Maude was a tough old bird, it seems, for she went back to work after she come to. At least that's how Grandpa always told it. To this day I have no idea who Aunt Maude was, and I'm not convinced my grandpa knew either. I don't think he even had an aunt or great aunt named Maude, but it was a story we all came to expect. Never a reassuring one for the guy steadying the post, though.

The other one is more of a community story. Again, I'm not sure who the people in the story were, though I always assumed they were from Izard County. In the mid-20th-century, when it was common for tens of thousands of people to leave the Ozarks on annual treks to the migrant labor fields and orchards, the most common destination for folks from my native Izard County was Washington state, especially the apple orchards of the Wenatchee and Columbia River valleys. After they married, my parents discovered that their families had worked on the same orchard, probably living in the same migrant shack, in different years when they were kids. Not surprisingly, I and many of my friends grew up hearing lots of stories about far-off central Washington, even though few of us had ever been there. According to one community story, three rather half-witted backwoods brothers decided to see what all the fuss was about one summer and piled into their car for the trip to Wenatchee, a two-and-a-half to three-day drive in the best of circumstances. Late in the evening on the third

day, the brothers topped a steep hill overlooking White River. They were still in Arkansas. As they descended the hill, the brother in the backseat leaned forward and, staring intently at the little town in the distance on the far side of the river, said with some hesitation: "Boys, does that look like Batesville to you?" (It was, of course.) The brother behind the wheel, exhausted from a full day's drive and offended at the implication, replied curtly, "Why, hell no! That's Kenatchee." In the time and place of my childhood, driving fence posts and traveling out west to find work were more relatable activities than most recounted in the tall tales and folklore Randolph collected before World War II. Should these stories survive another generation or two, they'll enter the category of folktale—if they haven't already.

What aspects of the Ozarks have most recently caught your attention? And why?

There's a couple of developments that I've been following for years, so there's really nothing recent about the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the region and the phenomenon I call the "two Ozarks"—the rapidly growing affluent Ozarks of northwestern Arkansas and, to a lesser degree, the Springfield area contrasted with the vast remainder of the region, which tends to be very rural, poor, and lacking in opportunity. The latter has been around for a while, though the economic bifurcation seems to be hardening. But in terms of more recent things, let's talk about the disappearance of the hillbilly. He's not quite as rare as a black panther, which biologists assure us do not exist, but he's getting there. I don't think this is so much a recent development as something I only truly grasped in the last couple of years. Just try to find a souvenir black felt hat, corncob pipe, or hillbilly shot glass in Branson. There was a time not too many years ago when any convenience store or tourist trap in the area boasted an entire aisle of such items, along with calendars and postcards featuring the Seaton family and a selection of fine reading material ranging from hillbilly joke books to treatises on outhouse architecture. And the venerable Ozarkland franchise? A spy tells me that the Osage Beach location still stocks a few things for the connoisseur of cornpone, but my own recent reconnaissance of the Kingdom City store, where suburban St. Louis gives way to the rural hill country, turned up not a single hillbilly doodad or knickknack.

Why has the stereotype that once defined the region's image and fueled its tourism industry suddenly gone the way of the passenger pigeon? And why did it happen when it happened? I've got theories, ranging from Crystal Bridges-style rebranding to significant demographic alterations nationwide. But I'm still fleshing them out. In many ways the region's hillbilly stereotype has been the catalyst for the Ozarks Studies movement. The region's history and image have been so obscured by the stereotype that some scholars (myself included) have approached the study of the Ozarks as, first and foremost, a chance to set the record straight by telling the real story of the region. It makes you wonder . . . If there is no longer a prominent hillbilly image out there, what is the glue that will hold Ozarks Studies together?

What are you currently reading?

I was tempted to pick up the Hemingway I quit reading about 100 pages in a couple of months ago and scan a few paragraphs to give you a more impressive answer. But the truth is I rarely read hifalutin literature or even books that anyone has ever heard of. But I'm not ashamed to admit it, and here's why. About 25 years ago I was watching an old C-SPAN television show called Booknotes. The guest was historian and JFK biographer Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Host Brian Lamb asked him what books he had most recently read, and any active scholar could appreciate Schlesinger's candid response. He told Lamb that when in the process of researching/writing a book (as he was at that time) he didn't have the luxury to read anything that wasn't directly related to his subject. As a young scholar I identified with Schlesinger, and in the years since, as I've careened from one project to another, I've seen this play out in my own life and career. Fortunately, there are occasional gaps between projects, and I try to fill those gaps by reading fiction or popular nonfiction that have no particular bearing on my research. In one such gap last year, for instance, I read Eli Cranor's first two novels, Monica Potts's *The Forgotten Girls*, Jon Meacham's biography of Lincoln, and Jim Cobb's biography of legendary southern historian C. Vann Woodward. But in recent months my reading has consisted of a heavy dose of old newspaper articles on newspapers.com, letters and other documents from archival collections of former Missouri politicians, and lots of academic books on environmental history and the rise of New Right conservatism. And, of course, that aborted attempt to get through a Hemingway novel.

Something Ancient

April Tierney

The first autumn of our daughter's life,
my husband shot a deer and an elk,
we were bewildered by our good fortune.
We spent days butchering in the kitchen
while our six month old baby played at our feet,
while friends and neighbors came over to hold her,
play with her, to help wrap the meat, cut the bones,
cradle the heart and liver, sing, tell stories and

shed tears over the two blessed animals/ancestors
that would grant us life for the following year.
I watched the ordinariness of such a thing
as it landed in my daughter's being, how obvious
it was to her that we would participate in the making
of life and death, the offerings, the stripping of hide
from sinew encased flesh, the pungent aroma and
deep red blood on the counter, on her parent's hands
and clothes, the piles of bones, the endless hours of work
and exhaustion, the way grief and gratitude were cousins
chasing one another around the kitchen and falling down
in fits of breathlessness, of wonder, of the truest kind
of ceremony she had ever seen. If we want to eat meat,
this is how it is done, said her tiny, primal body.
If we want to know our humanity, this is also how
it is done. We will not outsource the killing,
we will not pretend death does not exist
when it is the reason we exist.
I saw all of this in the easy way she moved through
those laborious days and I learned something
ancient about my capacity as a Mother.

So, in the second autumn of our daughter's life,
I carried her on my back up and down hills
to the place where my husband knelt
beside the doe he had recently shot—
our friends were standing around the deer's
fallen body too, making offerings and heaving
their sorrow, their praise into the frosty air.
Our daughter watched as her daddy slid his knife
along the length of the doe's soft, brown belly,
as he found a puddle of milk waiting inside,
as dusk settled deeper into that late-November sky,
as he steadied his hands and worked with tears
streaming down his cheeks, as the world stopped
for a time so we could remember our place within it.
And much later on, after we ground the meat,
after we scrubbed the counters and carried the hooves
back out onto the land, after we prayed over those hooves,

after we watched grief and gratitude, those wild cousins,
make a wreckage of our days, we grilled steaks
and sat together at the table, our daughter
eagerly reaching for the plate, her hands so open,
so new, reaching over and over again from the plate
to her mouth, like a ritual, like she understood
what all the sorrow and effort was for
like she had seen the body of this animal,
the bones and the blood, like she would not
stop eating until she felt our ancestor
stand up and leap inside of her.

The Sky is Falling

Morganne Howell

2006

"What are you worried about?" my mother asks me across the patio table. She looks at my father for reassurance, who studies his stein.

Charred fragments of the forest float down from the overcast sky and land in the crisp foam of his beer. He picks them out with a finger and wipes his blue jean pant leg. The wetness streaks alongside paint and oil stains from his garage.

"You've always been so fearless, Scout," my mother says, shaking her head. Her eyes are glassy. She squints, and the mascara on her lower lashes clumps together against the moistness. "You've always been the fearless one," she says, sniffing.

From the deck at the Cactus bar, we watch a red sun glow behind gray clouds of ash. Today, dusk came early. The wildfires on the other side of the summit pass doubled in size and the wind brought the heavy smoke to us.

As I drove to meet my parents for Sunday dinner, I talked to Toby, who was called with the other volunteers to the firestation. "They need my backup more than you do," he said, his steady voice echoing from the car speaker.

The clouds release dust in the shape of pine needles and small leaves. Remnants of the forest litter the air, which smells like campfire wood and whiskey. Black particles sprinkle the plastic white tables around us. The sunlight fades into a sickly hue, casting the foothills in sepia.

I rest my hand on my overround stomach.

"I've never been fearless," I say.

"You were such a brave girl, doing your karate and hiking with your brother's troop."

"I'm tired of hearing you say that, mom."

"It's true! You were braver than all those boys."

"You aren't listening." I put my hand on my forehead, feeling smothered by the dense air, by their denial. I start to take a deep breath and stop.

"We should go," I say, beginning to motion toward our waitress.

"I think what your mom is trying to say," my father rests his forearm in a line across the table. He extends his pointer finger with the bruised nail, and then curls it into his fist. "Is that you shouldn't be afraid," he says. He gently bangs his clenched hand on the table. "We are here for you," he says, like he is reading a car manual.

“Thanks.” I rest my hand on top of his. “To be clear, I’m not afraid of actually having a baby,” I say. “I’m afraid of bringing her into this.” I gesture toward the dark sky with my other arm.

“What do you mean?” my mother narrows her eyebrows and moves her head toward me. “Are you talking about that global warming again?” she whispers.

“The fires?” my father asks. He takes a sip of his beer, pulling his hand away from mine to wipe his mouth.

“We’ve always had wildfires here,” my mother shakes her head aggressively, and runs a hand against the back of her neck, massaging the little blonde hairs standing up on her skin. “You grew up with them. You were never afraid of them before.”

“Every generation has its fear,” my father says, flicking carbonized bark off our table. “The future always looks grim.”

My mother nods along quickly and watches me, her nostrils flared and eyes flicking back and forth between mine.

My father chops a straightened hand down into the table. “And we find a way,” he says with his unfaltering certainty.

“I think it’s different this time, dad,” I say, cupping both my hands on top of his.

Crab Lovesong

Eric Fisher Stone

The female blue crab must molt to become soft enough to mate, and unlike a male, can only shed once in her life.

–University of Maryland Center For Environmental Science

She comes, spilling perfume
into the bay. Her suitor tastes
her body's syrupy resins
and dances, fanning lapis arms
with red poker pincers.

Undressing her molt
the first and last time
for love, soft as fish,
his claws clasp her
to shield her from the surf

or serenade her shell.
The gravid moon lugs tides
as they spazz in spidery pleasure,
her cornflower-blue back
yielding to the same song

that makes flowers bloom,
beckons geese northbound in spring,
before she descends depths
dappled with eggs to hatch
thousands of fidgeting snowflakes.

Lofgeornost

Eric Fisher Stone

Beowulf's last word means most eager for glory,
though the gulf coast toad seeks anonymity
and crickets juicy as mangos. Warted
like some goblin dumpling, your soft stone

sits in moss-slick ditches, your eyelids
helming black mirrors to marsh grass
where Grendel might burble up
from salted Texas jetties. Teach us

your humility, jumping plum, rubbing
between streams without seeking power
beyond the kingdom of toads, delved
in worm-deep dirt, your mud throne

an empire of grubs, craving crawdads,
not fame. While Beowulf boasts
his slaughter of sea serpents, your midnight trill
rattles through gutters for a mate.

Beached Whale Syndrome

Peter Mladinic

This isn't an orange fish phone call,
sleek, darting to and fro in a tank
in a second floor apartment, green treetops
out the windows.
On one end of the line a beached whale.
A big, heavy call over a pay phone
the voice through the receiver like the lap
of water on a lake shore,
only the whale washed up in salt water,
its sentences no exuse.
A voice with wings.
Lulling, simultaneously unsettling,
like being "on hold"
or straining to hear a loved one whose voice
is weak from illness.
Not a fleeing call that moves back and forth
in a tank in a room like a closed casket
in a funeral home.
Rather, a call—big, round, slick, with gills,
washed ashore.
You're upright, listening in the foyer
of a rooming house.
Out the window
a plastic bag snags in a bare branch.
You're looking out where water meets sky.

Ivorybill

C.D. Albin

Extinct, they say,
despite the folderol
that descended
on swampy Arkansas
some twenty years ago,
reporters hyping the return
of the Lord God Bird.
I envisioned a lonely fowl
secreting among cypress
several counties south,
well back in the Big Woods.
Avian Mohican, I thought,
beautiful bird of doom,
although Audubon sketched
three birds on one trunk,
all pounding staccatos
in common purpose,
every movement
chorused to survival.

A Different Street

Heather Sager

I let myself look
down a different street.
Clanging spoons
dangle on a tree bough.
A little house with pinkish trim
stands in sundown glow and I see
a brick side of a house,
the warm orange light flickering
on the orange and brown bricks,
shadow shapes moving
from trees blowing in the wind.
I notice a yard's overturned
basketball hoop, painted happy
stones formed in a circle,
and a toppled flower pot
with ages of dirt growing inside.
Pink flowers beam
out of a rusty grate near
someone's lush yard. Two houses
face a stony path between them.
A boy is selling chocolate door-to-door.

Authors

C.D. Albin is the author of the poetry collection *Axe, Fire, Mule* and the story collection *Hard Toward Home*. For many years, he has taught writing and literature at Missouri State University – West Plains.

Fern G. Z. Carr is thrilled to have one of her poems in permanent orbit around the planet Mars aboard NASA's MAVEN spacecraft in addition to being published over seven hundred times worldwide here on Earth. The recipient of multiple honours and awards, Fern composes and translates poetry in six languages including Mandarin. She curates her YouTube channel at youtube.com/@ferngzcarr and her poetry collection is entitled "Shards of Crystal". www.ferngzcarr.com

Yuan Changming grew up in rural China and has published 15 poetry collections in English. Early in 2022, Yuan began to write fiction, with short stories appearing in *Bewildering Stories* (Canada), *Lincoln Review* (UK), *Paper Dragon* (US), and *StylusLit* (Australia), among others. Currently, Yuan is working on his trilogy.

Jim Daniels' first book of nonfiction, *The Abridged Book of Water*, is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press. His latest book, *The Luck of the Fall*, fiction, was published by Michigan State University Press in July. Recent poetry books include *The Human Engine at Dawn*, Wolfson Press, and *Gun/Shy*, Wayne State University Press. His next chapbook, *Comment Card*, Carnegie Mellon University Press, will be published in 2024. A native of Detroit, he currently lives in Pittsburgh and teaches in the Alma College low-residency MFA program.

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J Kramer Hare is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he lives and writes. When not reading or writing he enjoys rock climbing and listening to jazz. His work has appeared in *Uppagus*, the *Ulu Review*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *The Road Not Taken*, *Untenured*, and *Quibble Lit*. He can be found at kramerpoetry.com.

Elisabeth Harrahy is an Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, but in her spare time she likes to drive her 1967 Plymouth Satellite, search for stoneflies in cold-water streams, and pull all-nighters writing poems and short stories. Her work has appeared in *Zone 3*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *I-70 Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *PassengersJournal*, *Ghost City Review*, and elsewhere, and has been nominated for Best of the Net.

Rick Hartwell is a retired middle school teacher (remember the hormonally-challenged?) who just moved to northern Illinois from southern California (?) with his wife of fifty years, Sally Ann (upon whom he is emotionally, physically, and spiritually dependent), one grown daughter, and ten cats! Like Blake, Emerson, Thoreau, and Merton, he believes that the instant contains eternity.

Morganne Howell lives in Oakland, California. Her writing draws on her experience of growing up in the contemporary West. She has been previously published in *ARTWIFE Magazine*.

Alice Lowe's flash nonfiction has been published this past year in *Tangled Locks*, *Big City Lit*, *ManifestStation*, *Change Seven*, *Bluebird Word*, *South 85 Journal*, *Eunoia*, and *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*. She has been twice cited in Best American Essays. Alice writes about life, literature, food and family in San Diego, California. Read and reach her at www.aliceloweblogs.wordpress.com.

Peter Mladinic's most recent book of poems, *The Homesick Mortician*, is available from BlazeVOX books. An animal rights advocate, he lives in Hobbs, New Mexico, United States.

Michelle Cacho-Negrete is the author of *Stealing; Life in America*. Four of her essays have been among the most notable of the year, two have been selected for Best of The Net. She appears in five anthologies. She is published in *The Sun, Under The Sun*, *North American Review*, *Able Muse*, *Delmarva Review*, and many others.

Heather Sager lives in Illinois where she writes poetry and fiction. Most recently, she has contributed poetry to *The Dawntreader*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Bending Genres*, *Does It Have Pockets?*, *The Stray Branch*, *The Nature of Things* (Lone Mountain Literary Society), and more journals.

Mary Ellen Shaughan is a transplanted Iowan who now lives in the hills of Western Massachusetts. She writes fiction, memoir and poetry, and is nearly always surprised – sometimes happily – by what comes out of her pen. Her writing has appeared in numerous journals, and her first book of poetry, *Home Grown*, is available on Amazon.

Susan Shea is a retired school psychologist, who was raised in New York City and now lives in a forest in Pennsylvania. In the past year her work has been accepted by a number of publications including: *Across the Margin*, *Ekstasis*, *Feminine Collective*, *The Avalon Literary Review*, *Persimmon Tree Literary Magazine*, *Military Experience and the Arts*, *Triggerfish Critical Review*, *Green Ink Poetry*, *Litbreak Magazine*, *A Time of Singing*, *Gastropoda* and others.

Eric Fisher Stone is a poet and writing tutor from Fort Worth, Texas. He received an MFA in writing and the environment from Iowa State University. His publications include three full-length collections of poetry: *The Providence of Grass*, from Chatter House Press, *Animal Joy*, from WordTech Editions, and *Bear Lexicon*, from Clare Songbirds Publishing House.

April Tierney is a poet, activist, craftswoman, mother, and lover of stories. She is the author of three full length collections of poetry, including *Memory Keeper* (Wayfarer Books 2022), and a contributor to several anthologies. She has been featured in *Orion*, *Deep Times: A Journal of the Work that Reconnects*, *The Wayfarer Magazine*, and *Real Ground Journal*, among others. April lives in Lyons, Colorado with her husband, young daughter, mischievous dog, and wide web of kin. For more information visit www.apriltierney.com.

Terry Tierney is the author of *The Poet's Garage* and the novels *Lucky Ride* and *The Bridge on Beer River*. His poems appear in *The Bellevue Literary Review*, *Remington Review*, *Reed Magazine*, and *Rust + Moth*. His poetry book, *Why Trees Stay Outside*, is coming from Unsolicited Press. Website: http://terrytierney.com.

Diane Webster's work has appeared in *El Portal*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Verdad* and other literary magazines. She had micro-chaps published by Origami Poetry Press in 2022 and 2023 and was nominated for Best of the Net in 2022.

Gaby Zabar is a writer who lives in Southern California. Find her on the internet at gabyzabar.com.