Stonecrop Review

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ISSUE 4: FAUNA

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Pigeons drinking from fire hydrant, Seal Beach, CA by Roger Camp

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A Note from the Editors

"While I love all of the pieces selected for this issue, there is one line from one of our poetry selections that keeps playing over and over in my head. It's from Padmini Krishnan's poem "Under the Toddy Palm Tree in Ooty":

> *You shiver, not due to the mild gust of wind,*
> *but the intense competition*
> *in every living species*
> *for survival.*

These feel like apt words for the times we are living through. On a global level, we've seen a pandemic that has killed 1.25 million people and pushed the economy into a recession the likes of which have not been seen since the Great Depression. Here in North America, where I live, we've experienced ravaging wildfires, the fight for Black lives and racial justice, and a historic election.

What relevance, then, do fauna—birds, animals, and insects—have for these times? During lockdown, many residents of towns and cities noticed that animals were taking advantage of the relative peace and quiet. In "Love. Fur. Feathers" Swati Singh shares her coronavirus nature journal with us and the comings and goings of the local monkeys, street dogs, and cows; while Sheila McEntee watches rose-breasted grosbeaks from her window and tracks the movements of a black bear in her town via Facebook updates.

There are stories from a pre-COVID world in this issue too, stories that remind us of the ways in which animals can bring people together and inspire the best in us. In Ishita Sinha's piece "Turtle Walking" we meet the "turtle walkers" of Chennai, who are trying to save olive ridley turtles from the light pollution that leads them astray. Meanwhile, in Richard Risemberg's short story "The Crow Tree," a murder of noisy crows bring a group of neighbors together. Sometimes, however, humans simply get in the way, as in Diane Lefer's short story "Survival Skills," in which a gathering crowd of onlookers disturb a wayward mountain lion, leading to disastrous consequences for the narrator.

On occasion, there is a luminosity to the encounters between humans and fauna. We see this in Rachel Sloan's "Five Ways of Looking at a London Fox" when the eponymous fox flares into view, casting a vivid orange glow. And in Anne Whitehouse's poem "HAWK SHABBAT" when a Cooper's hawk visits a Manhattan apartment block: *Its black pupils rimmed in gold / pierced me with inexpressible wildness, / as fierce and strange as God's angel.*

Yes, it can sometimes feel as though the world is locked in an intense battle for survival, but it is my hope that the pieces in this magazine will bring a sense of calm in the current chaos.

Naomi Racz | Editor

“The sound of gulls outside my window usually wakes me up at daybreak. When I peel open my eyes, I'm greeted with a sky full of wheeling, diving seabirds shrieking into a coastal dawn.

I love it. The calls root me firmly to my surroundings: a small, coastal city tucked into an inlet off the Baltic Sea. Pre-COVID, I was frequently on the move for work, away as often as I was home. Now, deep into a second lockdown that has immobilised much of Europe throughout the winter, I feel embedded in this place, intimately immersed in my surroundings—especially the birds and other urban fauna—in a way that was just not possible in that previous lifetime.

This opportunity to gain a more intimate acquaintance with the nature nearby is one that many have had this year, as the pandemic has brought the world as we knew it to a standstill. In the midst of loss, uncertainty, and change that is both too abrupt and not fast enough, the constant and reliable presence of the birds outside our windows has become a source of incredible calm and reassurance.

This issue is—almost accidentally—an ode to that nature. When we were planning out the themes of our upcoming issues, we didn't know that Issue 4: Fauna would fall in the middle of a pandemic. And yet it paints a powerful picture of our relationships to the animals that move through our urban habitats. In this issue you'll find crows, foxes, hornets, monkeys, and bears roaming through our contributors' stories and images.

Nature—birds in particular—carried an additional significance this past year in calls for racial justice. Following a racist incident against a Black birder in Central Park, New York City, and as demonstrations against police brutality erupted in Minneapolis and around the world, the #BlackBirdersWeek campaign emerged online to give visibility to Black birders and nature enthusiasts Nature is too often a predominantly white space and we are delighted to include conversations with two of the co-organizers of Black Birders Week in this issue.

I also invite you to pause and look around at what lies outside your window, at your doorstep: what new vibrant worlds have you become acquainted with in these strange months?

Holly McKelvey | Illustrator

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ISSUE 4: FAUNA

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Five Ways of Looking at a London Fox

Rachel Sloan

Rachel Sloan is an art historian, curator and writer with a particular interest in landscape in art and literature. She had her short story "The Judgment of Paris" Highly Commended in the 2020 Bridport Prize. Born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago, she has called London home for most of her adult life.

1

The first time, I didn't see. I heard.

I was twenty-four, sharing a house in Stoke Newington with seven other students. Of the house, an unlovely Victorian semi-detached, the less said, the better. Its only saving grace was an exceptionally long garden that backed onto Abney Park Cemetery, one of those enchanted spaces where the imagined boundary between city and nature thins to nonexistence. It had all but ceased to be a working cemetery and was slowly transforming into a wood, the graves slipping from sight beneath skeins of ivy, bindweed and bramble.

In the small hours of a spring morning, my sleep was pierced by a wail that resembled nothing I'd heard before: an amalgam of cat, dog, seagull, and human baby, blended with something unearthly I couldn't pin down. I was awake in moments, heart pounding. I stumbled to the window, thinking it was a person in distress, but couldn't see a thing.

Over breakfast, I asked one of my housemates if she'd been awakened as well. "Do you have any idea what it was?"

She was incredulous at my ignorance. "Foxes barking. What'd you think it was?"

But I'd had no idea. During a childhood and adolescence in the northern suburbs of Chicago beloved of John Hughes, I'd encountered other animals—deer, squirrels, raccoons, the possum that passed into family legend for appearing on our porch at the precise moment during a Seder when the door was opened to greet the prophet Elijah—

but never once a fox. The only foxes I could claim as acquaintances were Reynard, Fantastic Mr Fox, and the wise fox in *The Little Prince*, creatures of ink and paper who spoke perfect English or flawless French.

Foxes awakened me on several subsequent mornings in that house, but now that I knew what the sound signified, I was thrilled. On walks through the cemetery I always kept my eyes trained for a flash of flame-colored tail or a pair of glinting eyes.

But not once did I see one.

2

Eight years passed. Several moves later, I was south of the river, in Crystal Palace. And at long last, I began seeing foxes.

Perhaps I should say that I began learning how to see foxes. Given how brightly coloured their coats are—they ought to stand out in sharp relief against both undergrowth and pavement—they're remarkably difficult to spot, masters of disappearing in plain view. You don't see a fox so much as sense its presence. And then, if you're lucky, it will allow itself to be seen.

My first fox I glimpsed from the northbound platform at Gipsy Hill station, half-hidden in the long grasses of the embankment as if woven into a mille-fleurs tapestry, its ears pricked for something beyond the range of the rumble of the trains and the shuffle of commuters. My second I saw padding up the steps from a back garden as I walked home one night up Gipsy Hill, tail like a flag, eyes gleaming in reflected streetlight. It moved swiftly yet without any sense of urgency or flight. There was something innately feline about its noiseless paws, the carriage of its head, the delicacy of its walk. It struck me then, and countless times since, that nature had played a cruel trick on the fox—a cat forever trapped in the body of a dog.

From then on I treasured every occasion a fox deigned to cross my path. Sometimes it was a sleek, elegant animal with a resplendent coat, gliding past like a proud and mysterious emissary from another world, and I cherished it as a reminder that humans' dominion over London was nowhere near as complete as many would like to believe. It seemed entirely unbothered by my presence, but not in the fashion of a tamed animal. I never heard one bark after I left Stoke Newington, but I couldn't help thinking that if one of those foxes could speak, it would probably say *I know you're there, and I don't care. You go your way, I'll go mine.* Sometimes, though, it would be a bruised, scraggy scrap of a creature, its coat dull and ears tattered, slinking out from behind a bin, a poster child for everything people hate about city foxes—and I had no illusions about the indignities a fox must endure, relative to its country cousins, to scrape out a life on city streets.

On one of my father's visits I mentioned in passing my regular encounters with foxes, only to discover that he was firmly in the camp of fox-haters. "They're vermin, pure and simple," he scoffed. And he launched into a tirade on their filthy habits—raiding bins, leaving their stench everywhere, leaving half-eaten bird and mouse carcasses in the field across from his house.

I seethed, unsure where my anger on the foxes' account ended and where it began on my own account. Ever since I was a teenager, he'd always found ways to belittle things that were meaningful to me, so this was just another in a long line. I wanted to ask him why he didn't stop to think about why foxes

have been reduced to eating rubbish to survive, or why he didn't have a problem with his cats, well-fed and cosseted, doing in that field exactly as the foxes did. I wanted to know why he could only see the bad in foxes, and none of what makes them extraordinary. But all those questions froze in my throat. My only response was mulish silence. I've never been able to meet his scorn with anything other than stubborn passive aggression.

Many times after that conversation I've wondered whether my affinity with foxes owes something to them sharing one of my worst character flaws.

3

My commute home from work starts with a walk down the Strand, one of my least favourite London streets. Unless I have an errand to run, I turn my back on it as quickly as possible and escape down Savoy Street to the Embankment. The shortcut is oddly little used, and despite being a stone's throw from the city's geographical heart, most evenings I have the street to myself.

One winter evening I was coming down Savoy Street, wrapped in my own thoughts, when a flicker of movement that I felt rather than saw stopped me in my tracks.

A fox materialised from a doorway less than four yards ahead, padded to the middle of the pavement, cocked its head in my direction—and stared.

It was winter-thin, its coat bleached of colour by night and streetlamp, but its eyes shone like polished onyx. Motionless, we regarded each other.

I have no idea how long the encounter lasted. What was probably a matter of seconds acquired, in memory, the unreal clarity, the breathless sense of time suspended as in a dream.

An eternity or an eye-blink later, the fox lifted its muzzle, sniffed at something only it could perceive, and melted away as silently as it had come. As if it had never been there at all.

4

In 2016, an otherwise horrible year, one small bright spot: I got tickets to On Blackheath. The day I went, Belle and Sebastian were headlining.

An outdoor stage on a barren stretch of heath once haunted by highwaymen and plague dead didn't seem a promising venue for a band whose fey, fragile songs sound as if written to be played in a student bedsit to an audience of three or four. But my doubts vanished within moments of them taking the stage. By some generous magic, they transformed the place into their front room in which several thousand people somehow become a handful of lucky guests.

Toward the end of the set, Stuart Murdoch sat down at the piano and a shiver of pure happiness ran down my spine as he coaxed out the first chords of "Fox in the Snow".

When I first heard the song seventeen years ago (in a ratty student apartment, in fact), I'd yet to meet a fox. Now, as Murdoch's reedy tenor—wisps of gossamer wrapped around a filament of steel—transported us from a summer night to a snowy field, it seemed to me that Belle and Sebastian, the patron saints of the shy,

of the misunderstood, of anyone unable and unwilling to squeeze themselves into the pigeonholes society metes out to them, are the best, and probably the only, band on earth capable of distilling the essence of a fox into a song. And maybe especially the essence of a city fox: constantly buffeted by life's indignities, determined to survive on its own terms.

Later I joined the stream of people drifting down the hill to the nearest station. My vision was hazed by the last traces of Pimms and afternoon heat, by exhaustion and music-induced euphoria, but I know my eyes didn't deceive me: a flash of eyes, then a flicker of tail, disappearing into a hedge. A song made flesh.

5

Two autumns ago, my work offered me the chance to realise a lifelong dream: a trip to Japan. I was to travel out in June and stay for a week. In a fever of excitement, I pored over guidebooks and blocked out an extra ten days to travel on my own.

Ever since childhood, I've been fascinated by Japan. Not least, now, because I've discovered that it is a culture that understands and appreciates the fox perhaps better than any other. In Shinto, snow-white foxes are the servants and messengers of Inari, the god of rice, and shrines to Inari the length of the land are populated by scores of stone foxes. In folklore, kitsune (fox spirits) are shape-shifters and tricksters, equally capable of protective loyalty, retributory mischief and terrifying malevolence. They can take on human form and they can just as easily possess other people's bodies: one of the recurring themes in these tales is the porous line separating human from fox.

One of Hiroshige's *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* shows a skulk of kitsune spiralling around the trunk of a bare tree under a starry New Year's Eve sky, each carrying before it a floating wisp of foxfire, each fox itself like a flame or a drop of molten gold. It's the most perfect representation I've ever seen of foxes in art and I vowed to track down an impression of the print. I daydreamed of glimpsing a Japanese red fox darting among its stone cousins in the grounds of a shrine, of watching one vanish down an alley in some out-of-the-way corner of Tokyo or Kyoto.

I could not have known then that the world was heading toward a pandemic that would strand us all where we stood, and Japan feels farther away now than ever. As I write, I am still at my desk at home. At least I'm sitting next to a window with a decent view, and the sun is shining in a cloudless sky.

Beyond the window, out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of red-gold and look down just in time to see a fox slip from between two parked cars. It stops just long enough to sniff the breeze, and then it's gone.

Under a Toddy Palm Tree in Ooty

Padmini Krishnan

Padmini Krishnan was born in India and now resides in Singapore. She writes free verse poetry and short stories. Her works have appeared in *The Drabble*, *Plum Tree Tavern*, *Terror House Magazine*, and *Shamrock Haiku* among others. Her e-chapbook was recently published in *Proletaria*.

Have you stood under a toddy palm tree

on a misty night?

The night where small ants stealthily

climb on the bark to taste

the juice. Many of them drown

in the sweetness and those few alive

escape to their holes.

Striped bumblebees poke their heads

out of their adopted holes

for a share of the juice.

Weavers squeal, wild and fiery.

You imagine their wild eyes,

immobile crests,

quivering contour feathers

and sharp beaks ready to

tear open the fruits.

You shiver, not due to the mild gust of wind,

but the intense competition

in every living species

for survival.

Survival Skills

Diane Lefer

Diane Lefer's books include the story collection, *California Transit* (Mary McCarthy Prize, Sarabande Books). Her novel, *Confessions of a Carnivore* (Fomite Press) was inspired by her relationship with a drill baboon at the LA Zoo where she's served on the behavioral research team for over 20 years.

Re: Claim 19-A376852110-06

Believe me, I understand that what with the fires, floods, and mudslides you people are overworked and stressed trying to process claims—though the Woolsey fire occurred more than seven months ago so you really should be done with that by now, and I do appreciate that your actuarial tables have yet to figure out how to factor in catastrophic climate change, HOWEVER, I have been waiting a very long time for monies due me and I am in desperate need of my insurance payout without further delay!

When I phoned this morning, someone whose name went by too fast for me to catch seemed to be saying you require further detail about the incident. I have already provided information, police records, and receipts but I am now complying by writing out the most detailed account humanly possible to refute any imputation of "recklessness on the part of the policyholder." Though I fear this may be TMI, I trust you will come to understand I behaved in the most reasonable, rational, and responsible way given the extraordinary circumstances. I do hope your company will at last be satisfied so that I may have satisfaction.

The events of June 28, 2019

The day started as usual. My cat Ozzie woke me a little after 5:00 a.m. I fed him, showered and dressed, put up my coffee and carried it upstairs to the balcony with Ozzie padding along behind me. My morning routine, dependent only on weather, is to sit there with my phone (to check email and take a quick look at the news) and put on my dark glasses as the sun comes up. I keep a pair of binoculars handy so I can watch the birds at the feeders in my neighbor's yard across the street. There's usually not much variety: sparrows,

mourning doves, hummingbirds, lots of hummingbirds when they're not chased away by the crows. I enjoy watching them. So does Ozzie, though he watches indoors from behind the sliding glass, making little sounds of excitement. Sometimes his teeth chatter, which I think is his hunting instinct being frustrated.

These details may seem irrelevant to you, but I want my money. I'm someone who's always played by the rules and paid my bills. I bundled home and auto, and my (exorbitant) premiums are up-to-date, and now I am being careful not to leave anything out to make it clear that of all the people on the scene, I was without doubt the most responsible (in the good sense) person present.

The morning in question, June 28, I became aware of movement in my neighbor's tree. This attracted my attention though I assumed it was a squirrel. What next caught my eye were the flowers, white blossoms and smaller pink and red ones. Strange, because my neighbor's tree does not bloom. It is tall and sturdy and definitely not a floral tree. It took me a moment to realize the white blossoms came from a nearby magnolia. It had insinuated its own branches, and pink and red bougainvillea had invaded, climbing the stone wall and twining up and around the trunk where it all looked beautiful though none of it belonged. Then I saw her.

First just her eyes, the flick of an ear. Then the pink nose and underneath it the white patches that looked like a bow tie flanked with black. She seemed so calm, at ease, in the crotch of the tree, almost hidden by the flowers and leaves, one leg flung carelessly over the branch, one paw lightly touching the bark further from the trunk where the bough grew slender.

My first thought was *I hope she's not here to eat the birds*. ("What is it with old people and birds," says my niece. We all need contact with Nature and OK, I'm older than she is but that doesn't make me old!) I reassured myself a mountain lion is not a house cat and surely would be after larger prey. I know, and maybe she understood, that deer do come this way. (Why else would the neighbor have fenced the saplings?) If not a deer, maybe a squirrel, a possum, a raccoon. A coyote? Now *that* would be interesting—dog versus cat!

Please note, I had no prior knowledge of the animal. I called her "she" to remind myself to be cautious. A female with cubs—kittens?—is more likely to be dangerous. You see, I was, from the start, very aware of the potential threat.

Then there I was, just like the people I love to criticize, in contact with the digital instead of the thing itself as I looked for answers on the web. *Puma concolor*, the old scientific name was *Felis concolor*. More commonly we say *cougar, puma, mountain lion* and I will use these names interchangeably in this report. (There are still other names but as they are not current in Southern California I won't bother with them.)

I love cats, all or most, though I have to say lions and mountain lions are not my favorites. Think of a cat, a house cat, bobcat, lynx, leopard, tigers with their lush fur and their faces, their sweet little faces. African lions may be king, but I'm sorry, to me they look moth-eaten with ratty manes. Mountain lions? Sleeker but still not what I call gorgeous, though through the binoculars this one did have a smart, intent cat face. In her own way, she was magnificent even if not beautiful, and I was stunned into stillness to see her so close.

In an entirely spontaneous way I whispered, "Where did you come from, sweetheart?"

From what I'd just read, I guessed she might have come from the other side of the freeway and now was wary of crossing back again. Other cougars have been hit and killed by cars: P-52, P-18, and P-23. Or maybe the fire that ravaged her old territory and killed P-64 and P-74 left an imprint of terror. Maybe she was looking for food. Live food, because cougars, like P-47, P-3 and P-4, died from ingesting rat poison in the food chain. (If you've wondered, the P stands for *puma* and the numbers are for the ones tagged and studied.) Most deaths do come from cougars fighting each other—the males, of course, so it's possible my "she" is a "he," but they wouldn't be fighting over territory if we hadn't left them with so little.

Honestly, even if *Puma concolor* is not my favorite cat, we still have to take some responsibility—though in general we humans tend not to and frankly that's why we carry insurance. Be that as it may, I cared about that animal in the tree, on the branch.

If you want to know what kind of tree it was, I can't help you there. If you could look up close through binoculars, as I did, and past the shroud of bougainvillea, you'd see heart-shaped leaves with jagged edges. Deep vertical scoring on the trunk—and if you think that's from the cougar's claws, you're wrong. Apparently, mountain lions don't climb. They leap.

In the calm morning, she was simply breathing, I was watching.

That was the right thing to do, to admire her from a distance, but I admit I wished there were a way we could establish a relationship. Not as friends, not as owner and pet, but simply with me as an ally, one who could impart survival skills:

- cross beneath the freeway through a culvert;
- only eat animals you catch and kill yourself;
- remember it's humans that have taken your territory, not other cougars, so don't let them turn you against each other.

Still, who am I to tell a mountain lion how to live? She was alive. She obviously had all the survival skills she needed.

This gives you some sense of my state of mind when my phone pinged. Up to that point, understand, I was watching her without interfering or disturbing her in any way. An alert from Nextdoor: *Mountain lion spotted at 17243 S. Manderley. Keep your pets and children indoors!* Interesting that pets come first. And shocking that, in spite of this warning, within minutes, the looky-loos began to arrive, many with small children in tow, including two little girls wearing *I* ♥ *P-22* T-shirts.

That's when I went outside. Someone had to protect the children. Mountain lions will rarely attack a full-grown human, but children, little children, are recognizably prey. I tried to talk to the parents. *Mountain lions are dangerous. P-22 killed a koala at the zoo. This is not the way to love wildlife* (which, by the way, is how I feel about the moon. What about this 50th anniversary hoo-ha! Why on earth did we ever go there? Scuffing it up with footprints! Love it from a distance, please! Why couldn't we just leave it alone?)

So I was thinking about all the damage we humans do, and all the while the crowd kept growing. Ten,

fifteen minutes later there were close to fifty people, maybe more, on the sidewalk and on my lawn, taking pictures with their phones and calling others—and those others kept coming. All I wanted was to convince them to leave. They heart cougars. Taking selfies like crazy—themselves in every shot, turning their backs on her. That's why I called 911. All I wanted the police—or Animal Control or Fish & Wildlife or whoever's responsible—to do was please please come and disperse the mob.

This was a rational action to take even if there were unfortunate and unintended consequences, which, I note, may actually have resulted from the Nextdoor alert. It's unfair and highly speculative to say what happened was because of me.

You can't understand how crazy it got: police cars, sirens, news helicopters overhead, news crews with their sound men and their cameras. When the leaves on the tree started to shake, I tried to warn people.

"Look, she's getting agitated. Can't you see the way she's twitching her tail? Whatever happens," I said, "don't run!"

That's when I met Harry Knox, who turned out to be a little guy in a Hawaiian shirt. I don't know how familiar you are with social media of very minor appeal, he writes the Hard Knox blog, which started out with him writing about his divorce. The reason everyone in the neighborhood knows him, at least by reputation, is he's been knocking (hard) on random doors and

interviewing people about how they've overcome adversity. In this case, he'd merely tapped—not knocked on—my shoulder.

"Hey, can I ask you why not?" he said.

"Because if you run," I said, "it's only natural for her to chase you."

Talking to him, I had to shout. The noise was deafening. For an animal used to solitude, it must have been unbearable. The cougar crouched, eyes taking us in, body tensed, ready to pounce. The Fish & Wildlife guy stood there with his tranquilizer gun, the cop drew his weapon, people were pushing, arguing, shouting *Shoot it! Save it! Take it to the Zoo!* As though cages are the answer to everything! I was shouting too, *Leave her alone! Go home!* and at the very moment when she took a graceful leap out of the tree and onto the street, people scrambled to get out of the way while I cried out *Don't run!* and my mind lit up in bright LED lights with the words I'd just read: *Leave the mountain lion an escape route.*

Thank God for the app on my phone. The garage door slid up and in she ran. I brought the door down again behind her. We were safe and so was she. Which mattered. Apparently we're sending the cougars of our region into what scientists (if you believe them) call a *vortex of extinction.* They're doomed, but saving her—one vulnerable individual—was the least and only thing I could do.

"Is your car in there?" shouted Mr. Hard Knox.

Of course. I wouldn't park a new car on the street. I think I have a discount with you based on having a garage.

I didn't expect complications. I had just learned that cougars are more closely related to house cats than they are to lions. And I've lived with Ozzie long enough to know a cat likes an enclosed space. It makes them feel secure. Once inside my garage, I expected the traumatized mountain lion would calm down.

Where I went wrong: animals are individuals, not just representatives of their species. (I'm sure you work the same way, basing risk on average expectations.) As for P-Something in my garage, we could hear her frenzy even over the helicopter noise. We could hear the scratching sound of her claws on metal, the thumps, the banging and smashing.

"Cougars are homewreckers!" Hard Knox shouted in my ear. "Do you keep the door to the house locked?"

At first I assumed he meant the front door. Then OMG, the door from the garage! My own survival instinct (which extends to those I love) kicked in immediately. I rushed inside to get Ozzie (and also my external hard drive, which I placed inside the go-bag I keep for earthquake preparedness). *Ozzie! Ozzie! Here, kitty kitty kitty.* I shook the canister with her treats. I could hear the cougar's powerful body slamming against the door. *Ozzie, where are you hiding?* I looked under the furniture. I ran to the bedroom and that's where Officer Aguilar caught up with me and grabbed me. (You can read his report.)

Officer Gerard Aguilar threw me over his shoulder and carried me outside. I was still screaming for Ozzie. To my relief, we saw him flee past our feet just as the officer set me down on the ground and slammed the front door behind us.

Now you may not know this, but cougars don't roar and cougars don't purr, but they can scream and they sound like a person when they do and that was the sound we heard when, I guess, she shattered the door and got into the house.

Through the picture window, we saw her invade the living room. She froze just for a moment, stunned by the impact, maybe even injured. Then the rampage began. She tore up and overturned furniture, knocked paintings off the walls, scattered books, broke my late mother's teacups and my antique clock, smashed the black clay pottery from Oaxaca, and flung about the decorative pillows until the stuffing flew out, and unfortunate as all this was for me, part of me, yes, wanted to cheer her on. We destroyed her home and so much more, didn't we?

What did Malcolm say about the chickens coming home to roost?

When she came right up to the window, Officer Aguilar drew his gun, but the frenzy was past. She was calm now. She regarded us coolly. She stuck out her tongue and licked the window, from affection or in mockery, I don't know. She closed her eyes, tongue pressed against the glass and I couldn't help it. I started to laugh.

I laughed the way Ozzie makes me laugh, oh, probably a dozen times a day with his video-worthy goofy charm that somehow coexists naturally with his inherent dignity, and I longed for him. He could be lost, he could be scared, and at that moment nothing was more important to me than finding my cat.

That's why, for what happened after that, as I've explained before, you'll have to rely on other witnesses and official reports. I understand it was several hours before Fish & Wildlife managed to enter my home, tranquilize the intruder, remove her and release her back to some canyon where she belongs. The crowd dispersed on its own, chased away by boredom, while I spent those hours walking the neighborhood—walking, obviously, because deprived of my car—calling *Ozzie, Ozzie, here, kitty kitty kitty,* searching for my beloved animal companion in vain.

By the time I returned to what had been—and I hope will again be—my home, only Officer Aguilar remained. He explained my house would have to remain sealed until damage, safety, and habitability could be assessed. Please understand, I'm someone who never expected to be maybe, nearly, even temporarily, homeless and now I need to get home. What if Ozzie comes back and I'm not there?

Once again, I am submitting copies of all receipts, and have added one I inadvertently omitted on July 1, $1,537.23, which covers the motel I'm staying in while waiting for the cleanup, rewiring, new interior door hanging, and necessary debris removal.

So why did a mountain lion wreak havoc in my home? Considering the threat to an endangered species as well as imminent danger to the people congregated in the area, I did what any reasonable human being would have, or should have, done.

It's easy to blame me and ignore the history and the context, some of which I've alluded to above. I do believe there are worse ways to die than at the hands—jaws—of a cougar, a quick suffocating grip on the neck, probably more humane and merciful than we deserve. But I'll shut up. I'll sit and watch the birds. I can go along to get along. Just give me the money.

Crow in Alley, Columbo, Sri Lanka by Roger Camp (bio on page 76)

Crow Says Love

Branden Printup

Branden Printup is an editor, writer, and expat living in Tokyo. He hosts the *Indie Book Review* podcast and he hosts a booktube channel, both about writing and small press literature. When he's not writing, or researching writing, he's lost in thought at an art museum. Or eating ice cream.

There was a murder, so it had to be Wednesday. Their feathers, a black shine. Hogging the sidewalk. Thick necks and unyielding stares, dagger beaks. Crows. Death's fowl incarnate.

Or so I'd heard.

Multiple accounts of thieving crows snatching sandwiches from family picnics in the park. Cornering small pets before pecking their eyes and lifting their wriggling bodies skyward in victory. Signs and warnings littering parks and forested areas in bold font. Letters blood red and ominous. Tales from friends and acquaintances confirming the danger of soulless crows. Crows that damage and take. Crows that terrorize. Crows of Tokyo that live up to their murderous name.

It was the way they intimidated the grade school children every Wednesday morning. Snacks clutched tight in their quivering palms. Red candy tips peeking out from their hands like tiny bullseyes. Little thumbs and fingers for the murder to shred in battle for their food. Brooding like long forgotten old men while we all hurried past, and continuing their assault on the blue braided nets protecting the neighborhood trash once we'd left. White plastic bags bloated like lazy bodies swollen in the sun. The innards, half empty food containers and brown rotten fruit peels, strewn in the street. Even cars went out of their way to avoid the crows, keeping constant watch while they pilfered and feasted. Beaks stabbing, and stabbing, and stabbing. Merciless crows at play.

Or so I started to believe.

Until I saw her socks, that is. The curve of her foot clothed in cream and accented with red roses. Her navy skirt chasing the breeze from the passing trains. Her tan shoes with tiny silver buckles placed neatly against the wall, away from the edge of the platform where she stood, waiting. The groan of the bullet train, one of the fastest on the island, the one that doesn't slow down on its race past our station, announcing its close proximity. Strands of the woman's hair panicked across her face in the growing wind.

Her cream and rose covered toes squeezed the platform's edge in anticipation. And before the bullet train rounded the final bend, before the woman made up her mind, before the rest of the patrons awaiting their train sank deeper into their smartphones in ignorance, a crow, blacker than ever, perched itself on the platform beside her. Its stare was threatening and deep. The woman's toes quickly unfurled from the platform's edge in her stumble away from the crow. It watched her scramble from its presence, as lazy as a weekend morning in bed past noon; stoic when the bullet train jolted the platform, scattering papers and empty food wrappers.

Before the last car passed, the woman had hidden her cream socks back in the bellies of her shoes and disappeared down the stairs towards the station exit. The crow, apart from its murder, took flight. The power of its cry against the busy city demanding reverence. Undoubtedly returning to the dismembered bodies of trash bags in the street.

Love. Fur. Feathers

Swati Singh

Swati writes of the world around us with a spirituality lens. Words in *Stonecrop Review*, *New York Spirit*, *Science of Mind*, *Saevus Wildlife*, and more. She's either lost in nature or finding nothingness while sprinkling happy-dust wherever she can.

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"These monkeys are such a menace!"

I was irked. The monkeys had thrown the red-vented bulbul's nest onto the ground. It had been kept so neatly under the canopy of leaves on the branches of the lanky guava tree. For four days, the female bulbul had been weaving the nest from twigs and rootlets, while her partner patrolled. Thankfully, no eggs had been laid yet. I put it back carefully between the forked branches, as if nothing had happened, but wondered if the bird could instinctually tell.

Monkeys have been regular unwelcome visitors for several years. The guava tree in the garden used to be a source of joy, even for our neighbors, as the bounty was shared with all in the fruit season. Then the monkey families came. They can be found around all twenty houses on our street, but our tree is always the first to get ransacked. Outside the fruit season, they attack marigolds and other dainty flowers and plants. My flowerbed cries silently. I know, I anthropomorphize it.

Monkeys are considered a descendent of the god Hanuman. For that reason, many people feed them on Tuesdays. Mostly bananas. There is a distinct day, color, planet, and animal for each deity in Hinduism. So, if Mars is malefic in your horoscope, a pandit or astrologer will advise you on a remedy in appeasement of the planet.

Monkeys must be aware that a grand feast occurs every seventh day. There must be stories in their clan about God's graciousness and the reason behind the number seven and bananas.

I lived with my grandparents in their house from age nine till seventeen. I think this small nature-clad space played a major role in shaping my thoughts about nature and its beings. I moved to the city for college and jobs but kept returning for visits whenever I could. Lockdown extended the stay for over three months. During that time I relived the past and sewed mindful moments into memories.

Our entrance gate used to have a hanging Rangoon creeper. Pink and white flowers embellished the whole outer wall of the house and greeted everyone passing by. It made the house easy for the postman and first-time visitors to identify—*That flower-vine house.* Over the years, the growing monkey families destroyed the creeper and, eventually, my grandparents got tired of chasing the monkeys away and decided to chop off the creeper and put up barbed wire. I protested and grumbled. The monkeys managed to find a way into the garden regardless.

After the nest incident, I was scared for the purple-rumped sunbird's nest on the lemon tree, in which the eggs had already been laid. Lockdown life had me listening to the birds' sonations, watching the ways they woo each other, and monitoring the progress of their nest making. A pair of common Mormon swallowtails indulged in a salsa-like courtship ritual dance. A nature journal was being written.

I reassured my heart that the thorny branches of the lemon tree would deter the unruly monkeys. Squirrels playing tag distracted my chain of thoughts as one of them bounced off our staircase. *Ouch! Wow! Squirrels can be clumsy too, huh?*

Critters have adorned this garden for as long as I can remember. When I was ten or eleven, I thought about catching the sparrows that used to flock here to eat grains. I wanted to see them up close, chat with them, tell them that I wanted to be their friend so they could hop around me unafraid. I tied a rope to a small wicker basket, placed it over the grains, and sat hiding in a corner. It was a naïve plan; it didn't work.

But feeding birds became a ritual. Bird watching became a healing therapy. Crows were sharp. Pigeons were little dumb goons who used to scare the other little birdies, and then act innocent. Mynahs were fearless folks, voicing their opinions, fighting for their democratic rights. I know, I anthropomorphize them.

There is a visitor at the gate. A young black calf. He visits daily and halts at the houses that offer him food, like a saint asking for alms. I put a bucket full of water and a few chapatis out for him. Male calves are an unwanted lot. Cows and buffaloes can be milked. Not the male calves. Hence, they are abandoned by their owners on the streets. Often, it is because of the financial burden they cannot afford.

In India, the streets are home for many animals. There are charities, NGOs and animal lovers who take care of them. Feeding, spaying, treating, and more. With growing awareness, thankfully, people are adopting street dogs as well. But with around 30 million street dogs and 5.5 million cattle, it's a mammoth task. Strays in India need efficient policies, more abundant resources and, most significantly, empathy.

Recently, I realized that strays are an unusual sight in many other countries. I've made friends on every street I've lived on over the years. A mocha-coloured, grumpy old dog called Odin was my favorite. It took a truck-load of patience before he finally wagged his tail and came leaping at me. It was such an achievement.

Imagine, you walk into a room full of people and the dog chooses you. That kind of feeling.

"Is it the monkey again?!" I said aloud and jumped from my chair.

I took a long bamboo stick to shoo her away, but couldn't. I saw her eyes wandering all over for food. She was drinking water from a bird bowl and looking in all directions. I am not sure who is accountable for the unchecked growing monkey population or if it is anyone's fault at all. I am not sure if she is the one who threw the nest. All I do know is I offered her two bananas. She left to eat them in peace, away from the eyes of her troop perhaps.

All I know is, she is a soul and empathy cannot be partial.

The red-vented bulbuls are now parents to three tiny hatchlings with a voracious appetite. I am keeping an eye on the tree.

#BlackBirdersWeek

Conversations with Co-Organizers Deja Perkins and Chelsea Connor

Black Birders Week emerged as a hashtag and online campaign in May 2020 in response to a racist incident in Central Park, New York. Christian Cooper was out birding when he had the police called on him by a white woman after he asked her to leash her dog. This incident, which occurred on the same day as the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, underscored two painful realities: that green spaces are often predominantly white spaces, and that white spaces can be very unsafe for Black people.

In response to Christian Cooper's experience, a group of Black STEM professionals quickly organized a week of powerful online events to highlight Black birders and increase visibility of Black nature enthusiasts in green spaces. The events included hashtags like #BlackInNature, which encouraged Black nature lovers to share photos of themselves outdoors, and #BlackWomenWhoBird, which highlighted Black women birders and fostered discussion around the intersection of their identities as Black birders and as women in STEM. Livestream discussions and Q&As with prominent Black birders also featured in the week, as well as the opportunity for members of the public to share pictures of birds they'd seen (#PostABird) and get help with an identification.

The events were a whirlwind of joy-filled nature photos, frank and open discussion of the dangers involved in going out in nature while Black, favorite bird species, expertise on all things avian and more, and plans for birding get-togethers when the pandemic is over. Subsequent #BlackIn___ weeks celebrating Black people in STEM have been inspired by #BlackBirdersWeek, including #BlackInAstro, #BlackInGeoscience, and #BlackBotanistsWeek.

We were excited to speak with two of the co-organizers of #BlackBirdersWeek, Deja Perkins and Chelsea Connor, who gave us behind-the-scenes looks both into the week and its organization, as well as into their love of birds and their own work in STEM fields.

A conversation with Deja Perkins, Co-Organizer of #BlackBirdersWeek

Holly McKelvey: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me! Can I ask you to introduce yourself: where are you based in the world, what are you currently working on, and what's your relationship to birding?

Deja Perkins: My name is Deja Perkins. I am originally from Chicago, Illinois, and I am currently based in Raleigh, North Carolina. I am a recent graduate of a Masters of Science program at North Carolina State University in their Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation program, and my research really looks at urban birds and the differences in bird diversity across different socio-economic neighborhoods as well as how citizen science projects could potentially be biased.

HM: What are your first memories of falling in love with nature?

DP: I remember as a kid, I loved animals. For me, growing up in Chicago, a lot of that meant seeing those huge megafauna at the zoo. But I just had fond memories as a child driving along this one street called Lakeshore Drive and always seeing Canada geese in huge numbers out by the lakefront. So I know that was my earliest memory with birds and I just knew I always wanted to work with them.

It was at an internship that I had in Minnesota, at Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, where I got my first taste of the huge diversity of birds that

are out there. I had no idea that there were 10,000 species of birds and that birds can be found all over the world. Working at Minnesota Valley, it was my first experience at an urban refuge and the fact that just minutes from the airport there was this safe haven for birds, a migratory hotspot—I remember seeing bald eagles flying over my head every day or seeing sandhill cranes or hearing people get excited about the indigo bunting and having people rush to a certain location to go see a black-crowned night heron.

It was just a really cool experience getting to see so many different birds for the first time, and hearing my first owl . . . After that I was really just hooked.

HM: What would you say is one of your favourite bird species?

DP: Oh, it's so hard for me to pick. There are so many—SO many!—different birds and so many different cool adaptations, but I think for me the birds of prey have a special place in my heart just because they were the first birds that really got me hooked. They're so large and you'd never really expect to see a red-tailed hawk sitting at the top of light posts or sitting along wire lines along the highway! So I think a red-tailed hawk would probably be my favorite urban bird. And then I love barred owls—that's probably my favorite bird—because it's the first bird that I really got to experience, and their call, the "who cooks for you" is so unique. It's something that I look for every single time I go out.

HM: I love that you mention the red-tailed hawk as an urban bird that people can watch out for, and I hope readers will take this as an invitation to look up when they're out in urban areas! Circling now to your research: in your graduate studies you focused on urban bird distribution across socio-economic gradients and looked at urban green spaces. Could you talk about that?

DP: Sure. So my masters project looked at bird data from four different cities. I was looking at birds in Raleigh, North Carolina; Durham, North Carolina; Tucson, Arizona; as well as Fresno, California. We really wanted to see what were the underlying factors of the cities that could be picked up in the bird data. Each city has a different historical context, a different background and different people, and different cultures; and that really influences not only the structure of the city, but also green spaces and bird and wildlife habitat in cities. One thing that is well-known is that areas that are redlined—which is the discriminatory historical practice mostly used to keep Black people from gaining home ownership in cities—have less green space today than areas that were not redlined. So that means that a lot of white neighborhoods have more green spaces, they have more money being invested in their parks, and they have the environmental benefits that you get from having a lot of tree cover and having parks, including higher diversity of birds, higher diversity of plants.

I love barred owls—that's probably my favorite bird—because it's the first bird that I really got to experience, and their call, the "who cooks for you" is so unique.

My project specifically was looking at how two different methods that were used to collect bird data have underlying biases. A lot of birders use the eBird app which is used a lot for research and helping to make management decisions and policy decisions.

However when we use eBird, the birding demographic is very narrow. People are typically 55+ and higher-income. And the eBird application is made to match the way that people go birding. A lot of birders will go to specific hotspots where they know they can have a high bird diversity. And if they're going and repeatedly sampling the same locations where they know there's high diversity, it means there are a lot of areas across the city that actually get missed, and so we have a lot of gaps in the data. So at the end of the day we end up making management decisions and policy decisions based off of data that is biased because we're not capturing the entire spatial context of the city. If we use a more systematic approach, it helps us to better capture the spatial landscape and makes sure that we're picking up on those neighborhoods that may be lower income, and helps us really see how birds are using the different habitats that are in the cities.

> I'm so glad that #BlackBirdersWeek had so much reach and that it sparked this whole movement within the sciences overall. I'm just really excited.

HM: Could this potentially spark policy that would help get more green spaces into areas that currently lack them?

DP: That is my hope. I really hope that more people start to use this systematic approach so that we are able to really identify the areas that are in more need in cities, which are specifically going to be more low-income, minority areas. This helps us inform the local government and the city's urban planners and other people who are involved in these management decisions and the creation of new parks.

HM: As you said, it's a narrow demographic that's using birding apps like eBird—what kind of initiatives can broaden who's out contributing information and engaging in birding?

DP: I think that those initiatives will have to start with organizations and different societies and even universities and schools. One of the barriers to birding as a whole is the cost of equipment such as binoculars as well as the knowledge and being able to actually learn how to identify birds. You know, bird watching is hard, bird identification is hard, and it takes a lot of practice, it takes a lot of time. And so I really think it starts with creating community partnerships. And I think if a lot of these bird centers and organizations are really committed to making birding more inclusive and diversified and making sure that birding is for everyone, they really have to start looking at their programs, hiring diverse staff, and making community connections. They need to build partnerships and actually work with communities and lead walks where the people are, where the people feel comfortable. Because birds are everywhere! Birds aren't in one specific location, they don't exclusively live in the high-income parts, you never know what you'll see in your neighborhood park, you never know what you'll see in your back yard or around the corner or at a water management pond or off the side of the road. So I really think that it starts with the people who say they are interested in wanting to get more people involved.

HM: That brings us really well into talking about #BlackBirdersWeek. It was sparked by a racist incident in Central Park in May and within a week afterwards, events were already being organized. I was in awe of how quickly this came together! Could you describe what the process looked like behind the scenes?

DP: Sure. So #BlackBirdersWeek was really a large initiative that was started by about thirty young Black STEM professionals and I think because we already had that existing community, it was really able to come together quickly. There's a large group of us that are in @BlackAFinSTEM, which originated as a counter-space. It was a space where people who were in STEM in the natural sciences and were Black would be able to come to a space, be able to talk, be able to build community, be able to just find friends and mentors and network. And because we had already had this group going on the GroupMe app for almost a year, we already had that community built up. When one person said, "Hey, let's use the momentum from this incident to really highlight the fact that there are Black birders out there, to highlight Black ornithologists and people who are in nature" and a group of us said, "Yeah, this is a great idea", we all started putting in the effort to making this event happen. So we had people who were designing the flyers, I was organizing the live stream and curating the questions to really help move the discussion forward, and we had people who were helping to promote the event. So it was really a huge team effort and it wouldn't have been able to come together so quickly and be pulled off so nicely if there wasn't such a large group of us already.

HM: Can you talk about what some of the goals of #BlackBirdersWeek were?

DP: #BlackBirdersWeek had a few goals. One was to increase the visibility of Black birders and Black nature enthusiasts. That's why we had #BlackInNature day, where it didn't matter if you were in a STEM profession—if you just like being outside in nature and you're Black, we wanted you to promote yourself with a picture of you being outside and showcasing that Black people do belong in the outdoors. I think that that was one of the greatest days of the week itself because it really helped to highlight how many people were not only enjoying the outdoors but actually in different natural science fields.

Another goal was to help people be connected with Black STEM professionals and see them as a source of expertise, and so that's why we had #AskABlackBirder day—where people would just ask questions and have them answered by Black birders. That's because a lot of times within the birding community, if you're Black and you're going out on these bird walks or you're going to a bird festival. people don't believe us when we say we saw a certain bird, or they don't look at us as a source of expertise. So this was really to showcase that, hey, there are Black birders and we do have the knowledge to be in this space.

And then, in my opinion, one of the most important events of the week was the #BirdingWhileBlack live stream discussion. That was the event that I was mostly focusing on curating, and that's because I thought that it was really important for us to have not only a conversation about people's experiences of birding while Black, but to actually start some of that conversation on how to move forward and how to make birding more inclusive and share our experiences of what it's like for us when we are outside in these natural spaces. I think that discussion was

really great because it helped to not only highlight our experiences but really push forward and start conversations. The week as a whole—highlighting Black people in nature, highlighting us as a source of expertise, highlighting our experiences, highlighting Black women who bird and how that intersectionality is different—I think that it really brought attention to the individuals who are in the space, helped to make sure there wasn't a lot of tokenism going on, and tried to spread the wealth of opportunities among Black STEM professionals. It gave a lot of the people who were involved in the week the opportunity to actually help with these initiatives, get paid to actually help be diversity consultants and help programs like Audubon to actually figure out ways they could make their program more inclusive, how to reach out to different communities.

HM: You mentioned the hashtag for Black women who bird, addressing that intersectionality. #BlackBirders Week and specifically #BlackWomenWhoBird addressed two of your identities, namely that of being a birder, and also that of being a Black woman. What is it like for you to be able to speak about both of those identities together on a larger stage?

DP: It was really great because I think that people don't really think about the intersectionality a lot of times. I think that we sometimes look at race first, and it's like, yes I am Black—but as a woman, a lot of times people don't see us as a voice of authority or somehow people don't think that we belong in the outdoors because we probably don't like getting our hands dirty. But there are a lot of us who enjoy being in this space, and it was just great to be able to speak about that experience and highlight things that make us uncomfortable in the outdoors sometimes. So it was important that we highlighted that because sometimes Black women just don't get a voice in this space.

HM: Another thing that you've touched on several times is community building. Were you able to make new connections and grow that community during #BlackBirdersWeek?

DP: Oh most definitely. Through #BlackBirdersWeek we found people who are in Canada, who are in the Caribbean, even over in Europe. It was just really amazing to be able to expand that community. It's really great to be able to see the people who are doing a lot of this great work, who we might not otherwise get connected to. A lot of the time you can feel alone and isolated and invalidated in your experiences because sometimes you're the only one in that space. And sometimes you can go a large portion of your career before ever meeting another Black scientist or being in an office with another Black woman who's doing the same work as you. And so it was just really great to be able to expand that work and see that, hey, there are a lot more of us out there and we are not the only ones in our field, even though sometimes it can feel like that because we might be the only one in our area.

> My last thought would be to encourage readers to get outside and do a fifteen-minute sit outdoors and see what you can find, whether that be different birds, or insects, or anything, and just get outside and really experience your local park and what the nature in your neighborhood is.

HM: One final question about some of the emotions that were coming up during #BlackBirdersWeek; it was sparked by the Central Park incident but it was happening at the same time as nationwide and worldwide protests for #BlackLivesMatter and I think that gave it extra force and meaning in that moment. One term that I heard a lot to describe the experience being communicated especially through the #BlackInNature photos was "Black joy", and I wanted to ask what that term means for you.

DP: For me, I would say that Black joy is something that we don't see very often. I just think that nature can be healing, and, you know, being outside in nature, bird-watching, hiking, kayaking, whatever I do outside in nature, I think that it is the first step to really experiencing Black joy. Being able to just go outside and smile and feel carefree and gain some mental reprieve from our everyday experiences. A lot of times we experience microaggressions and Black joy is being able to just be carefree, even if just for a moment. That's the experience that a lot of people get when out, once they actually get a chance to go outside and experience nature—just being able to explore, and not having to worry about all the other things in life.

HM: That brings me to the end of my questions—but was there anything maybe you'd hoped I'd ask, or that you would still want to say?

DP: I think my last thought would be to encourage your readers to get outside and maybe even just do a fifteen-minute sit outdoors, whether that's in their front yard, or in their local park, and just bring a notebook and see what you can find, whether that be different birds, or, you know, insects, or anything, and just kind of get outside and really experience what your local park and what the nature in your neighborhood is.

Find Deja on Twitter:

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A conversation with Chelsea Connor, Co-Founder of #BlackBirdersWeek

Holly McKelvey: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me! Back in May, as Naomi and I were starting to put together our plans for this issue on urban fauna, #BlackBirdersWeek exploded on our timelines. We were seeing so many images of Black birders and Black nature enthusiasts out there reclaiming nature as a Black space, and we knew we wanted to feature that in this issue and hear from some of the organizers. Could I ask you to introduce yourself?

Chelsea Connor: My name's Chelsea Connor. I'm from the Common-wealth of Dominica, I'm one of the co-founders of #BlackBirdersWeek, and I'm a herpetologist—I study lizards, anole lizards. I started off with birding back home, so I'm very familiar with the birds on my island. I have two bird guides for my island that I brought to Texas with me because I wanted to keep them with me forever. I don't know exactly what age I got into birding, but I wanted to be an ornithologist for a very long time until I got to Texas and started studying lizards, and then I was like, wait! I totally do love birds, I still go birding.

HM: You do a weekly #DidYouAnole hashtag, in which you teach people cool facts about anoles. Can you tell me how you got started doing that?

CC: I just felt like there wasn't a lot of anole content! I talk about anoles and people would be like, "what is that lizard? What are anoles?" And I'm like, "What

do you mean, what are anoles? Anoles are everything! How do you not know what an anole is?" So I was like, I really feel like I should do some anole content and I'm not sure how. And I thought about it for a while and like, okay well maybe I can just introduce a new anole to people every week! And that would be great. So that's what I've been doing, introducing a new anole to people every week and it's been going well so far.

HM: You and other organizers started #BlackBirdersWeek after a racist incident in Central Park in May, which was a reminder that urban parks and other nature spaces aren't always safe for Black people. And the reaction from a lot of white people was surprise—

CC: Yeah, like "we had no idea this was happening" and meanwhile we've been talking about this for a while. We've always known this has happened, and it kind of felt like finally here's another thing to add to all the other things we've been telling people, that this isn't okay.

HM: Many Black birders have been coming forward to share their own experiences—have you had similar experiences?

CC: I haven't had the police called on me but I've definitely been considered a suspicious person for being in streams or wherever, like, "what is she doing and why is she doing it." I've had people watching me in the distance a lot, like "what is she up to?" And I'm like, "I'm looking at a stream today, can I look at this stream in peace, please?" Like, why is there a little group gathered watching at me look into this stream?

> My name is Chelsea Connor. I'm one of the co-founders of #BlackBirdersWeek, and I'm a herpetologist—I study lizards, anole lizards. Anoles are everything!

HM: Do you feel like this kind of racism exists equally in the city or in more rural spaces?

CC: I think definitely it's pretty much the same in both, but the thing is, in a rural community, it will be more overt, simply because that's how people there tend to be, they tend to be more straightforward and more honest. People in an urban environment, typically because of their socio-economic status there and the fact that they have a higher education, it doesn't mean they don't have the same biases, it just means that they've learned how to hide them better.

HM: How did the idea of #BlackBirdersWeek first come together? Can you describe what the process looked like behind the scenes?

CC: Yeah! So Anna Gifty Opoku-Agyeman came up with the idea after thinking about how people ran for Ahmaud after his murder and she was asking if we could do something similar for Christian Cooper, and I was like, "oh that's a great idea!" And it was like, we can go birding for Christian Cooper. And then we were like, what if we do more. And then it became a week. And I was like, okay, so what events are we going to have for the days. And we need art to put with it as well! We need to have a cohesive theme, and we just went there. Somehow everything came together! Some of us didn't get much sleep that week. I'm so proud of everybody who worked on it. We put together an amazing movement, and we've inspired a lot of other people, and we've started a lot of important conversations.

HM: Absolutely. There have been so many subsequent hashtags that have all been bringing up important conversations in a lot of different disciplines.

CC: Yeah, it's been really cool to see everybody representing their disciplines and getting the word out there about their experiences in their fields, as well as making sure that we all have that visibility that we need. The Black experience is not a monolith, but there is racism in every field that we occupy or would like to occupy. No two experiences are ever exactly the same, and they all need to be looked at and discussed so we know and we can do better.

HM: What would you say were the main goals of #BlackBirdersWeek?

CC: To highlight that there are Black birders out there, there are Black people in naturalist fields. We need to have this dialogue; these conversations need to happen. We don't feel safe and we need to feel safe. White people going outside don't go, "Oh, I hope no one will stop me today and ask me if I'm really going birding." No one's going to ask you that because it's the norm for you, but for some reason people don't think that we do that normally, and that's not okay. We shouldn't have to explain why we're outside enjoying a space meant for everybody.

HM: This movement brings together two of your identities, so being a Black birder (and herpetologist), and being a Black woman. How has that experience been for you, to be able to talk about this in such a big forum?

CC: It's been amazing to be able to share my experience and to be able to be heard. For a long time it felt like I was alone, like I didn't have anybody I could talk to, and nothing I was gonna say was going to change people's minds or get them to change the way they were thinking. And while it is important that you listen to everybody and listen to their points of view, finding a group to help amplify my voice and to help listen to my experiences and to help me with some of that burden—it's been amazing, it's been such a great experience.

HM: It feels like it's been a genuinely international movement. Have you built up new connections through it?

CC: I've definitely found an amazing community of people to talk to about lizards and about birds and to share my thoughts on diversity, equity and inclusion when it comes to the sciences. There are some things that are across the board throughout every scientific field that we need to change regarding diversity, equity and inclusion. Some of those conversations can be hard. I tweeted about colorism a couple days ago and I lost a lot of followers.

HM: Can you tell me about what you tweeted?

CC: So the overarching theme was that I was asking people to think more about colorism. We all know what racism is, but in communities people can have varying skin tones: in the Black community there's light-skinned Black people and there's dark-skinned Black people who are discriminated against because of their skin tone. So people who are darker like me receive a lot of negative attention. They don't get

We shouldn't have to explain why we're outside enjoying a space meant for everybody.

some of the same opportunities, we don't get the benefit of the doubt that a lot of people give lighter-skinned Black people. We're not seen as being as beautiful as lighter-skinned Black people and I was asking people to think more critically about that.

HM: What would be your advice to young black birders?

CC: Definitely go for it, live your dream. If you have the bandwidth and the capacity to accept a position or an internship—and internships need to change, they need to be paid, because people shouldn't have to decide between furthering their career and eating—but while we're getting that changed, if applicants have the bandwidth, the capacity, to accept one, I think you should go for it, because you never know where the opportunity leads you. I thought I was into birds, and then I got an anole opportunity and I'm like, actually I'm super happy here, I love these anoles!

If you need help, there are so many amazing Black and STEM communities on Twitter, and you can just look up hashtags, you can just search it and you'll find it, you'll find us. If you want something more, there's so many others, the #BlackIn_____ weeks, they all have their own Instagram and Twitter pages. If you reach

out we are absolutely going to respond to you. Even if it takes a couple days! Because we do get busy! But we will be there for you. If you need a place to share your experience, you need help, you need someone to go birdwatching with you, if there's anybody in your state, in your area who can help with that, I can tell you for a fact in @BlackAFinSTEM, every Black person is rooting for every Black person. So we will do anything we can to help you if you ask us for help, and we all want to see each other succeed and make it.

Ask questions! Don't be afraid to ask questions. And advocate for yourself. If you're not sure how to, again, there's a lot of resources and people you can ask to help with that. Especially if you can find an advisor that you can speak to, or you have an online community you can ask for help with that. But don't be afraid to ask questions for yourself, and about the things that you want to do. Like right now I'm talking to advisors and there's so many hard questions that I have to ask but I have to ask them. What is it like on your campus? Those are very important questions. I'm a Black student! Some campuses aren't great for someone like me. It shouldn't be that way, but for now that's something that I have to consider. Until we get past a large amount of people in America for some reason thinking that skin color is political. But we're working on changing things to make it better!

If you need help, there are so many amazing Black and STEM communities on Twitter. We will do anything we can to help you. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Find Chelsea on Twitter:

@ChelseaHerps

The Crow Tree

Richard Risemberg

Richard Risemberg was born into a Jewish-Italian household in Argentina, and brought to Los Angeles to escape the fascist regime of his homeland. He has lived there since, except for a digression to Paris in the turbulent eighties. He attended Pepperdine University on a scholarship won in a writing competition, but left in his last year to work in jobs from gritty to glitzy, starting at a motorcycle shop and progressing through offices, retail, an independent design and manufacturing business, and most recently a stint managing an adult literacy program at a library branch in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. All have become source material for his writing.

A strident crow call woke him out of his thin morning sleep. It sounded as though someone were yanking old rusted tenpenny nails out of hardwood. Three harsh caws, then a rest, then three more. He sat up in bed, still vague with slumber. The caws were loud, insistent and dominating. The window was already bright with daylight. It was hot, and they'd left it open all night. His wife stirred beside him, muttering random swear words. Three demanding caws filled the room again. Had a damned bird actually come inside? He fumbled for his glasses. The room was empty. His wife struggled up on her side of the bed.

"What time is it?" she mumbled.

"What's the difference? We're up for sure now. They're at it again."

Three more caws scraped the last sleep from his brain. He wobbled to the window and looked outside. The tree in front of their apartment building reached up well past their third floor rooms. A little above the window, on the street side of the tree, the crow perched on a swaying twig that seemed far too small to hold it. Its head turned briefly to note the man looking out the window, and then its black beak opened and emitted the three caws.

His wife stood at the window beside him, her black hair a-shambles. "It's amazing," she said, "how a damned bird can sound so loud."

"And it's just one of them so far. I think he's calling the rest."

Two more crows plummeted into the tree, landed heavily on small branches, and added their voices. Then three more, and then the tree was strafed with crows, flapping their wings heavily as they chose

a perch. The cawing became louder and almost continuous.

"It's like a diabolical orchestra tuning up," he said.

His wife yawned, "Oh, not so diabolical. I bet they're just socializing."

"Sounds more like arguing."

"It's the only voice they have," she said.

She leaned on the windowsill and looked out. He followed suit. The nearer crows hopped out to branches slightly more distant from the window. He craned his head out to see how many more crows there were. They seemed to fill the entire tree, but stayed about ten feet out from the ivy-bearded wall of the building. As if it had suddenly borne fruit.

A crackly human voice startled him. "Guess they're having a conference," it said. He looked to the side and saw the old man who lived across the hall. His white hair stood up in tufts around his bald spot.

"Seen it plenty of times. I used to live about three blocks away, and this same flock would crowd into an old fir tree now and then and do the same thing. Them and me's old friends."

The old man lit a cigarette while a nearby crow examined him quizzically. The barrage of caws continued.

A sweet female voice: "Well, tell your friends it's six a.m. on a Saturday." A head of lustrous brown hair stuck out from the window below them. The newest tenant smiled up at them, blinking in the morning light. "They're kinda fun though. I've never seen so many so close up."

"Wish I had me a shotgun," shouted another voice from above them.

The old man shouted back over the incessant croaking. "Like that would be any quieter," he said.

"A firecracker, then. Scare 'em off."

The wife twisted around and smiled at the shotgun man. "We'd all be awake then anyway, wouldn't we?"

"We all are," said another voice, which belonged to the little pudgy man who lived below the older fellow. "May as well make something of it. I've just put a big pot of coffee on. Let's meet in the courtyard in ten minutes. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

"What a great idea," said the wife. "I'll heat up some rolls I baked yesterday. We'll have a crow party!"

Heads nodded in agreement all along the front of the building. The wife turned to her husband and said, "I'll get those rolls warming up and then put on a basic face." She wrapped her robe around herself and shuffled off to the kitchen.

The man took off his glasses and rubbed his face. The racket from the crows had become continuous but irregular, like factory noise. He changed into jeans and a shirt. A few minutes later, they were padding along the hallway to the elevator. His wife was still in pajamas, bathrobe and slippers. She carried the plate of rolls.

"Smells right good," said the old man, who was padding along in his ragged old robe behind them. The elevator doors squeaked open. The shotgun man was inside it, smiling at them. He raised a bag in his hand. "I brought some butter and jam for those rolls. Sure smell good," he said.

The courtyard was on the side of the building, in a sort of niche. It was full of potted plants, and there were wobbly metal chairs around a table. The pudgy man was there when they arrived, and the coffeepot steamed fragrantly on the table. He had brought an assortment of mugs and set them up in a row. The brown-haired girl arrived, fully made up, and wearing a new robe and flip-flops. She was carrying little porcelain pots of cream and sugar. They matched. The pudgy man poured coffee, while the wife arranged the rolls. They chose among the mugs.

The man breathed in the smell of his brew. It was a smell that always made him feel warm even before the first sip. The pudgy man raised his mug in a toast. "Here's to the crows," he said.

"To the crows," they chorused. The crows, just out of sight around the corner of the building, croaked in their sociable frenzy.

"To neighbors," the wife said, "feathered or not." They drank down their coffee in the cool morning air.

Crow in Alley, Columbo, Sri Lanka by Roger Camp (bio on page 76)

Christmas Yokes

Nnadi Samuel

Nnadi Samuel is a graduate of English & literature from the University of Benin, who lives in Lagos, Nigeria. His works have been previously published in *PORT Magazine*, *Gordon Square Review*, *The Blue Nib*, *The Elephant magazine* & elsewhere. He is a co-reader at *U-Right Magazine*. On Twitter he is @Samuelsamba10.

Winter comes grey & dusty, like another vagabond experiencing its hangover on Lagos's belly. Every harmattan finds December eating weird dishes in my head & other Christian homes left in my body. Whatever goes into them becomes a fellowship—a wild cathedral of shrimps hailing a boy not so full of grace. Tonight, the sky may not womb a high-spirited cloud, but promises the universe & the moon in front a smooth ride. God dabbles in a swampy dew, but no one believes this still: that there are worms deworming their dreads on the Milky Way, so the white lines can inherit. I am yet to reconcile the whole part of this, to discover that in a world that keeps claws like lobsters there is nothing like an unscathed lawn, smooth paths that tilt to colors, not even a small patch to make up for overused cages as dog vaccine cribs. Now I know why they all die asleep, because lying comes with the luxury of cleaning their chest & splitting the insteps of their hooves made mud pies by a marshland. And here, the spider, climbing the roofs to eavesdrop a conversation our windmill holds with her fins.

In the stream beside our ghetto, you could almost hear the fishes' gnashing of teeth on the surface of water. This they say is everything—that moment you remember hell & it's a gorgon of sylphs, fading with the hummingbirds, all feather & pink. The wind here eats their flesh, & gifts them with drone stunts as they flap distances in choir lines, leaving claw prints for their eaglets to chase. They beak the shrubs from roofs, &

suck branches till they lie like twigs, like trunks you'd make a giant nest from if heaven would stop yawning. In their wild thoughts, this was how God knew to fulfill his promises—with ripe shrubs on the rooftop to serve as homes & victuals for them: the birds that feed on air.

The air here is one talent the moths do not cherish. Kicked strokes like pretty butterflies losing their wings to harmattan blows. It peels the colors & flings them up, like a wallet of rainbow. Arc with shapes like Noah's ark, reminding us that animals like this aren't safe here, not in this clime, with non-veggies who know little about petting.

The stars are gorgeous beads, when knocked between a weather. They close, like amputated oysters stripped of limbs, having their fingers in different folds cauterized by the wet burns that steam from a barnyard. The stench bolts with the wind, & the horse neighs to a near-death. There are haystacks plugged to the owner's ears, so he doesn't know when he loses a beast that feels like burden. His cattle would stray to the field, & lose their feet to potholes. They'd swim the mud & get tired of it. In a sennight, help would come in ropes & sticks, & teens tied to a guava tree, drawing hinds from a pit soaked up to the tip. The teats would bear cracks, & wean from its milk to join the horses in their menial jobs trucking hay into a tattered urn. This is how helpless the cocks feel, when hands squeeze their bare trunks & spill the blood on our reeds.

Here, our hen counts her chick & crates her eggs in mud holes. But, this will not stop our hands from digging to cull the spoils. The next day finds her glued to the mud, shifting her claws, as if to trace shell lines to a spot where we cracked & made the protein look like sin. Livestock, like her chicks—alert in their cribs, dreading the hands that steal them. Each grip, a miss, a lost count of her census thing, & she's back again recounting the chicks, asking after their feathers, why they've grown so pink it feels like a color bet, or a near-death from our stead?

But, this is how we celebrate our eves, how we fledge the Christmas trees to lay eggs on their twigs, & yoke us all with lurid beams.

Untitled by Rana Voss (bio on page 76)

Window Watching

Sheila McEntee

Sheila McEntee writes frequently about nature and her home. Her essays have appeared in the *Brevity* magazine nonfiction blog; *Voices on Unity: Coming Together, Falling Apart*; and *Wonderful West Virginia* magazine, among other publications, and aired on West Virginia Public Radio. Two of her essays were recently published in *In the Midst, a COVID-19 Anthology.*

In the grip of the coronavirus pandemic, my small city shutters. We go inside, hunker down, fearing illness and death. We wash our hands and we watch the news. We watch the world outside our windows too. Beyond the window panes, impervious to our plight, wild things remain wild. From behind cold glass we mark their comings and goings, having so few of our own. In this troublesome time, they enlarge our shrunken lives.

On the crowded street where I live in Charleston, West Virginia, houses sit shoulder to shoulder on either side, like twin regiments, and march along a lengthy ridgetop. My road is a busy cut-through between downtown and the town next door. Traffic is continual and rumbles with buses, pickup trucks, and SUVs.

In the early weeks of isolation, my only vista is the one just beyond my living room window, where I've hung bird feeders in the old silver maple that dominates my tiny front yard. As I shelter in place, my companions are mostly feathered—those I can still invite over for suet and seeds.

It's always good to entertain old friends: cardinals, titmice, chickadees, and downy woodpeckers. But when the rose-breasted grosbeaks drop by in early May, it feels like a down-home picnic has become a fancy gala. The birds are elegant: he in his dapper black tux and bright pink cravat, and she in understated earth tones, sporting her signature white eye stripe. I can hardly tear myself away from their company.

While I, along with much of humanity, am grounded by the virus, the rose-breasted grosbeaks and other neotropical migrants keep their travel plans. They

leave their wintering grounds in Central and South America, and many fly more than a thousand miles to reach the Gulf Coast of the United States. Some days after making landfall, six stunning male grosbeaks arrive in my silver maple.

There've been springs when I've not seen a single rose-breasted grosbeak at my feeder. At best, I've thrilled to one or two that stayed a few days. Usually they rest and refuel briefly, before continuing further north to their breeding grounds.

But this year, for nineteen incredible days, I lift my window shades just after dawn and see a grosbeak, or two or three, already poised on the feeder, stocking up on black oil sunflower seeds. After the third day, the otherwise empty blocks on my calendar begin to fill with exclamations.

"RBGs still here!!" I write on Day 8. "2-3-4 at a time on the feeders!"

"3 males at 9:30 AM!" I note on Day 13.

For nearly three weeks, I host a daily reception, keeping the buffet stocked and watching the revelers mingle. Behind the window, I am but a wallflower, relegated to observing the dramas and dynamics.

Unlike confident resident birds, grosbeaks do not fly directly onto the feeders. Instead, they land in the leafy branches above, glance around, gauge the competition, and then descend. Once they are feeding, they are unfazed by rumbling vehicles, human voices, yapping dogs, and growling lawnmowers.

The resident birds accept the newcomers graciously. The grosbeaks, however, are a bit aloof, if not aggressive. Grosbeak males will sometimes lower their heads toward a male cardinal cousin and nudge him off the feeder. Equally brazen, a female grosbeak does the same to a downy woodpecker. Grosbeak males also vie with each other for space at the feeder, jockeying for position, sometimes fluttering off but returning quickly.

It is common to see a male cardinal gallantly offer his mate a seed. Not so the grosbeak male. On the contrary, I see them nudge their female counterparts off the feeder. The females take it in stride. Apparently used to their mates' boorish behavior, they wait on a nearby branch for their turn.

Yet, a male grosbeak will, at times, defer to a territorial cardinal or raucous blue jay. Both can unseat him handily from the feeder. There are also the crass party crashers, with whom the grosbeaks do not mingle: the pack of mousy grey, juvenile starlings that commandeer the suet cage in open-billed squabbling and the squirrel that drapes itself, like a fur stole, over the feeder, prohibiting any avian diners.

While I marvel at my great fortune in hosting the grosbeaks for so long, I also wonder why there are so many of them and why they have not moved on. Bird behavior is complex. Our state ornithologist says birds surely take cues from temperature and food availability. He speculates that this year, a weather event may have driven more of the grosbeaks to migrate through the Appalachian region instead of through other areas of the country. Then, our cold springtime temperatures likely slowed their progress northward. They stayed a while longer where food was abundant. Indeed, the birds' adaptability and resourcefulness seem all the more amazing in this time of human fragility and uncertainty.

On the twentieth day since the grosbeaks' arrival, I lift the living room shade ever so slowly and peek out at a grey sky. Glancing at the feeders, I find a lone, male cardinal, his hefty bill busily working a sunflower seed out of its hull. I gaze out for a long while. Titmice, chickadees, and house finches come and go.

But where is the glamour, the flair? After several more checks at the window throughout the day, I know the rose-breasted grosbeaks have moved on. I feel as if I have been left to sweep the floor, take down the streamers, and gather up the empty champagne flutes. Indeed, the party is over, and I will have to wait a whole year to host another one.

Yet, after a time, I glance out the window and see an elusive flicker, with its scarlet nape stripe and polka-dotted breast, stabbing the suet cake with gusto. Before long, a sassy brown thrasher arrives, bringing a brood of two. I watch a male downy woodpecker feed dabs of suet to his nestling. And, oh! There is an impish hummingbird buzzing in for nectar.

My ears awaken to the seesaw notes of a yellow-throated warbler and thrill to the wood thrush's evening flute melodies. Both of these migrants nest in little patches of woods near my home. Though I never see them, their songs sweeten the air well into summer.

Along with warmer temperatures come spikes in coronavirus cases. Safe behind my window, I watch not only birds but also passersby. There are more of them now: people jogging, walking their dogs, strolling their babies. I watch my Facebook feed, too, and check daily posts on the neighborhood page. There, on an evening in late June, I make a startling discovery: a video of a black bear lumbering along a busy, nearby street. The animal looks confused as it crosses the parallel, yellow lines in the middle of the street and then stops to consider a guardrail. After a time, a hefty pickup truck comes up the street. The driver sees the bear, which is now out of our view, and slows to a stop.

The video ends there, but the next day, neighbors post more, and photographs too. I see the bear lifting the lid of a trash can and eyeing the bulging, white bags inside. Later, it helps itself to birdseed. Sitting in the grass, it grasps a neighbor's tubular feeder with both front paws and brings it to its mouth, like a small child drinking a glass of milk. Then I watch the bear handily scale a chain-link fence, lifting its rump and short back legs to the top, and then bounding over to the other side.

As residents of a heavily wooded state, my neighbors and I are used to white-tailed deer meandering through our yards and, unfortunately, decimating our gardens. I've seen a young buck wander up my driveway. Once I counted five does, each with a fawn, ambling peaceably together, browsing grass and leaves.

But a black bear in the neighborhood? That's news. In fact, the local TV news features our bear, making it a bit of a celebrity.

At first, my neighbors are amused by our big, furry guest. One posts a picture of Smokey Bear, standing tall in his blue jeans and ranger hat, solemnly grasping the handle of his shovel. Another adds an image of Yogi Bear in his porkpie hat and necktie, making off with a picnic basket. Indeed, our bear is soon dubbed "Yogi."

"Hey, Boo-Boo!" another neighbor quips, referencing Yogi Bear's loyal sidekick. This time the bear can be seen walking up a driveway toward a white SUV.

"He's up here enjoying our Red Lobster leftovers!" a nearby neighbor reports one evening.

"Tomorrow's trash day," yet another notes. "The bear should have a great time!" His post is accompanied by an emoji laughing to the point of tears.

Yet, I, for one, cannot join in the jocularity. Seeing West Virginia's official state animal, a magnificent, woodland creature, amid cars and gas grills, reduced to picking through trash cans, makes me sad.

Shortly after the bear's arrival, my neighbors notify officials at the Division of Natural Resources (DNR), who instruct us to secure trash cans and bird feeders, and to bring pet foods inside. A bear that continues to find food will become a nuisance, they caution. Bears habituated to human food can be hard to relocate and must be euthanized. A fed bear is a dead bear, we are warned. Not wanting to attract the bear to my yard, I reluctantly take down my bird feeders.

A DNR biologist informs us that our bear is a male yearling, a young bear recently turned away by his mother, who is preparing to breed again. Wandering our neighborhood, then, is a misguided, ursine adolescent, getting into scrapes while trying to find his way. Who among us doesn't have a story or two like that to tell? My heart aches for him.

It is rumored that the DNR will set a trap for Yogi, and, because he is a yearling and weighs only about 170 pounds, relocate him to a state natural area. But a couple of weeks go by and that doesn't happen. It's hard to say why. In the midst of the pandemic, everything has slowed down. Everyone is struggling. I try to cultivate patience and expect less.

Meanwhile, the bear is reported within a block of my house. Though I never see the bear, a dark-green scat in my backyard leaves me wondering. Thereafter, while working in my garden, a twig snap or leaf flutter sends me whirling around, scanning the tree line. Though there are no reports of Yogi bothering people or pets, I stop walking my dog after dark.

As time goes on, my neighbors become less enamored of the bear. Nerves fray and tempers flare on Facebook. One person speculates that the DNR may be overwhelmed and suggests we raise money to hire a private company that deals with nuisance wildlife to relocate the bear.

"Don't kid yourself," another replies. "That bear can't be saved. It's been up here too long. They'll just kill it and say they relocated it. Why should we pay for that?"

The retort: "And who pissed in your Cheerios this morning?"

All the while, Yogi roams our streets, eventually expanding his territory. A neighbor some distance away opens her door at five in the morning and startles him from her porch. He runs to her magnolia tree and climbs it. Not long after, he is seen enjoying breakfast at the dumpster at the neighborhood swimming pool.

Finally, after nearly three weeks, the DNR tells us they are coming for the bear. Sightings have become so frequent and communication so rapid among neighbors that the biologists do not need a trap. Near dusk, they drive to the yard where the bear has been seen minutes before. They find him, tranquilize

him, and load him into the bed of a pickup truck. Destination: a twenty-three thousand acre natural area some seventy-five miles away, featuring an oak and hickory forest and a trout-stocked lake.

With the heat of summer upon us, the rose-breasted grosbeaks are long gone and so, now, is Yogi. Though I am glad the bear's life was spared, I know he is not yet out of the woods, so to speak. Hunting black bears is legal in our state and allowed in the area where he was set free. Still, for now, I imagine him roaming beneath a leafy canopy, remembering the lessons he learned from his mother, peacefully foraging for roots and berries, fungi and insects.

Meanwhile, the rest of us carry on. We don our masks. We keep our distance. We bundle our bags of trash and ply paved streets, sometimes slowing to allow the deer to cross.

Bahd, Aunty Janet's Dog

Nwokoji Chigozie

Nwokoji Chigozie is a graduate of English from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He currently teaches and writes in Lagos. Reading new works of fiction is something he does everyday with relish, just to dwell on beautiful strings of words. His work is forthcoming on Praxis.

The boy didn't like his mother's friend, Aunty Janet. His mother knew, which was why she sent him often, saying *take this, take that* to her.

"You'll soon see that she's a nice person."

The boy asked, "Is she your sister?"

His mom said no.

"Why does she sleep on your bed, and why do I call her Aunty?"

The boy didn't like Aunty Janet, but he would soon learn to love her dog.

Aunty Janet was an unmarried woman at forty-five, almost his mother's age. His mother had become friends with Aunty Janet after she'd given her a lift home from the market. She'd seen Aunty Janet's sack of flour snap and burst on the road and she'd taken pity on her. The boy's mother had explained to him that their friendship grew from helping out a poor woman, and in return she gained company in the woman's ramblings about the local, poor neighborhoods in the slums of Lagos where she hawked meat pies.

Aunty Janet lived two streets away, in an area marked off from their estate, where the disparity between privilege in the boy's estate and squalor in Aunty Janet's street was strongly defined. On Aunty Janet's street women fried fish on tripods, wiping sweat off their contorted faces with their greasy lappahs while one or two of their babies pooped on the floor just inches away, and fumes gauzed the whole place. Passersby watched the ground as they walked through the intertwining pathways that were dotted with dumps so that their feet wouldn't plunge into stinking puddles of muck, while putrid smells struck their nostrils. The boy would look at Aunty Janet and his mother and think of the way spirogyras stick to walls, requiring hard scrubs to completely scrape off. They'd chatter and laugh in the kitchen and Aunty Janet would even spend the night in his mom's room. He hadn't slept in his mother's room since his dad left them.

The boy's mother never thought he would fall in love with a dog. She knew he hated dogs. He would tug at her side whenever they came across a dog being walked by its owner, nudging her towards the opposite side of the road. Even a thick-furred terrier she'd told him was cute and harmless scared him.

"These ones, when they come close, they only want to sniff you and make you a friend," she'd told him.

"Who wants to be a dog's friend?" he'd sniggered.

Some time ago, a thief had made it into their compound and into the flat below theirs. The thief had picked up their neighbor's phones through the window using a mop. The next morning several of their neighbors had called a meeting, and the couples who lived in the four flats constituting the condo—the boy's mother being the only single parent among them—let out pent-up anger and dissatisfaction over slackening security in their estate.

A neighbour had said, "And no dog even barked."

Then it struck them that in their small close lined by six condominiums, there wasn't a single dog—so they decided to get one.

At another meeting, someone complained, "Nobody has the time to care for a dog in Lagos."

"Dog foods are too expensive."

"Who would even walk it? It'd die here."

Some complained the dog would scare their kids.

A man said, "Who would even have time to flog it once *once*."

And some arched their brows at him. Some shrugged. Some scoffed.

The boy's mother later expressed her own distaste.

As time passed without any more thievery in the compound, the discussion of dog security lost its initial fervor, even though the tenants still spoke about it in smaller, gossipy groups. The boy's mother would later joke about this to Aunty Janet: "Nwanne'm nwanyi, the matter was like onugbu soup that lost its bitterness from continued reheating."

The tenants decided to use the money they'd been saving towards a dog to put up new barbed wire on the compound's fences.

One day the boy went to Aunty Janet's at his mother's prompting and returned ranting that Aunty Janet had a dog and why didn't his mom tell him? Aunty Janet's dog looked like a lioness. It was so tall it reached his elbow, its snout was square and long, and when it opened its mouth—showing off its long canines—its tongue wagged and dripped with saliva. The boy said it looked like it could really bite, but that it had black patches of fur under its two eyes that extended down to its nose like the letter V and softened its ferocious height and snout. Those patches made the dog's eyes look human.

"Its eyes would stop anyone from hating it," the boy said, inflecting the "it."

Aunty Janet's dog had tried to sniff at the boy's legs and the boy had shivered. His mom had told him that a dog could easily smell an enemy, a hater. Would this one smell his own hatred and then attack him? While Aunty Janet held the dog still, saying "do not run, nna," the boy looked up at the ashy sky, noting the small movements the clouds made, distracting his mind so he didn't have to look at what the dog was doing. He didn't notice when the dog scooted in front of him, looking up at the sky like him, probably curious about what it was in the sky that had ensorcelled the boy. Aunty Janet had watched and laughed. In spite of himself, the boy laughed too when he looked down and saw the dog.

"You see, he likes you," Aunty Janet said.

The boy described this moment to his mother, but he didn't tell her that he had thought Aunty Janet was a wicked woman for making him meet the dog. Aunty Janet had told him, "Call him Bahd." He'd said "Bad'" grudgingly, his tongue hanging in the roof of his mouth.

"Call it how you'd pronounce bad with a *h* before the *d*," she'd corrected him.

Aunty Janet and her dog had then walked him through the passageway, the dark, tiny aisle between the "face to face" netted doors of Aunty Janet's public compound. The dog kept the landlady's cats from playing around the boy's legs and creeping him out.

Before the boy's encounter his mother didn't know Aunty Janet had a dog. Aunty Janet later told the boy's mother, "Where could I have got money to buy a dog kwanu?" She told her she'd got the dog from that man from Calabar that had been disturbing her for marriage.

"He said Bahd is too good a dog to use for meat like that. I'd told him about my landlady's cats. Those stubborn felines are witches. I wake up in the morning to find red marks all over my body. Look at this one." She pulled up her blouse sleeve.

"Chei!"

"Eziokwu ka'm na-agwa gi, my sister. It didn't start today. And do you know for the days Bahd has been with me, just sitting in my corridor like that, I wake up and there's not a single scratch on my body. He barks them away. At least my elder sister and her pastor will stop saying it's my spiritual husband that has been scratching my body in my sleep."

Aunty Janet had spread her palms when the boy's mother asked how she was going to care for a dog as tall as the boy had described, with her paltry salary from baking at Tantalizers and the little scraps she gathered from selling meat pies on her off days.

"Is it not to fetch the bones and leftover food I'll get from Tantalizers?"

The boy's mother had promised to help with whatever she could.

"Are you going to also beat him?" said the boy's mother.

"How do you mean?"

"One of my neighbors said people in Lagos beat their big dogs to make them bark more when they see thieves and witches."

"Hia, Eziokwu. So, the dog would rip me apart abi?" Aunty Janet laughed.

On his next visit to Aunty Janet, this time carrying along food for Bahd, the boy found that Bahd made no attempt to sniff at him but remained in Aunty Janet's corridor and devoured the food: lumps of thin fish bones mixed with rice. The boy liked the way Bahd made food that would have been thrown away appear useful, savory, running his tongue along the sides of his mouth afterwards.

The boy started looking out for bones for Bahd in his apartment and their neighbors' homes. He now visited the neighbor's children more often, especially when they were having lunch. He told their mothers he'd eaten when they offered to give him food and waited until the children had finished eating to pack up bones and lumps of eba for his Bahd. At home he would bite around the edges so that there'd still be clumps of meat stuck to the bones for Bahd.

The boy's mother was elated when he came back screaming, "Bahd knows how to shake. Bahd knows how to shake somebody's hand. You just tell him 'Bahd, shake me' and he brings up his paw like this." The boy mimicked Bahd and laughed to himself. He told her he no longer had to deal with Aunty Janet's landlady's stubborn cats because Bahd now hurried to meet him right at the threshold of the dark passageway, jubilantly wagging his tail. He told her that Bahd follows him to the well to fetch water and carries his own water bowl in his mouth, can she believe that? The mother was happy the boy no longer seemed to mind Aunty Janet's presence. She didn't mind that her son now walked Bahd around the neighborhood sometimes.

It was the boy who first noticed the cuts on Bahd's ears that attracted flies and the yellowish, slimy liquid that ran down his black patches from the corners of his eyes. He noticed the slimy liquid made deep cuts into the sides of the dog's eyes whenever he washed it off. He'd mentioned it to Aunty Janet and she'd shouted "ndi Amunsu!" The boy didn't understand what she meant until he heard Aunty Janet telling his mother that Bahd only chased the cats, he never killed them, that she'd have preferred he killed them so she could have her peace.

"Ozugbo-ozugbo!" Aunty Janet told the boy's mother her landlady no longer wanted to see the dog around, complaining that he littered shit along her passageway.

"I know Bahd doesn't shit like that. Bahd is sick. She says she'll kill him if I don't move him. Igasikwa! I'm sure it's because Bahd is dealing with her and her witch cats and shooing them off my doormat. That woman wants to finish me."

The boy remembered seeing this landlady a few times. He remembered each of her buttocks taking turns to jiggle as she walked, as if on cue. She scraped her slippers on the floor and didn't seem to give a piss about the noise. "The very fat, black woman who doesn't reply when somebody greets her," the boy had told his mother.

The boy asked his Integrated Science teacher, "How do you treat a sick dog?" Everyone laughed, not only because the teacher's lesson that day had nothing, however remotely, to do with dogs, but also because they all knew he roamed about the streets with a dog he called Bahd. The teacher reported to his mother, "Your son is letting that dog get into his head. That Bahd is indeed bad for him."

The boy would switch from cartoons on Nickelodeon to Dr Pol on Nat Geo Wild, hoping to find useful tips on dogs. This was where he learned that people's dogs stayed with them inside the house and not outside like Bahd, that they even slept in their owner's bed. He learned that their owners took them to special hospitals for animals, that there's such a thing as veterinarians and veterinary doctors. Could this be how that healthy looking terrier his mom talked to him about was being treated? He'd wonder. His mother would often snatch the remote, "Your teacher says you're letting that dog get into your head."

For some time, the boy was not allowed to see Bahd. The day he snuck out, he waited and waited at the threshold of the passage, but it was too dark and he noticed scattered movements and yellowish, bright eyes. The cats were prowling. He thought for the first time, *Why is it always so dark in here?* The sun outside shone with aliveness. Bright blue skies blended with white clouds, which moved in slow, endless motions. Bahd's outline showed up at the other end of the passage. It took a while for the boy to make out the dull yellowish color of his eyes. He was strutting without his usual vibrancy, eyes set down and ears snagging, pulling flies along. The boy's powerlessness over this thing that was slowly killing Bahd wracked at his heart.

The boy gleaned from conversations between his mom and Aunty Janet that Aunty Janet had returned Bahd to her Calabar boyfriend, who used him for meat in his restaurant.

"Before my landlady finishes him up completely." Aunty Janet was crying and the boy's mother held her shoulder. "I was at a loss on what to do about a dog that sick."

For days after, the boy would sit up in bed at night and tear up over how anyone could possibly eat Bahd, the Bahd he'd sacrificed his meats for. Didn't Bahd's killer feel something like humanness exuding from Bahd? Didn't the black patches under his eyes make the killer feel some sympathy? Why didn't Bahd sniff his killer, smell that he was an enemy and run away? Did the killer hold back Bahd's head and cut his throat like the boy had seen people do with goats? Until blankets of sleep wrapped him up, pretending to promise consolation and healing, his thoughts would tear him into two selves, one posing questions, the other failing at answering them. He would walk up to his mother the following morning, residue of the previous night's tears lining his face and forming thin crusts under his eyes, "Mom did they cut his eyes? You know whether they cut his eyes?"

The White Hart

Judy Upton

Judy is an award-winning playwright with plays produced by the Royal Court, National Theatre, Hampstead Theatre and BBC Radio 4 etc. *The Bulbul Was Singing* was a Radio 4 Drama Of The Week (2019). She's had two feature films and a TV drama produced, plus a novella published by Orion Books.

I swore as I checked the mirror and braked hard. It was just before two a.m. When I got home I went to bed straight as soon as I'd eaten, still uncertain if what I'd seen had been real or imaginary. I tried to sleep, but its red eyes burned beneath my eyelids. The sunlight pouring through the curtains made matters worse. The material is far too thin and flimsy. If I worked regular night shifts I'd get blackout blinds, but I've no time to do anything about it now. I suppose I could stick old newspapers over the windows. I don't get one delivered myself, but there're usually a few kicking about in the waiting area.

All us drivers are confined to one corner of the warehouse now, while our trucks are loaded. There are five plastic chairs, all spaced apart, though right now I'm the only person here. After we protested to management yesterday, we also have a single chemical toilet for our use. Drivers had always used the staff toilets until we were banned last week. So while it's still fine for the wholesaler's own staff to use their facilities, the drivers, for reasons unknown, are treated like outcasts. We sit on our designated chairs, fenced off by a line of hazard tape, eating our homemade sandwiches and drinking lukewarm coffee from our thermos flasks. There is a coffee machine, but it's now on the other side of the tape border and reserved for packers and forklift drivers.

I miss hearing all the news and gossip from my friends among the warehouse workers. I won't be able to have a chat with any of the supermarket shelf-stackers when I do my drop-off, and supper will be in my cab, as the café at the motorway services is closed. As a trucker I'm used to being on my own for long periods of time, but now, like so many people, I don't see anyone outside of work either.

I live alone in a one room box, and most of my friends aren't yet into virtual conversations. We do Skype and FaceTime, but we're all a bit awkward and quickly run out of things to say. It's not the same as when we'd go for a meal or to the pub in a big group. Mum rang about an hour before I left tonight, even though I'd told her not to call during my downtime. She can't adjust to me working nights. I'd said I'd drop in any shopping she needs on my way home, but all she wanted were her bleeding lottery tickets.

"Can you get me three and a couple of scratch cards, Jen? They won't put any of those in my food parcel will they?"

I don't think that was a serious question, but you never can tell with Mum. I told her the supermarket wouldn't be open when I finished work, and that I wasn't going out again later just so she could waste her money. Why do people in their eighties want to win the lottery anyway? Mum always says she has no idea what she would do with a million if she won it. Then why ask your daughter to risk her health for something pointless?

Sitting here alone, as the forklifts bleep and the distant packers shout and laugh, the white stag's on my mind again. When it stepped out in front of my truck last night, I was certain I was going to hit it. I'm seated too high in the cab for that kind of impact to do me damage, unless it was thrown into the air, of course. Knowing my stopping distance, even at only a little over thirty mph, I didn't think the deer stood much of a chance. It disappeared and I feared it had gone underneath, despite not feeling so much as a judder. When I got out to take a look though, there was nothing there. Not a mark on the truck, no movement in the trees, and no sound of any living thing on that deserted stretch of road. The stag had melted away, as if I'd driven through a ghost. At least that meant it didn't have to go in the incident log.

It's only since this crisis began that we've been asked to drive at night. Previously we were used to setting out before the sun was up, but doing whole trips in darkness is a new experience. No one likes to hear heavy lorries thundering past their home in the early hours, or at least they didn't before empty shelves became a problem. At night the motorway lights can become hypnotic and with few vehicles apart from other trucks out there, there's less than usual to occupy your mind. You leave the radio on for the traffic reports and notice how the DJs struggle to play appropriate songs after each news bulletin. Follow it up with something cheerful and it appears insensitive, choose a downbeat track and it'll make us feel worse. In the end they usually just play the bland stuff. It's middle of the road music for the middle of the motorway in the middle of the night.

I'd already left the motorway by the time I saw the white stag. I was delivering to a store in a village where there's a winding lane with a tree canopy for several miles before you reach the High Street. That's where it happened. He stepped boldly out from the shadows of the trees. He held his head and his huge antlers high. In those few seconds, as he turned his head to confront my 7.5 tonne lorry, he appeared utterly fearless.

Taking out my phone I search "white stag" and discover that they're actually quite rare. There are several species of deer in this country but by his size I think he must be a red deer. They shed those massive antlers around this time, in March or early April, and grow a

complete new set by autumn. A large white stag is also known as a "white hart"—like in the name of a pub or in White Hart Lane. The Internet says they're surrounded by superstition and folklore.

Mum's superstitious, but I'm not. Not usually. Though I do suddenly feel the urge to discover whether a white hart is associated with good luck (like seeing two magpies), or with bad (like smashing a mirror). This newly-acquired superstition has been burned into me by those ruby red eyes, by the way they met mine as if it was trying to tell me something.

If any of the other drivers were here at the moment, they wouldn't let me take this white hart thing seriously. "You nearly hit a stag—oh deer!" That's how it'd be. Then Markos would be telling, for the umpteenth time, the story of the squirrel trapped in his cab, while proudly showing the teeth marks left in his thumb. Richard, though, might be interested in the whole white hart mythology. He has a dream catcher hanging above his windscreen and likes folk music. Catch him in the right mood and he'll talk about things like water divining and ley lines.

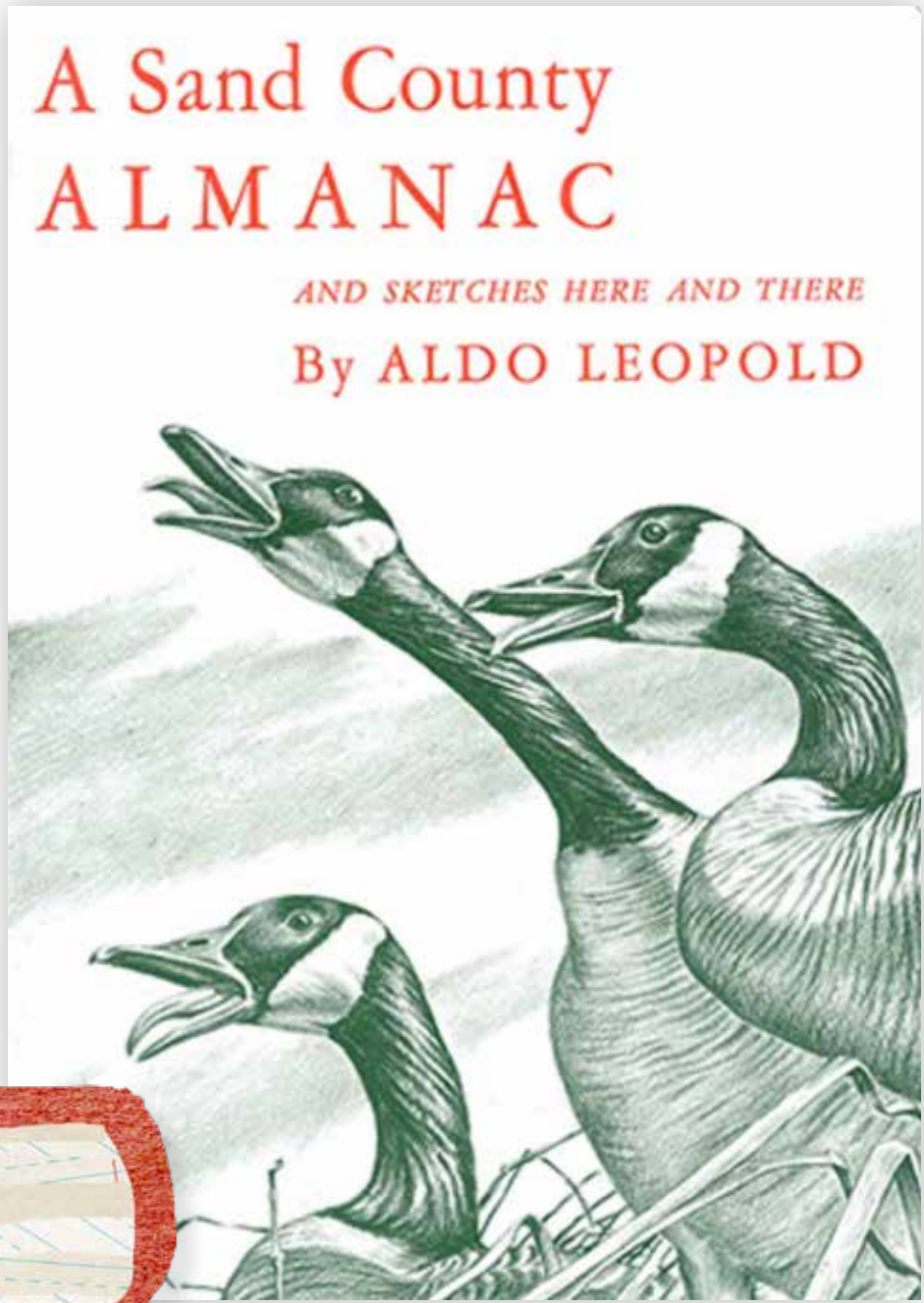
Richard might know if it's lucky or unlucky to see a white hart. I'll text him before I leave the warehouse and send him links to some of the stuff I've just found about them. A couple of websites mention white harts as part of the legend of Herne the Hunter. He's an antler-wearing lord of the forest who watches over the natural world. Celtic people once saw white harts as messengers from a place called "the otherworld"—a land of spirits. My gran was from County Wexford and she was superstitious. Perhaps that's where Mum gets her love of the ruddy lottery. Now I've clicked on a site about English folklore and it says a white hart appears at times of great turmoil and it signifies change. That's certainly interesting, if, at present, a little unnerving.

A man wearing a mask appears and beckons, socially distanced, with his blue-gloved hand. I think it's Steve but it could be Dave as they're both bald and around the same height. Either would be a friendly face, in normal times. You start to miss smiles when they're not visible.

My truck is loaded and it's time to go. "A white hart can lead you down new roads," the folklore website says, which to me sounds suspiciously like a detour ahead. "It can also symbolise new beginnings, new knowledge and a greater understanding of the world."

The white hart might not be the lucky black cat I was hoping for, but at least it's no prophet of doom. I'm toying with printing up a photo of one later. I could stick it up in my cab, like the way people are putting rainbows in their windows. I will pop out later and buy Mum her lottery tickets too, I've decided. I'll take them round and put them through her letterbox. It's not because seeing a white hart has made me feel particularly fortunate. It's just that at the moment, we all need to believe in something, whether that's family, friends, luck, or something more spiritual. In this time of uncertainty, there's one thing I now feel certain of—at some point I'm going to see the white hart again. Maybe sooner, maybe later, somewhere down the road.

Readers Corner


A Sand County
ALMANAC
AND SKETCHES HERE AND THERE
By ALDO LEOPOLD

An Asphalt County Almanac

Sandy Schuman

Sandy Schuman majored in Environmental Conservation at Cornell University. He wrote this term paper as a freshman in 1969. It appears here with few modifications. After graduating in 1973, he worked on coastal management issues for New York Sea Grant, developed New York's Energy Extension Service, and then focused on public policy and management decision making. He retired in 2010.

Aldo Leopold's book was required reading in Environmental Conservation 101, the introductory course for my college major. His literary sketches reflected on the grace and wonder of natural life on his farm, located in Sauk County, Wisconsin. Given their sandy soils, the counties in that region were known as "sand counties." To generalize his writings, he entitled his collection of month-by-month observations *A Sand County Almanac*. I was so taken with the book, I wished I had written it myself.

But the place where I came from was so different. I did not have a relationship to the land as he did. Nonetheless, I had to write a term paper. I couldn't write about a "sand county" filled with nature's abundance, but I could write about an "asphalt county," where nature is scarce and more difficult to observe. Indeed, I'd grown up in the largest asphalt county in the largest city in the United States.

If you haven't read *A Sand County Almanac*, you should. It's been more than 70 years since its publication in 1949 and it's still an elegant classic. Read it and you'll see my attempt to reflect a few of Leopold's sketches in the mirror that is asphalt county. This is what I saw.

January | Snow

I joined a line of people at the bus stop one icy morning after a snowfall had covered the asphalt and concrete with a foreign whiteness. I overheard talk about how clean the air smelled and how the snow must have washed the dirt and pollution out of the air. But the snow's effects would not last long. Already, while we waited for the bus, cars and trucks turned the white powder into grey slush, their tires grinding it into the asphalt. The litter, trapped beneath the snow, showed itself. The smokestacks

smoked; the car exhausts exhausted. But, for a brief respite, we had a beautiful snow.

February | Trees

I often wondered, when I was small, about the trees along my street. I learned there are many kinds of trees, distinguished by their leaves, bark, and overall shape. On my street, I found out, there were acorn trees, poly-nose trees, itchy-ball trees. At the time, I didn't know anyone knowledgeable enough about the natural world to call them oak, maple, and London plane trees. There were a few other types of trees, but no one knew any names for them.

In February, I didn't look at trees. I sat inside my house, warmed by an oil-fired boiler that automatically fed itself. I awoke in the morning in a comfortable house and, when I went outside, was shocked at how cold it was. It didn't look cold through the window.

I learned lots of important things in my early years in school. Even before I could read, I was taught that milk came from cows, eggs from chickens, apples from apple trees, and so on. The teacher planted pea seeds to show us where peas came from; she stuck a sweet potato in water for us to watch grow. We looked at pictures of horses, sheep, and cows. We learned from picture books about the animals of the forest. I sensed there was something more.

March | Birds

I was amazed when a friend told me that geese fly overhead during their migration. I wondered why I'd never seen any in my asphalt county.

Walking down my snowy street one morning, I noticed a strange, small bird in one of the trees. I had never seen birds in my area other than house sparrows, starlings, blue jays, robins, and pigeons. I often claimed I knew each one by name. This strange bird was not one of them. I looked closer, being careful not to scare it away. It was black on its head, and a drab gray everywhere else. It was silent—no chirping or singing. It was alone; I searched for but did not find any others like it nearby. Later, I learned it was a black-capped chickadee, and I've seen many of them since, but not in my neighborhood.

April | Rain

April showers bring May flowers, and so it is in an asphalt county. Rain falls on small squares of soil to provide a tree thirty feet tall with moisture. I am amazed at how such a large tree survives.

The rest of the water flows along the concrete and asphalt until it reaches a sewer, into which it drains. (A watershed can be defined as that area of concrete and asphalt drained by a given sewer system.) Sometimes the rain carries along so much litter and leaves that the sewers become clogged. Water backs up into the street, sometimes quite deep, and traffic backs up with it. Cars drive up onto the sidewalk to discharge passengers so they won't get wet slogging through the water.

Water piles up higher than the curb, flows over the sidewalk, and seeps into the patches of earth not yet covered over by asphalt or concrete. At last the trees get their fill.

May | Weeds

May is when the flowers come—all sizes, shapes, and colors. There is one flower, however, I was taught to dislike. It was yellow, grew in the lawn (competing with the grass), and had ugly seed heads. If I smelled the yellow flower up close, my nose turned the same color. I learned it was called dandelion, from the French, "lion's tooth," and named after the shape of its leaf. I learned the leaves could be eaten, either fresh or cooked, and the root bark used as a coffee substitute. I refused to believe that such a useful plant, with such a beautiful flower, could be called a weed and not be loved.

June | Flushing Meadows Corona Park - A Fishing Idyll

There is a weekend migration of fishermen from the city to secluded fishing spots. Some settle down in a nice, quiet area far from the city. Some find their chosen spot in the city's outskirts, perhaps a little too crowded for their liking. Then there are those who cannot venture from the city.

Many find their way to Willow Lake and Meadow Lake, which were created when the site was developed for the 1939-40 New York World's Fair. Here, in the heart of the city, you can become a contemplative angler and, if you're in luck, bring home a few sunfish or carp. Recognizing the proliferation of toxic pollutants in freshwater fish, wise anglers limit their consumption and adhere to state health advisories.

July | Great Possessions

If you tire of your garden-less apartment or fenced-in backyard, you can retreat to one of the many parks, playgrounds, or beaches found in and around an asphalt county. Leave the sounds of horns honking, brakes screeching, sirens wailing; listen for leaves rustling, waves lapping, birds calling, insects humming.

If it's hot and sunny, then the beach is the place to go. Take the bus, subway, or train. If you drive, arrive early, and remember where you parked! Be sure to stake out your claim on the sand with blanket, umbrella, chairs, and ice box. Arm yourself with tubes of suntan lotion so you can quickly acquire a deep, natural tan.

If the beach is not your kind of place, try one of the parks. Some have swimming, boating, picnicking, and golfing facilities, not to mention concerts, zoos, and other attractions.

For those with limited time or money, almost every local community has at least one playground—the only open space available to many people. Young children play in the sand and on the swings; older kids play basketball, handball, or boxball; teenagers do almost anything; and older people interrupt their checkers or shuffleboard game to comment on the behavior of the younger generation. These places are indeed great possessions.

August | The River

One of my high school teachers was formerly an asphalt county elementary school teacher. In teaching second grade geography, she first had to define and describe the geographic features to her class. When she defined "river," she found out many of her students had never actually seen one.

This seemed easy to rectify. She planned a field

trip so the students could see a river firsthand and wiggle their toes in it. But, because of the risks and red tape involved, and because he didn't feel it was really necessary, the school principal wouldn't allow it.

A river is so much more than a geographic boundary, a source of water, a route to travel, or something you crane your neck to see as you drive over it on a bridge. It is an ecosystem to understand, an environment to protect; but first you have to see and feel it.

September | To Be Honored by Nature

When I was a high school senior, I went with several friends to one of those asphalt county parks. Late in the afternoon we walked to the bus stop for our ride home. We sat on the ground underneath some trees. As we talked, I felt something wet on my hand. A bird in the tree above had chosen to excrete its waste in my direction. I had never heard of anyone being so chosen by a bird. I felt honored.

October | The Unheard Sounds of Early

Many people work far from their homes. On a typical morning, herds of them crowd into buses, trains, and subways. They sit or stand, having learned from experience how to maintain their balance, and check their phones or read their newspapers. Or, they doze off, having acquired the remarkable ability to awaken at their proper stop.

On such a morning, as you wait for your transportation, the noises of traffic obscure other sounds. You sort out the rustling of trees in the wind, the warning cry of a blue jay, the jabbering of starlings, the cooing and chirping of pigeons and sparrows, the squawk of a startled robin, the buzz of a fly. These sounds will fade once you are on the bus, or in your school or workplace. But now you listen and wonder, am I the only one who hears them?

November | A Sterile Fortress

Here and there, between one building and the next, is a small woodlot. These are maintained for the benefit of the people who live or work nearby and go there to relax. In one such manicured stand of trees I took my daily lunch. I often strained my neck to search for birds in the treetops. I never saw any. Perhaps the absence of birds and other wildlife was due to a lack of suitable habitat.

To remedy this, I built two chickadee houses, but couldn't get permission to put them up. The building custodian said he didn't want the responsibility to clean them or take them down some day, or to risk having people climb the trees to steal them. I wasn't too upset because I wasn't confident that putting up a couple of bird houses was going to make any difference.

One day, as I was leaving the building, I noticed a work crew with pruning shears and saws removing some branches and trees from the woodlot. Why, I asked. Don't worry, they said, they were only removing the diseased and dying branches and trees. They didn't know of the insects that burrow into the decaying wood, or the birds that eat the insects, or the squirrel that searches for a hollowed trunk to make his home. Their woodlot management was well intended but counterproductive.

December | 11378

I would like to write about a bird I banded whose number was 11378. I would like to record its sightings over time and learn its natural history. But 11378 is not a number on a bird band, it's a zip code assigned by the United States Postal Service to an area of an asphalt county called Maspeth. It was named after the Mespeatches tribe, who knew the land and called it "Mespat," meaning "bad watering place." It was the first European settlement on Paumanok, the largest island in the contiguous United States, deposited by glaciers twenty- or thirty-thousand years ago. You can find it on a map; it's the southernmost part of New York State. We call it Long Island.

That's where I lived for my first seventeen years; it's the place where, despite its scarcity—or because of it—I developed an interest in the natural world.

On occasion, I took the bus to the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. I found a beautiful, isolated spot. My eyes scanned the phragmites, my ears tuned in to the red-winged blackbirds. Black skimmers, flying low with their beaks open, their lower beaks scooping the surface of the pond, became my favorite bird. I wondered if perhaps I was the first person ever to stand in that spot. I laughed at myself for having such a thought as I stooped to pick up a beer can and a gum wrapper.

Each of the millions of people in asphalt counties should have a favorite natural spot, a favorite animal and plant of the wild lands. Learning about the natural environment from books, television, and the Internet is good; better yet is to develop a personal relationship with the real thing.

The natural history of 11378 goes on. Dirt paths have been paved over with more durable asphalt; wetlands have been dredged out or filled in; flora and fauna have been reduced in number of individuals as well as species, each and every one all the more precious.

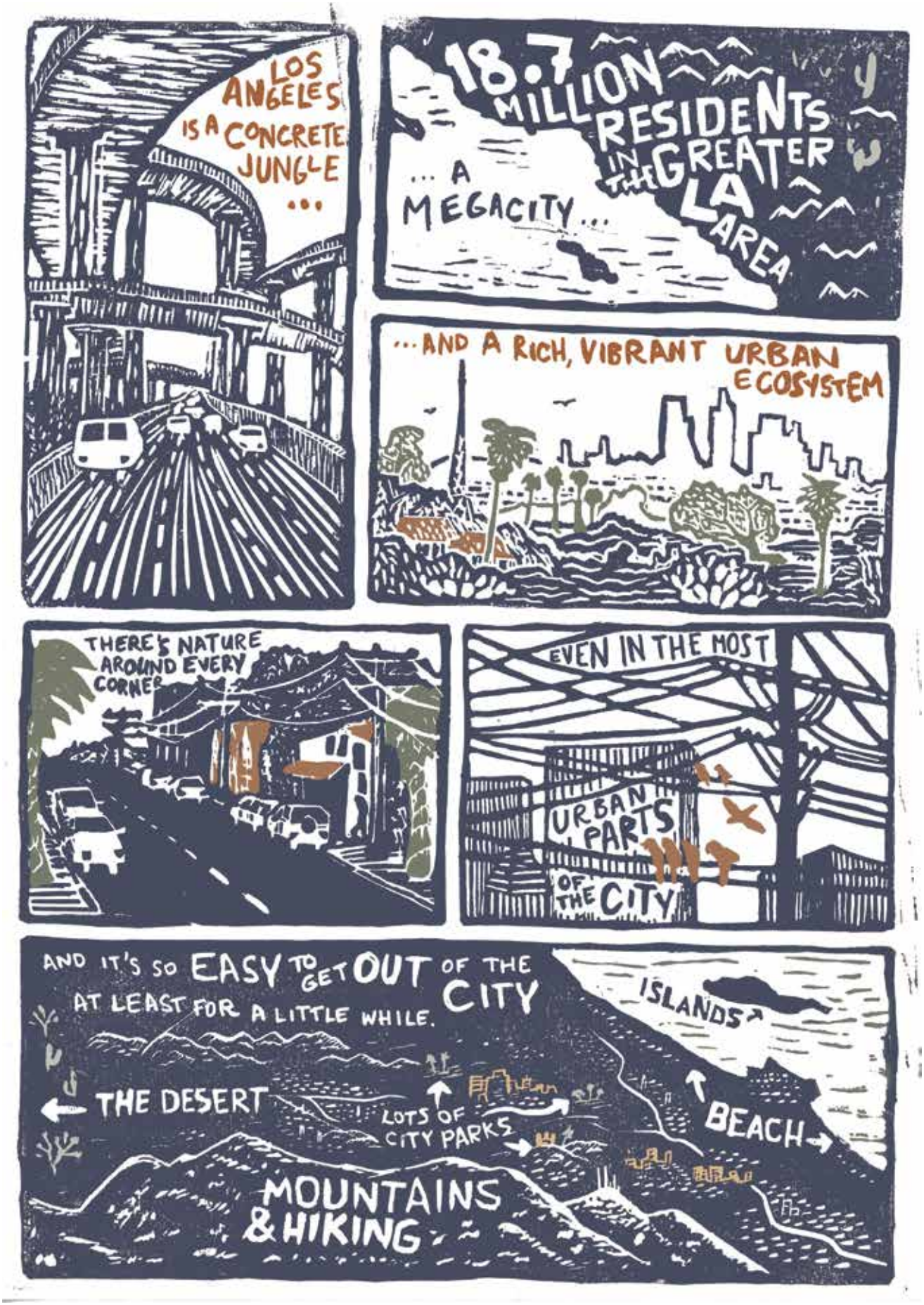
The living system, banded 11378, lives on.

Portraits of Place:
Urban Biodiversity in Los Angeles

Holly McKelvey

Holly McKelvey is an illustrator whose travels as well as her background in geology and ecology flavour her art on the relationship between humans and nature. She co-founded and illustrates for *Stonecrop Review*, and is currently working on two graphic novels that explore humans in nature. You can find her work at her website www.holly-draws.com/ or on Instagram and Twitter @holljmck


PORTRAITS OF PLACE:
URBAN BIODIVERSITY IN
LOS ANGELES
THIS SAGEBRUSH SMELLS AMAZING
IT'S THE SMELL OF THE FOOTHILLS BUNDLED INTO ONE PLANT
FUNNY IT'S NOT ACTUALLY TRUE SAGE
IT'S PART OF THE SUNFLOWER FAMILY
WHO KNEW IT COULD SMELL SO DAMN GOOD


LOS ANGELES IS A CONCRETE JUNGLE ...
18.7 MILLION RESIDENTS IN THE GREATER LA AREA
... A MEGACITY ...
... AND A RICH, VIBRANT URBAN ECOSYSTEM
THERE'S NATURE AROUND EVERY CORNER
EVEN IN THE MOST URBAN PARTS OF THE CITY
AND IT'S SO EASY TO GET OUT OF THE CITY AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE.
ISLANDS
THE DESERT
LOTS OF CITY PARKS
BEACH
MOUNTAINS & HIKING


THEN AGAIN...
SOMETIMES THE CITY FOLLOWS YOU OUT.


OF COURSE, THE NATURE IN AND AROUND LA ISN'T WHAT YOU'D CALL PRISTINE ...
AIRPLANE
WILD PARROTS
IT'S OVERFLOWING WITH NONNATIVE PLANTS AND ANIMALS
AND MANY NATIVE SPECIES HAVE HAD TO ADAPT TO CITY LIFE
ALLEN'S HUMMINGBIRD
BANANA TREE
EUCALYPTUS
BIRD OF PARADISE
THERE ARE EVEN SOME SPECIES OF FLY ONLY FOUND IN LOS ANGELES!
MAKING LA A FASCINATING AND UNIQUE ECOSYSTEM


SO WHO ARE SOME OF THE MANY SPECIES THAT CALL L A HOME?
PALM TREES WERE INTRODUCED AS GOOD CITY TREES BECAUSE THEIR SHALLOW ROOTS DONT BREAK UP SIDE WALKS
WILD PARROTS: PET SHOP ESCAPEES
CALIFORNIA POPPIES ARE THE STATE FLOWER
COYOTES THRIVE IN LA
PRICKLY PEAR CACTI (THE FRUIT MAKE GREAT SMOOTHIES)
MUSTARD FLOWERS (INVASIVE) ARE DELICOUS
CALIFORNIA SAGEBRUSH IN TEA CAN RELIEVE CRAMPS
INVASIVE FOX SQUIRRELS EAT AND DISPERSE MANY NONNATIVE SEEDS LIKE EUCALYPTUS
LEMONADE BERRIES ARE A TASTY COASTAL PLANT
AND, OF COURSE... HOMO SAPIENS

Rocky

Jacquelin Cangro

Jacquelin Cangro served as editor for the anthology, *The Subway Chronicles: Scenes from Life in New York* (Plume). Her short story, "Secrets of a Seamstress," was selected as a finalist in the *Saturday Evening Post*'s 2014 Great American Fiction contest. Elsewhere, her stories have been published in the *Cortland Review*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, *The Macguffin*, and *Pangolin Papers*. She can be found at jacquelincangro.com

I'd just snapped the cap off my beer, hadn't yet felt the sudsy bite in the back of my throat, when I saw him lumber out of the darkness and into McGinty's courtyard. At first we all were paralyzed in our seats, as you would be if a half-ton moose came within spitting distance. We often see moose around the city limits, but they usually don't decide to join us for a nightcap.

I was about to tell everyone not to make any sudden movements when Shannon jumped up, catching her chair between the bricks of the patio and knocking it over. That caused Linda, Uncle John, and Curly to stand, and the moose to lower his head in a shoveling motion. Then he made a guttural honking—somewhere between a goose and a cow. A call that nature had designed to be heard for miles. A challenge call.

"What now?" Uncle John said too loudly, tapping his hearing aid, worried about missing crucial information.

"The storeroom?" Linda said.

The storeroom was closer than the door to the bar, and we had a clear path. We inched there single file. I brought up the rear, crabbing sideways, not wanting to turn my back to the moose. He followed me for a few steps and stopped.

And now here we are: humans holed up in McGinty's storeroom; moose in the courtyard of the bar under the glow of the twinkly lights. The storeroom is a well-used ice fishing hut that Linda bought off Craigslist. It's been propped in the courtyard for ten, twelve years, but I'd never had a reason to go inside before tonight. If Curly and I stand fingertip to fingertip, we'll just about touch opposite walls.

Shannon taps me on the shoulder as we peer out the window in the door. "He's gone mad. I bet it's rabies!"

Preparing myself for anything, I unbutton the cuffs of the only dress shirt I own and roll the sleeves to my elbows. "I suppose he could have been bitten by a rabid raccoon or something, but he's not exhibiting the prototypical behavior."

"But approaching a group of people is prototypical behavior?" She makes her voice squeaky at the end. It used to be cute when she mocked me like that—the way her nose wrinkled and her eyes flashed. We dated on and off since high school, but now it is most definitely off. Definitely.

Ten years as a biologist for Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife has taught me not to assume. This is a trait Shannon despises. She thinks I overanalyze. She likes magic and intuition. I'm all about data and truth, like my dad. But I've been coming around to her way of thinking, although I would never tell her this. I'm trying to expect (and sometimes do) the unexpected, which is helpful when you study *Ursus americanus*, aka the black bear. Black bears are clever and bold, and they're smart enough not to trap themselves in a courtyard with only one way out.

The moose snorts a thin column of vapor and stares at nothing in particular. He seems distracted by the lights and their reflection in the window.

"Why don't we make a lot of noise? Like bang the lids of the garbage cans," Curly says. He tucks his black tie into the waistband of his pants. Curly probably hasn't worn that tie since his wife died a decade ago. "Maybe he'll get scared and go away."

All heads swivel toward me. "Or he could get angry and charge us."

I should point out that we know the moose is male for two reasons. One: he hasn't yet shed his enormous antlers. That usually happens in January or February. How many bitterly cold days had my dad and I snowshoed through the backwoods looking for sheds? Sometimes we'd be frozen to the quick and not find one, and sometimes we'd pile them taller than I was on the sled. We attached the sled to my harness like the little dog in the Grinch, and together, we'd "mush" them to the truck. Once we picked up speed on the snowpack, we kept a good pace. Then Dad would lower the tailgate and load them in the back, each one weighing a solid fifteen pounds.

And the second reason we know the moose is male: at that moment he crouches a bit and lets loose a long stream of steaming pee.

"Impressive," Linda says.

Linda and my dad were together more than twenty years. She owns McGinty's, a bar converted from a farmhouse leftover from when this area was an apple orchard as far as the eye could see. If you ask her about the name, she'll tell a tall tale about her great grandfather Paddy McGinty, but the truth is that she was going through a *Frasier* phase when she opened the place. Based on that information alone, she and Dad were perfect for each other. He was just like Frasier's dad—a levelheaded, practical guy with a big, damaged heart.

She shoos Curly off of the carton he had been leaning against and takes out a Budweiser for each of us. The bottles are cold enough. We clink all around and tip our heads back in long, simultaneous gulps.

"Don't suppose you'll ever get that stink out of here, will you, Lin," Curly says.

Shannon opens the window, letting in a burst of warmish air tinged with an acidic shot of moose piss. This December has been downright balmy—hardly any snow, temperatures in the forties. A prolonged adolescence.

Maybe for the moose too. I listen for a response to his challenge call, but all I hear is a group of rubberneckers. Everyone in McGinty's has emptied onto Clarke Street and is now lined along the courtyard fence.

"Here moose-y, moose-y." Kissing noises follow.

"The glare of the lights is too much. You think Linda can turn 'em off for a minute?"

"You prop Jenny on the fence, and I'll take it." A flash goes off.

"Let's call him Rocky. Like Rocky and Bullwinkle. Remember that cartoon?"

"Rocky!" says Jenny, clapping her hands.

"Enough," I call from the storeroom like a voice from the beyond. "Jack. Angela. Ben. Come on. This is a wild animal."

Caught off guard, Ben nods sheepishly, but I know he'll post the photo to Facebook with a stupid caption. "Hey, Mike, sorry about your dad. He was a good man."

"The best," Angela says. "My favorite teacher of all time."

"All right. Just get going."

For a few minutes, I'd forgotten why we were here. Just beyond Rocky the moose is the picnic table where we'd been sitting. Our still-full beers wait like soldiers on guard. On second thought, Dad wouldn't have liked that analogy. He wasn't keen on shows of force. Like Moai statues conferring sacraments. Scratch that. He didn't subscribe to dogma. Like redwoods standing sentinel. That's the one; he believed in the quiet power of nature. My tie is in a heap next to Dad's silver urn. It hadn't occurred to me to bring it into the storeroom. Part of me wants to run out there and get it, keep it safe and close.

Ever since Dad was diagnosed with heart disease almost a year ago to the day, I couldn't wait to get to this point, the moment it was all over, all the useless worry and the lame attempts to help. All the pretending that there could be dignity in his death. Instead I'm trapped in a storeroom that smells like trout with people I only see at funerals, staring at a crazy moose, while the odds of getting shitfaced and drunk dialing Betsy Warner for a sympathy screw are dwindling. Does this make me a bad son?

"Assholes," Shannon says. She holds my hand. "Rocky was the squirrel."

She always knew just the right thing to say.

Shannon's hand is cold from holding the beer bottle, so tiny and delicate—she, a Princess Fiona; me, an oafish Shrek. She was the reason I took the job studying black bears in Aroostook. There's nowhere, and then there's Aroostook. Couldn't go on pining forever. It was best for both of us. Then this autumn, the bears went into hibernation, Dad went into hospice, and I came home. And I noticed that I hadn't really moved on. She is here out of respect for Dad and only that, I keep reminding myself. But her head was on my shoulder at the funeral.

Curly's brother, Jeff, passes in his patrol car, lights flashing, telling people over the loudspeaker to stay inside. Rocky turns red, then blue, red, then blue. As soon as Jeff turns the corner, the local television crew parks their van in front of McGinty's. The satellite dish goes up.

"How long do you think this'll take?" Curly asks. "I've got to get home. No disrespect of course." We don't question him. Curly takes pride in being set in his ways. Dad had shown him how to use the DVR, but he insisted on watching his programs as they aired. "Turn off the TV,

Curly. Get outside and exercise," Dad told him often. "At this rate, I'll outlive you by a mile."

Curly checks his watch. Elephants, crows, and bears, especially females with cubs, mourn the death of a member of their group, but I wonder how long they are affected by the loss, how long before they return to homeostasis. I wipe the fog of our collective breath from the storeroom window with my sleeve. Rocky starts shaking his head in quick jolts as if he's trying to rid himself of annoying flies. "About an hour," I lie. "Two, tops." Curly turns to Linda for moral support in the form of another beer.

"Something's not right here," I say to Shannon. "But I can't put my finger on it."

"Something's definitely different," she says and raises her eyebrows. She always knows the right thing to say, except when she doesn't.

"At least some things never change."

"What?"

"You," I say. "Do you have to be so sarcastic? Christ."

"Subtlety was never your strong suit, was it?" She forces her hair behind her ears, the sign that she's revving up, and this is where I tune out.

"Kids. Kids. Give it a rest. Pete's service was only two hours ago," Linda says. "Though I don't think your behavior would surprise him."

"Sorry."

"Besides, we've got bigger fish to fry." She points to Rocky, who had taken several steps closer to us.

"Maybe he wants in," Uncle John says.

Every Sunday from May through September, for as a long as I could remember, Dad and Uncle John set out at some ungodly hour to stand in the middle of a cold river tributary hoping the fish would bite. On Saturday nights as Dad laid out his gear, the inevitable question: Are you sure you don't want to come? I dreaded that moment, when I would have to say no again. I became rooted in that no, but he never stopped asking, even after I moved out. Later, when things with Shannon had imploded after grad school, I secretly appreciated the steadiness of the question. I wish I had said yes, just once. For the first time since Dad's long fucking decline, I realize I will never hear that question again.

Uncle John always said yes, and in many ways was a better friend to Dad because of it. Here he was, hands stuffed in his pockets, glasses sliding down his nose. He was a quiet man, always content to let his brother do the talking. Who would be Uncle John's fly fishing buddy now? Uncle John stares hard at Rocky, as if he is a Jedi, trying to will him to leave. But behind his attempt at telepathy he looks lost. The way I feel.

Rocky seems to be studying us as much as we're studying him. Moose have a blind spot directly in front of them. They're forced to turn their heads when they want to look closely at something. His right eye, just a few feet from the window, is wet and runny. My shadow is reflecting in his pupil. He closes his eye behind thick eyelashes for a long blink, and I disappear.

A white floodlight sets the entire courtyard ablaze, flattening everything and chasing the shadows. On Clarke Street I can just make out a woman in silhouette standing by the fence. Between the spots dancing in my vision, the camera pans along the courtyard and stops on Rocky, who shakes his head violently. A line of drool leaves his mouth and drips toward the ground in a long

ribbon. Still, the odds are very long that he is rabid. Some other kind of illness, more likely. Possibly he is dying.

"It's time for you to do something," Shannon says.

"What, exactly, would you have me do?" Dad would have known what to do. My mind goes to the tranquilizer darts I have in my work truck back in Aroostook. The thought of Rocky dropping to his knees and breaking a bone or twisting his neck under the weight of his antlers fills me with dread. If he's dying, let him go in peace.

"He's getting angry," Curly says. He scoots to the back of the storeroom, but I don't want to tell him that's not going to be far enough if Rocky charges us.

As if on cue, his head sinks lower and lower below his horizon until his antlers are pointed directly at us. He stamps his right front hoof twice. I pull Shannon away from the window just as Rocky pushes his massive weight onto his front legs and kicks his back legs out behind him.

We all gasp. The picnic table where we had been sitting before Rocky came into our lives knocks into another table and flips over. Beer bottles shatter. The urn makes a thin tinny sound as it bounces on the brick pavers. When it lands again, the top comes off sending a small cloud of ash into the air.

"Oh no. No, no, no," Linda says.

I take one of those cleansing breaths and hold for three beats before slowly letting it out.

Linda puts her hand to her forehead. "Pete's last wish was to have his ashes scattered in the river. His last wish!"

All those hours I sat with him in the hospital, he never told me he had a last wish. He believed that kind of stuff was best left to creationists. Like Mom. She was buried in her best Sunday dress with a set of rosary beads in her hands. Dad was a man of science, a chemist, a believe-it-when-I-see-it kind of guy.

"Mom." Shannon puts her arm around Linda's shoulders. "Don't worry. We'll, uh, clean it up and put it all back in the urn. Won't we, Mike?"

I nod, but the thought makes me queasy.

I probably failed to mention that Shannon is Linda's daughter. I try to forget that part. Linda and Dad thought it would be cute if we were dating too. No pressure there.

The burst of activity seems to drain Rocky. He staggers a few steps to the right and then back to the left. The intense light is still trained on him. He lowers his nose until it's nearly touching the ground, and I expect his legs might buckle at any moment. He deserves better than this.

"Call your brother and ask him to get these people out of here," I say to Curly as Linda hands him her cell phone.

Then, surprising myself, I turn the doorknob and step outside. With nothing between us, Rocky is larger than life. The hump between his shoulders stands a head taller than me. Slowly, I move to his left side to be in his line of vision and to block some of the light. He lets out a long, rumbling sigh, and I realize I've been holding my breath.

"Jeff? Can you swing back around to McGinty's? This damned camera crew is making things worse." Curly's voice echoes from the tin can that is the storeroom.

Rocky is a beautiful bull. He has thick paddles between the prongs of his antlers, which curve gracefully upward like a well-oiled catcher's mitt. He might be seven or eight years old. In the prime of his life.

"Dad would have loved these when you were done with them."

I've never touched antlers on a living moose before. Though I am currently breaking nearly every Inland Fisheries and Wildlife safety rule, I place one finger on one prong. I can't explain how I knew it would be okay, I just knew. Rocky eyes are at half-mast, almost inviting me to keep going. I rub my palm along the woody prong, half thrilled and half scared shitless. Come February, if he makes it that long, he will cast off these antlers. When they finally drop into the snowpack, will it be a relief? A release of a heavy burden? Or will it be a loss, part of him that he could never reclaim?

Brakes squeak as Jeff pulls up in his police car. Soon the courtyard returns to shadows as the camera crew moves on. Rocky and I both relax. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry you're dying," I whisper. "Don't you want to die in the woods?"

He is my responsibility now. I'll see to it that things end well for him, or as well as possible. Maybe he'll let me lead him out of the courtyard so he can feel dirt beneath his hooves before it is too late.

Dad's five favorite words: *We have to do something.* We'd gone camping one summer break, the four of us. Shannon and I were eleven, maybe twelve. Dad set up the tents while Linda started the grill. Back then the state park had built-in grills around the campsite—a terrible attraction for bears, we later learned, and the definitive start of my career. Linda was about to dump the briquettes into the grill when she pulled up short.

"Pete? Come see this."

Trapped between the grates was a black bird with bright red patches on its wings. A wire was wrapped around its foot, which was hooked between the bars. The bird looked exhausted. Dad put on his reading glasses and searched for the right tool in his Swiss Army knife.

"Make your fingers into a V. I want you very gently to put the bird's neck in that V so it can't peck your hand," he said to me. "Then hold its body still with your other hand."

The bird flailed a bit, and its heart thumped against my palm—a persistent pulse of fear and desire to be free. But the determined look on Dad's face is what I remember most. He licked his lips as he always did when he was concentrating. His wiry eyebrows, flecked with gray even then, squeezed together as the pliers snapped the wire in two. He untangled the bird's foot and checked it for cuts.

"Okay, Mike. Ready for lift-off."

I raised my arms, feeling the energy contained between my hands, and when I opened them, the bird exploded skyward. One, two, three flaps of its wings, and it was gone. Dad watched the trees for a while, but I knew he couldn't see the bird anymore. He patted me on the back and smiled. The trip was already a success as far as he was concerned. He was proud to be of service to this bird. That's exactly how he would have phrased it—to be of service to this bird.

I move along Rocky's side, running my hand down his flank so he knows where I am. I gently, very gently, tap his haunches to see if he'll turn toward the gate. His big nose swings toward me nearly swiping my chest. Then he belches. An epic Homer Simpson belch so long I count to ten. The smell is the bleachers after a Yankees-Red Sox game. I wipe my eyes on my shirtsleeve.

"Gross," Shannon says from the storeroom.

I begin backing up toward the courtyard gate, hoping he'll follow. I feel it before I hear it—coarse sand beneath my good shoes and then a crunch. My feet become rooted to that spot, unable to move, unwilling to track my father's ashes along the brick pavers. Rocky's hoof kicks the urn with a twang, and it rolls a few feet with a metallic echo before settling to a stop.

The sound seems to wake Rocky from whatever fog he's been under. Awareness returns to his eyes. He scans the breeze with sharp, quick intakes of air, zeroing in on something near the woods. He squeezes into the corner between the overturned table and the fence with no room to spare. He dips his head. There is lip smacking and snorting, but it's too dark to see what he's doing. Where's the news crew with their spotlight now?

"Mike, he's going to get trapped," Shannon says.

No kidding.

Despite what is now beneath my shoes, I force myself to get closer. He's snuffling and crunching. Eating? He pushes his nose in my direction, and I backpedal to avoid a thrashing from his antlers. I step in something squishy. It isn't dung or a clump of wet leaves. It has the consistency of grapes. I reach down under my heel and bring it to eye level to inspect by the twinkly lights. Just an apple—brown and mushy and mealy, a whiff of sulfur. Dozens of apple trees still line Clarke Street. It's been decades since this was a proper orchard, and even though they're no longer tended, the trees continue to do their thing. By December, fallen apples are usually buried under a good foot of snow, but this year they are exposed and fermenting.

I won't think about the fact that I'm holding a rotten apple coated with Dad's ashes. Compartmentalizing is the best way to work with wild animals. It's dangerous to think about your ex, your dead father, your pre-midlife crisis while working with wildlife. Tuck it all away in the back of your mind to think about at another time (or better yet, never). Ask Shannon, and I'm sure she'll say that this is how I have lived my entire life, wild animals or not. I can't disagree with her.

Rocky lunges for the apple in my hand. I backpedal again, but this time he pushes forward, straining the wooden fence.

"Not my fen—," Linda says from the storeroom as Rocky downs the slats with ease.

"How many of these have you eaten?" I ask Rocky, half expecting an answer.

He cranes his neck and stretches his lips toward my hand. I pitch the apple into the woods beyond the row of trees. He lumbers after it like a dog to a ball. The darkness envelopes him. I hear him shuffling around in the leaf litter for a few minutes, and then nothing.

"Is he gone?" Shannon asks. They venture out of the storeroom.

I nod, disappointed for some reason. "He's not sick. Just drunk."

"Drunk? Really?"

"He's been eating fermented apples. He'll sleep it off and be fine in the morning."

"I wonder what a moose hangover is like," she says. Usually I take the bait and allow her to lighten the mood but not this time.

Curly and Uncle John each slap me on the back as they go to their cars, and Linda promises to have beers waiting for us in the bar. Shannon and I right the tables and the urn. She hands me a broom she'd found in the

storeroom. The ashes are in a mound, except for the area that had been flattened by my footprint. Such a small pile, much smaller than I would have expected for a man who was six feet tall.

"I can do this, if you want," Shannon says. She reaches for the broom. If I'd felt useless while he was dying, I feel even more useless now. I motion for her to hold the dustpan and she puts it flush against the brick. I sweep Dad's ashes, now mixed with dirt, twigs, and leaves. There's no way to get all of the ashes that are trapped in the mortar.

"I hope he's okay." I look out at the trees where Rocky disappeared. "I should have followed him, made sure he didn't get in trouble while he's down for the count."

"He'll be fine," Shannon says in the most absentminded way possible. This is my pet peeve, or one of them. If she's going to be so dismissive, she shouldn't say anything at all. She taps the dustpan on the ground to get my attention back to the task at hand.

"Can you cut me some slack? For once?" I wave my hand around to indicate everything that has brought me to this horrible moment, including her. Though I know that's not fair.

"For once? I cut you too much slack. I never asked you to hold up your end of the bargain."

I say, "Oh, that's rich," but she's right. She didn't expect anything of me, and maybe that was the problem. "Ask me now."

Shannon stands up. Her features are unreadable, which scares me. Because I already know I don't want to return to Aroostook. Then she holds out her hand, and I take it. For now, this is the best we can do.

I spend a restless, sleepless night watching the clock, and the next day Linda, Uncle John, and I take Uncle John's dinghy to the middle of the river. I know I should be here with them, but I couldn't say why. I just sit at the front of the dinghy for ballast, peeking into this private side of my father I never knew. Uncle John insists on manning the oars while Linda empties the urn into the brownish gray water. We watch it float on the lazy ripples like sludge you'd skim off the top. "I guess I thought it would sink to the bottom," Uncle John says.

"Could we swirl it around so it spreads out?" Linda asks.

Uncle John reaches forward with the oar before Linda grabs it midair. "You want me to stick my hand in? This water is ice cold."

She shakes her head, so we just watch the ashes until it's time to go.

"He really didn't need my help, did he?" I say to no one in particular. I squint in the early morning sun.

"There was nothing more that could be done," Linda says. She pats my hand. "You did everything you could."

Everything *I* could. Could someone else have done more? Could someone else have been more compassionate, more sensitive, more intuitive? I know I'm overanalyzing her words, but I can't help myself.

Uncle John lets me row to shore, though that is an understatement. I nearly wrestle the oars away from him. Surprisingly strong for an old man. We are miles from town and McGinty's, but I scan the riverbanks for Rocky. Between the bare trees, I hear the echo of a grunt—a cross between a goose and a cow—and I hope I had been of service to him.

Giraffes with beer kegs, Paris 13th by Roger Camp (bio on page 76)

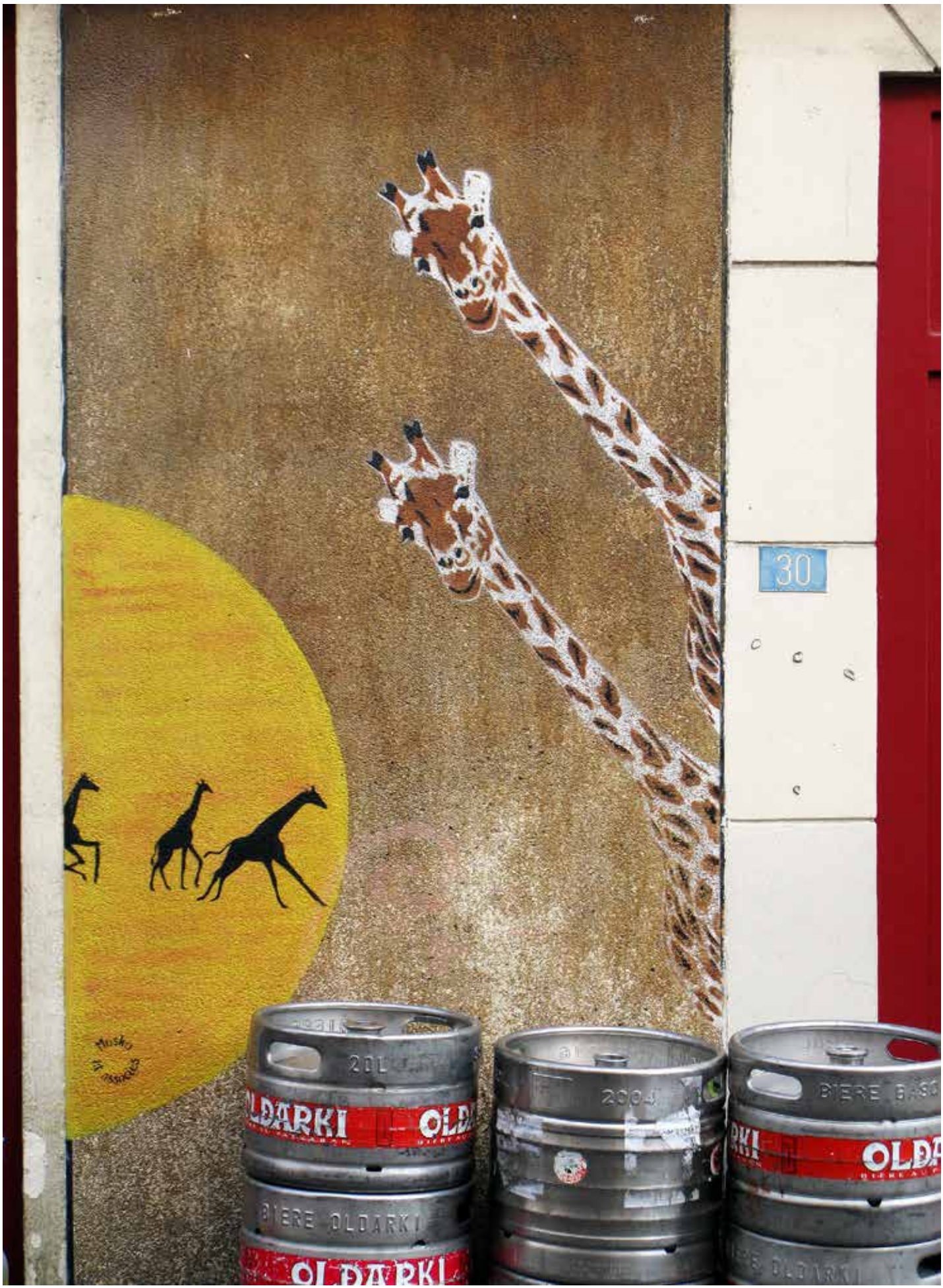
Issue 4 Illustrators and Photographers

Roger Camp

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight*, Thames & Hudson, 2002 and *Heat*, Charta, Milano, 2008. His work has appeared in numerous journals including *The New England Review* and *New York Quarterly.* His work is represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC.

Rana Voss

Rana Manele Voss is a young illustrator based in Kiel, Germany. Currently she studies communication design. While studying fashion design (Hochschule Hannover and Birmingham City University) she found her way into illustration and art through a short-term course called "drawing and visualisation" at the VIA University College in Viborg, Denmark.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Hornet Truths

MK Sturdevant

MK Sturdevant's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Orion*, *Flyway*, *Kestrel*, *Alluvian*, the *Lily Poetry Review*, *X-R-A-Y LitMag*, *Tiny Molecules*, *The Lily Poetry Review*, *The Great Lakes Review* and elsewhere. She lives in the Midwest and can be found on twitter: @mksturdevant

This bald-faced hornet, enormous, white and black, it warned me first. "I feel as though you might trap me or threaten the nest," it said.

Its face was getting so close I could see its mandibles. Instinctively, I tried to back up but I felt glued. I wasn't heavy, just slow. "I won't," I promised.

"But I feel like you might. I have to cut you now, and leach my venom into you, maybe a couple times."

"Please don't."

"I will," it said, turning down towards my arm.

"Will I die?"

"No. You might want to, the swelling and itching. The sheer pain of the first contact, then the sinking of the blade."

"Can I run?"

"No. We move at the same time now. That fabric is bending. Space will respond in a few days, we think."

"We?"

"Think."

"Hornets think about space-time fabric but not my promise?"

"Try to run then."

I bend my right leg to take off. But it takes about half a minute. It isn't that I'm weighed down, everything is just taking forever. Every movement seems slowed down a thousand times more than usual. I only get a few inches away.

As it makes its way toward me, the hornet's wings lift and drop. I can hear the slightest whir, flap, with every wingbeat. Its face is coming nearer.

"I have things I want to do," I beg.

"Try to do them then," it says.

I reach for my iced tea. I want to finish it. I want to water the basil and peppers. I was supposed to be working this whole time. I don't know what my priorities should be now. I get the rim of my glass to my lips. The ice cubes are slowly dislodged from the bottom of the glass. I would have said suddenly, but it's all so protracted I can't move my face away from the rogue cube that sloshes me with tea. Even the drips are slow, and my hand, which instinctively lifts to wipe them, takes forever to get to my face.

The hornet is wielding its stinger already, flying about an inch from my arm. At this rate, I have another minute or two.

"Wait," I beg. "I want nothing to do with you, I didn't even know there was a nest around here. I was just drinking iced tea by this stupid, late-season flowering tree."

"I like these trees."

"I know."

I look up into the tree—a squat, thick tree with giant blossoms. The people who lived here before must have planted it. I'm too Midwestern to know about flowering trees, but I guess they grow here now. I've heard they're trending.

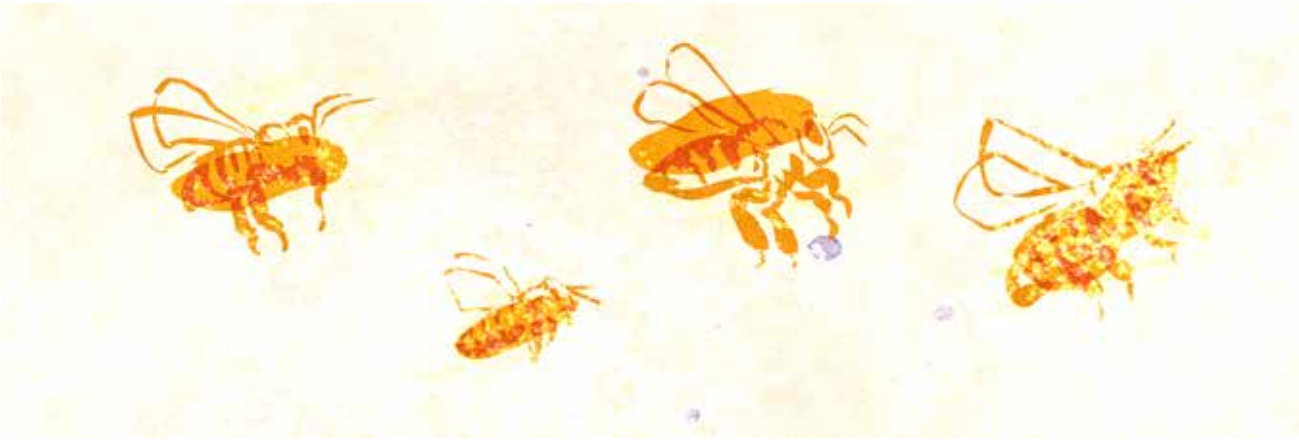
"What's the deal with time again, I don't understand," I ask.

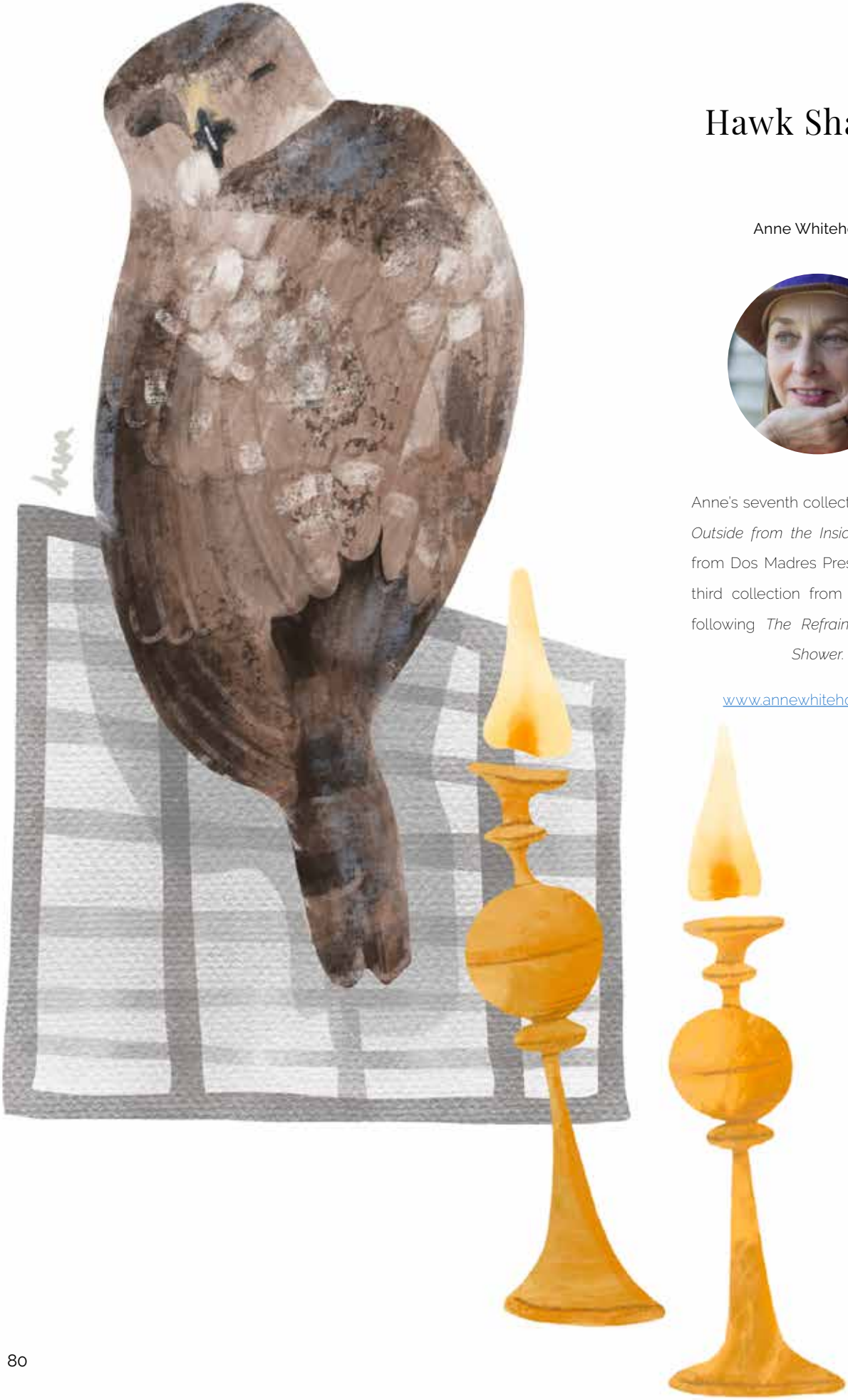
"It broke this year. We can feel it. It's been arcing, and it recently snapped. Our habitat is expanding, now our season too."

"Christ. What good are you, anyway? What do hornets do for nature?" I ask it.

"We predate flies, beetles, and caterpillars, keeping their numbers in balance. What good are you?"

I try to think of an answer, but its ass is poised over my forearm, the stinger fully drawn.





Hawk Shabbat

Anne Whitehouse

Anne's seventh collection of poetry, *Outside from the Inside*, is just out from Dos Madres Press. This is her third collection from Dos Madres, following *The Refrain* and *Meteor Shower*.

www.annewhitehouse.com

Once a Cooper's Hawk settled
outside the first-floor window
at the back of our Manhattan apartment,
perched on the wrought-iron bars
of an empty air conditioner cage.

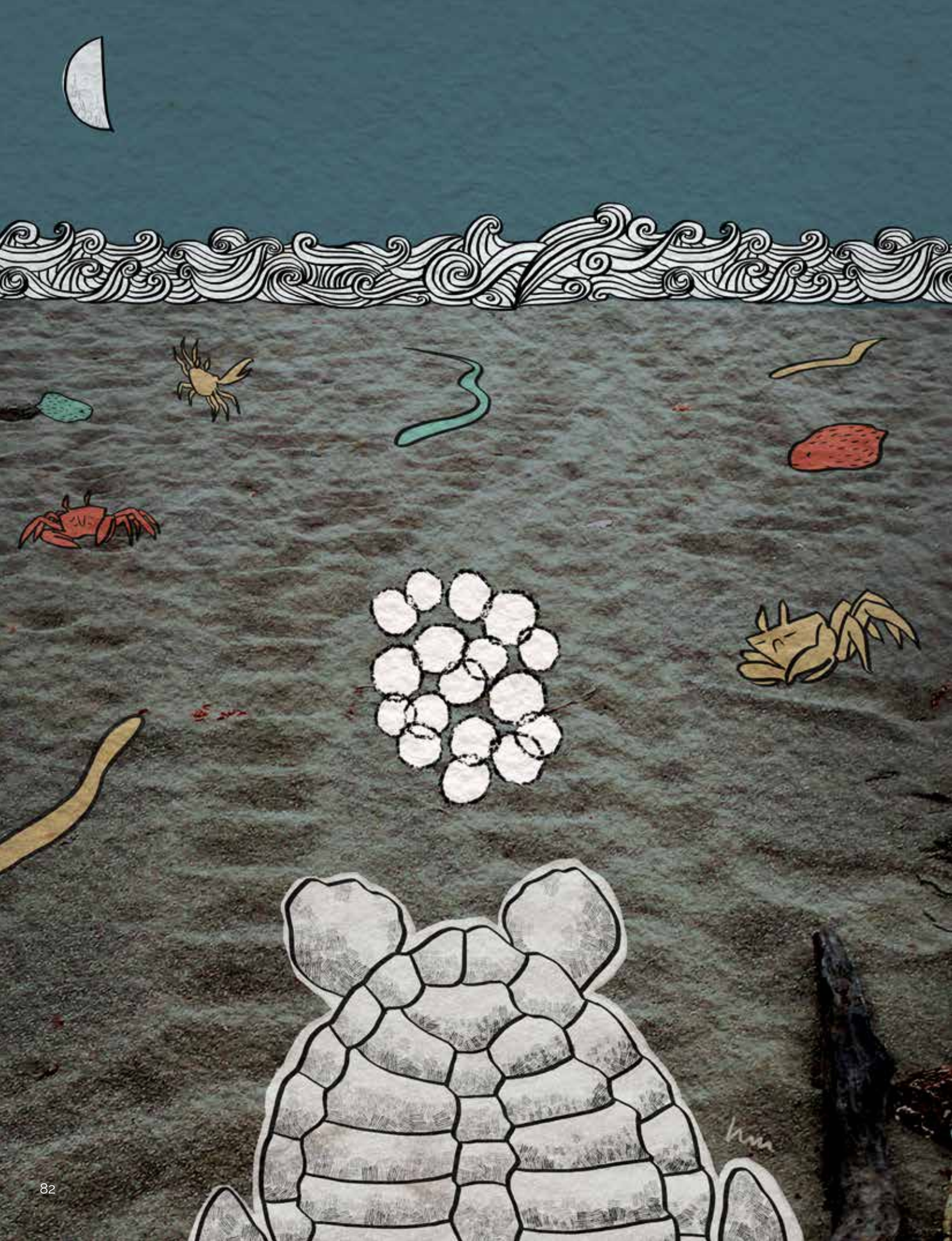
In the cold, high realms of the air
it had traveled a great distance
and from afar with piercing vision
had spied our cage and courtyard,
one protected space within another.
It felt safe enough to rest surrounded
by high walls, like being
at the bottom of a well of air.

The hawk was so tired it didn't care
that we were inches away,
separated only by a pane of glass.
Its head swiveled all around,
facing backwards on its neck,
and with its beak it ruffled
its neck feathers and tucked its head
under its wing and was fast asleep
while fierce-looking talons
gripped the bars of the cage.

It was a Friday evening, and the peace
of Shabbat was falling like a veil,
shadowing the world as the hawk slept.
Not wanting to disturb its rest,
I left the room dark as I set the table
next to the window and lit the candles,
softly singing the blessing,
shielding my eyes in prayer.

My husband and daughter and I
blessed the wine and the bread
and quietly ate our dinner by candlelight.
Twice the hawk woke and stared at us.
Its black pupils rimmed in gold
pierced me with inexpressible wildness,
as fierce and strange as God's angel.

Like a sheet of mica clouding its gaze,
the hawk's inner eyelid slid from front to back,
and again its head rotated, and it bent
its beak under its wing and slept and woke
and slept again. I woke in the night
and it was still there, a dark form
immobile against the darkness.
In the morning it was gone.



Turtle Walking

Ishita Sinha

Ishita Sinha is an English teacher, currently residing in Chennai. Despite the water crisis, heat and humidity, she likes the city for the damaal dumil of the women she lives with and the abandoned property next door, which is increasingly being occupied by crows, cats and koels.

Chandni was the one who told me about the turtle boy—an old student of hers, one of the few she's stayed close to over the years. *He goes to the beach with a bunch of others. Now that you're in Chennai, you can connect with him.* That's how I started walking the beaches at night. No two nights are the same. Tonight the moon is half-shrouded in black and the sea overspills and thunders. My attention is drawn to things it leaves onshore. Dead things. Eels, puffer fish and turtles. Not all turtles are dead, though. We walk for the unborn ones, those buried in warm sand pits.

The Students' Sea Turtle Conservation Network (SSTCN) volunteers and citizens sit in a circle under a street light—one of hundreds that light up the entire stretch of sand. There's a group of young men playing midnight volleyball not far away. This powerful lighting is a serious threat for turtles. Left to themselves, newly-emerged hatchlings will head in the direction of these lights, the brightest objects they wake up to, instead of towards the sea, get dehydrated and die. SSTCN volunteers have been walking the beaches at night, January to March, for over twenty years, relocating hundreds of nests and releasing thousands of hatchlings every year.

Shiv Anna leads tonight's session with citizens in Tamil—one of SSTCN's primary goals is to raise awareness about turtle conservation and the environment. He plays with sand and dogs and answers questions posed by attendees. *Olive ridleys are the only turtles that nest on Chennai's beaches. A clutch could have up to 110 eggs. They are vulnerable because only a few nesting sites remain in the world and because of overfishing. Yes, they are protected by the letter of the law, but little is being done to save them. For example, most industrial trawlers do not*

have mandatory turtle excluder devices (TED)—a door turtles and bigger species can push open to escape. There are other threats to their survival as well—they are a thermosensitive species and sand temperatures have increased alarmingly. Then the walk starts. A few volunteers act as scouts and walk ahead. They keep close to the high tide line and look for turtle tracks. Once tracks are found they will follow them to locate the nesting site. Then they will dip their hollow metal poles into the sand around the nesting site—the more easily and deeper the probe sinks, the closer the nest.

I walk barefoot with other volunteers and citizens, sidestepping trash, excrement, and dead sea creatures. Hundreds of crabs scuttle about our feet. Spidery ones, perhaps freshly-hatched, and larger ones that glimmer white in torchlight—ghostly fingers dancing on sand. Their preternatural senses are on high alert and they avoid getting under our feet. Shiv Anna says they belong to land and water equally, breathing oxygen from the air through wet gills. Up above, the stars are big and bright and the sky bends into the sea and I believe the earth is round, my mind extending the curve into a ball. We walk, eyes roving for tracks. Yama, walking with the scouts, has circled each dead eel we come across with her probe, so we can observe their silver bodies and gaping teeth.

There is an hour of rest. Behind us is a big bungalow. "The whole thing is a Coastal Regulation Zone violation," Babita says. With her, it's all violation-this and petitions-that and the environment ministry. A real activist. My energy reserves are low, but I have an urge to dance. I feel compelled to engage with the night, with the people beside me, with the music of the sea. The moon is higher now and I lie down to trace Orion and the bears. Some walks we don't find any nests or even dead turtles. On others, we witness the turtles nesting, watch the mother flap and flail—ever so awkward on land and *exhausted*, back to sea.

At this point I should tell you about the dogs that Babita is feeding. In all there are more than seven stray dogs that might join the walk. Luta has been a tagalong for over twelve years. Eyes full of cataracts, he is remarkably fit for his age. Shaky Bum is odd. He whines and begs to be loved every second of the walk. I have made friends with the only female dog that has joined us on our walk today; I think her name is Floppy. It's amusing to watch the dogs' attempts at catching crabs—the crustaceans immediately sink into holes, leaving the dogs puzzled, scraping sand with muzzles and paws. We cross many fishing hamlets and their respective defensive dog packs. Our dogs bark back. Some fishermen leave for the sea at one thirty in the morning, some at three thirty. Their boats are simple machines with painted wooden bodies and motors that jut behind.

Hurray, we find a nest. The tracks are clearly visible in the moonlight. Yama sits with her knees splayed over the nest site and starts digging. Her small hands scoop out sand in quick motions. Three at a time, she places the eggs beside her. They are crumpled white table tennis balls. Azad the turtle boy measures the dimensions of the nest, counts the eggs carefully, and places them in a cloth bag. One hundred and ten. Then we are invited to feel the cavity. One at a time, we crawl to the nest and poke our arms into it. It's deep enough that our shoulders disappear inside. Our foreheads touch the nest opening and our bodies are prostrate—the nest is a shrine and we bow in namaskaram.

No more tracks are spotted and Yama carries the precious cargo to the hatchery. "It's like carrying five kilos of vegetables," she jokes. We are met by a small drama. A camera crew is shooting a scene right in our path. Babita seethes with anger. *Not allowed. No hope for turtles.* The sea spray caught in the film lighting resembles billowing smoke. Further down the beach, I hear owls and bats from the grounds of the Theosophical Society. Azad and Yama point to an unlit part of the beach. It takes me a few seconds to make out the outline of the structure, which is just a bit more solid than the general darkness around it. The hatchery is simply a bit of the beach surrounded by bamboo. The fence prevents hatchlings from getting out and crawling towards beach lights. While I wait at the hatchery door with the other volunteers, Yama and Azad go inside and dig a nest similar in dimensions to the one they extracted the eggs from. Forty-five days later, tiny hatchlings will emerge from the sand and these turtle walkers will direct them towards the sea.

I scratch Floppy behind the ear and rub Shaky Bum's tummy at the same time. The moon is falling into the west and, away from the high tide line, the sea is a lullaby of whooshes. His work done, Azad comes out of the hatchery. "Do you want to walk up to the estuary and watch the sun rise?" he asks. Beyond the river, lit up metal-glass buildings contrast starkly with the swelling blackness of the sea. Stars dance in and out of the waves—lights from fishing boats.

This piece is inspired by my walks with Students' Sea Turtle Conservation Network (SSTCN), Chennai. Names of people have been changed to protect their identities.

A Fist of Bleached Bones

Issy Flower

Issy Flower is a writer and actor, currently in her third year at Durham University. She has had work performed as part of the Durham Drama Festival, where it won 'Best New Writing', and performed or shortlisted by *JustOut Theatre*, *Kickitdown Productions*, *Hive North*, the *Painkiller Project* and *Catalyst 2020*. Her journalism and prose writing have been published by *Palatinate*, *The Bubble*, and *From the Lighthouse*. Her first love is writing, though Anthony Newley comes close.

We found a frog skull down in the park.

Do you remember?

It was as big as your fist.

You picked it up in your little gloved hands and put your face right up next to it. Rosy cheeks against bleached bone.

I was surprised it was as bleached as it was . Everything else in that park was covered with dirt and leaf mulch, from the trees to the old fashioned roundabout to the ice cream van that was caked in mud and couldn't move. But this skull was a bright Daz white and shining, without a sliver of decay.

You cradled it like it was something precious, the way you held toy cars or took worms off the playground. I could tell you loved it. This thing. I could tell immediately that it would be coming home with us, like with the grasssnake skin and the sea glass. A mother knows.

So I took it from you with a smile and popped it in my handbag and we went to Boots and bought suncream.

When we got home, you put it on your windowsill, next to the picture of Daddy and the model of Thunderbird 1. It loomed out against the red brick of the houses opposite. If you looked through the eye sockets you could see into Mrs Haslam's house, you told me, you could see what they were doing, and I told you that was rude.

"It's not rude, Mum," you said. "It's cool."

Well. We agreed to disagree.

It stayed on your windowsill for years and years, turning ever whiter, ever purer, bleached by the early morning sun to an even whiter shade of pale. It stayed there even when Dad's picture was taken down and Thunderbird 1 replaced by guitar picks and Lynx Africa. A bastion to your childhood fascination with the wild on your doorstep, and my indulgence of it.

But you didn't take it to university.

I know 'cause I went in to touch your sheets and see your knickknacks once you'd gone. A whole double lifetime, contained in that room, whittled away piece by piece by your grabby hands as you'd stripped it to furnish a new room and new life I'd never be part of. I came to gather what was left.

And there, on the windowsill, your frog skull.

As still and silent as it had ever been, eye sockets still framing the Haslam house, still contrasting the rosy red brick and the dark blue curtains of your room. I wondered why you hadn't taken it. You certainly liked it enough. It had outlived all the other obsessions of childhood, this flimsy thing of bone no bigger than my thumb. It had even tied in nicely with your goth phase. A little bit of wild sitting on your windowsill, a little bit of wild clinging to life through you.

Gently, I took it down, and wrapped it in cotton wool. I put it in my bedside drawer. When I get lonely at night, and think of my son, I take it out and worry the wool between my fingers.

This bit of strange, this bit of life, I get to keep.

Even if I don't get to keep you.

One for Sorrow

Deborah Torr

Deborah Torr is a writer from South London. One of the London Library's Emerging Writers 2019, Deborah has been published by *Reflex Press*, *Spread the Word* and has work forthcoming in *Great Weather for Media*. You can find her on Twitter @deborah_torr.

The sky won't be blue today. I haven't pulled down the blind yet but I know the sky will be a white rectangle framed against the white wall. I'm still in bed. If I stay still, then my flatmate might think I'm asleep. She might leave to go for a walk, or head downstairs to take out the bins. There's daylight pressing against the corners of the blind, which is makeshift and attached with Velcro.

Out the window there's an oak tree, another block of flats, a scrub of park. On blue-sky days, I visit the scrub. I am strong-armed out my bedroom to "make the most of the day" at the sight of that all-encompassing blue, against my will, a hangover from childhood. If I hoist myself half out the trapeze window I see the towers of Canary Wharf and the spike of the Shard, but these are both far away and have nothing to do with what's happening here.

Two magpies are building a nest in the oak tree opposite. This is their fourth attempt. The nest is in constant need of repair, with errant twigs tumbling to the pavement every so often. It seems exhausting. Though they both work at the same craft, the magpies do not receive the same oohs and ahhs as the swans in Brockwell Park, who are building a nest for their unhatched brood.

The magpies are indifferent to the taxis, cars, vans and buses beneath them. They hop from branch to branch, taking no notice of the people ducking in and out of the food and wine store, the Christian bookshop, the ice cream parlour, the chicken shop, the funeral home.

The magpies are even unbothered by the other birds, giving no notice to the pigeons that exist on a diet of kebabs and cigarette butts, or the seagulls that circle overhead. I wonder why the seagulls choose Brixton over the seaside.

Through the wall, my flatmate is talking on the phone. I wonder if she is talking about me. I cannot make out the words, only the cadence of her sentences. I smell her instant coffee and toast through the gap where the door ends and the floor begins.

Magpies are always seen in pairs. They mate for life. Lately, I haven't seen the second magpie. I imagine it is foraging for food, or finding the right branch to finally perfect the nest. I light a cigarette as a thing to do, and paint my toenails pink.

Paul from next door has commandeered the communal rooftop to grow his lavender and daisies. He comes out to water them in his boxers each morning. He likes his plants pruned and presentable. Inside my flat, the pothos has vined around the kitchen sink, the fern is mushrooming in the shower. All of my plants are exploding and I am in bed. I stub out my cigarette in a used-up candle.

I rip off the blind like a plaster. The sky is blue today. There's a helicopter flying by overhead, the wings beating black noise against the dead blue sky. The oak tree is empty, but there are two black and white magpies flying high against that universal blue.

Issue 5 – Flora

From weeds pushing their way up through cracks in the pavement to wild-flowers planted along roadsides, from potted plants on your balcony to trees providing shade in the park, plants can shape urban landscapes. They can provide oases of calm in a bustling city; yet their roots can also wreak havoc as they crack open roads or disrupt pipelines. A fruit tree might be a delicious treat, or a messy nightmare. We can't wait to see your artwork and photography and read your stories about the plants you experience in your city! The submission period for this issue is

1 December 2021 – 28 February 2022

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