Wrongfully Neglected

We came up with this feature as a way to offset the short window for books, especially poetry books, to be reviewed after publication—eighteen months at the outside. This editorial standard allows too many excellent works to disappear from the literary record. When we asked *Kestrel* contributors if there were writers or works they thought more people should know about, the answer, you'll see, was a beautifully varied "yes." Our hope is that these responses will attract new readers to teach, talk, and write about these works.

Richard Eberhart and the Alligator Gar

The gar wasn't beautiful, its armored scales beige or tan. Nearly three feet long, maybe ten pounds. A small gar. As gars go. On the first day, it lay with its throat ripped open and its eyes pecked out, but the rest of it was intact. Long bill, rows of razor teeth. When I see dead animals like this, I often think of Dick Eberhart and his groundhog in that June field where maggots revealed the "seething cauldron" of the groundhog's being.

My winter gar was still, not seething. Eberhart had four or five poems that are as good as any ever written—"The Fury of Aerial Bombardment," for me, his best. But it's hard to walk the beach and consider Van Wettering and Averill, gone to an early death after distinguishing "the belt feed lever from the belt holding pawl." These days, though, I might wonder, as Eberhart did, "If man was created stupid to see his own stupidity."

So, for me, it's dead animals. Not roadkill, the random deer, armadillo, or possum, but an animal like this gar that every morning as my dog and I walked the beach, I'd wait and wonder if it was still there. I'd consider too why it was there. I have been walking beaches for almost sixty years and never before come across a gar. It's a river fish, some sort of preternatural thing. It looks ancient and brutal, meant to kill something and survive Armageddon with the cockroach.

But this one was on the white sand of a gulf beach—the Gulf of Mexico. Every day for nine days, it was there, for the first seven unchanged. Twice, I threw it back in the water, but the tide brought it back. Then, one day, someone cut its head off, and two days later, on what would have been my mother's 100th birthday, it was gone. Eberhart returned seasonally to watch his groundhog decay. Months later, he saw a sodden hulk, then later a little hair, later still just bones

bleached in sunlight. Three years later, it was gone.

I admire a man who returns that often to watch something live beyond death. No one talks about Eberhart or his poems anymore except me and Steve C. In the sun-filled U of Florida Special Collections room, he told us, a bunch of undergrads, stories about sitting lakeside with Bob Frost and Bill Williams, about Dylan Thomas drunk, crawling under a rug in a drawing room at Harvard. I never learned much about poetry from Dick Eberhart, but I learned that I wanted to be a poet, and I remember today, forty-six years later, another poem—"New Hampshire, February." The speaker finds two frozen wasps and decides to play god, holding them in his hands and breathing on each. They come back to life, but he drops one and accidentally steps on it with his ski boot. This maudlin tale gives rise to one of the greatest last lines in modern verse; considering the fate of the wasps the speaker states, "And/God does not live to explain."

Not about wasps, groundhogs, gar or much of anything as far as I can tell.

—Rick Campbell

To Cry in the Bathtub With

In *Cataloguing Pain* (YesYes Books, 2023), Allison Blevins documents the way her speaker's body is "turning slowly to floating light" during a chronic, painful illness. In beautiful prose sequences and long-lined verse, Blevins examines the intersections of pain and disability with the queer domestic, erotic, and familial. As the speaker's husband begins a gender transition, Blevins notes the irony in how "My husband is leaving behind his body captor. I am every day entering the body that will cage me." Elsewhere, she explores the complexities of parenting while ill and the inheritance of caretaking instilled in her speaker's children. Blevins's moving collection offers much more than a catalogue—it offers a profound reflection on love, desire, and the fluidity of identity.

Katie Jean Shinkle's *Thick City* (Bull City Press, 2022) is a collection of dark, interconnected flash fiction stories set in the imaginary Thick City in the United States of Ours. Shinkle's characters—single mothers, sex workers, influencers, and addicts (all women)—navigate the longings and loneliness of the twenty-first century through coping mechanisms ranging from the gritty to the tragic to the surreal. One woman imagines ordering a new friend off a Friendship Menu while another coos at an empty stroller while

still another breastfeeds her dinner salmon—all searching for "what salvation looks like for fishes like us." Shinkle's pulsing prose is the beating, deeply empathetic heart of this mesmerizing collection.

In *A Gray Realm the Ocean* (Fordham University Press, 2022), Jennifer Atkinson dialogues with abstract expressionist women painters, such as Louise Bourgeois, Alma Thomas, Marina Abramovic, and Ana Mendieta, with a particular focus on Agnes Martin. Atkinson's meticulously crafted lyrics exemplify what ekphrastic poetry can and should be, embodying her own assertion that "Description, like translation, is/not so much a rendering/….as it is a crossing through." For Atkinson, crossing through a painting in the language of poetry means conjuring synesthetic experiences of how the painting sounds and smells ("wind across snow," "the aftereffect of citrus"), how it moves, and what memories or ideas it evokes. Atkinson inhabits the world of each painting fully, calling forth its weather, music, and temperature, and discovering in abstract brushstrokes and pencil marks hidden landscapes, plants, and animals: "the animal/body appears/ from what seemed//to be/nothing into form//but the thing is/it was there all along." More than an engagement with individual works, this collection offers a re-imagining of abstract painting itself, as in Atkinson's insight that such work is "Not an abstraction as such Distraction from suchness is more like it."

In *Too Much* (Ghost Peach Press, 2022), Gion Davis's disarmingly direct, forlorn, and funny voice captures the exquisite tenderness and pain of living and love—the "heartache inside the heartache" of vast, existential feelings. The book's blend of sincerity and playfulness recalls Frank O'Hara and Eileen Myles, all set to the soundtrack of Patti Smith and The Cure. "A person I loved for a long time walks into a bar/& the heart jumps up like a dog in the yard," Davis writes in one poem, and in another, "there are/so many bones/ in the human hand/which I'd forgotten/until I held yours." Davis's poems search for the spectacle in sadness, grounding their laments in the physicality of the twenty-first century, from snap-crotch onesies to Instagram to Flamin' Hot Cheetos. These are the poems I want to cry in the bathtub with.

Soham Patel's *all one in the end—/water* (Delete Press, 2023) is a meditation on a world teetering on the edge of ecological collapse and consumed by late-stage capitalism. What is the role of poetry, Patel questions, when people are reduced to their "market value," when every life leaves a damaging carbon footprint, and when we exist under the violence of empire on stolen land? Implicating the "lust for

profit," digital surveillance, and the erosion of attention, Patel writes: "We are about to see what no/generation has seen before. When we are in a/room we are elsewhere always." These apocalyptic lyrics burst with spontaneity and urgency, seeking to remind us that we—and the planet—are bodies made of water. Following the inspiration of Lorine Niedecker, Patel fashions a Marxist ecopoetics layered with wisdom and resilience in these ruminations, protests, and laments.

—Alyse Knorr

Tim O'Brien's *American Fantastica*

Tim O'Brien's latest book, *American Fantastica* (Mariner Books, 2023), might be his most engaging and timely work. No, it isn't about Vietnam like his others, including the perennial favorite, *The Things They Carried*. Instead, this tale of pursuit and revenge which traverses the country and all of its characters, puts, in the words of one review, "a mirror to a nation and a time that has become dangerously unmoored from truth and greedy for delusion." Every major news and entertainment outlet praised *American Fantastica* as O'Brien's most literary work, and the cast of characters is straight out of this country's increasingly crazy news cycles. This is a work of fantastical fiction set in such a powerful setting of today's disturbing reality, I had to remind myself it is just a novel.

—Bob Kunzinger

LeAnne Howe's *Savage Conversations*

Savage Conversations, by the great Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe, is a book you may not know about but one you should track down as soon as you finish reading these paragraphs. It brilliantly explores the nightmares and hallucinations of Mary Todd Lincoln during her stay in the Bellevue Place Sanitarium in Batavia, Illinois. The book is set in the Sanitarium in 1875, thirteen years after her former husband, Abraham Lincoln, ordered the hanging of thirty-eight Dakota men for their participation in the so-called Dakota War against white settlers. According to the notes of the doctor treating her—this is all well documented by the way—Mrs. Lincoln claims that every night an Indian spirit comes into her room, slits her eyelids, sews them open with wires, lifts her scalp, cuts a bone out of her cheek and removes

everything by morning.

Savage Conversations is a dialogue between Mary and "Savage Indian," the ghost of one of the men executed and the man she believes performs these procedures. Appearing in the background is "The Rope," a bizarre figuration of both a man and a rope that eavesdrops on their conversations. Sometimes it comments. Sometimes it seethes. Sometimes it twirls around the room like a dancer.

Published by Coffee House Press in 2019, *Savage Conversations*' reception was complicated by a couple of different factors. First was the COVID-19 pandemic. Right as Howe's collection was starting to get traction, it was derailed by global death, a preoccupation with information about transmission and communicability, and an impending presidential election. Bizarrely, the book may have been even more hampered by the press's uncertainty of how to publicize it. Ultimately, Coffee House decided to market the book as "fiction," though it is not written in prose, and almost nothing about it feels like a novel, novella, or a short story. One reviewer gave up and described it as a "play/poem/novel/historical nightmare."

That feels about right.

Formally, *Savage Conversations* is a hybrid text that mixes lyric poetry with the dramatic monologue. When you open the book, the visual structure of the text resembles a one-act play. Characters are identified in bold letters, but there are no quotation marks. However, it reads like a poem. Think John Berryman's *The Dream Songs* or Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*. I've read a lot of books—including a lot of experimental books—and *Savage Conversations* is like nothing I've encountered. It is dark and funny and weird and riveting. I highly recommend it.

—Dean Rader

The Cases of Kell & Quill

Charles Kell's *Cage of Lit Glass* won the 2018 Autumn House Poetry Prize, was published in late 2019, and like Leanne Howe's book that Dean Rader talks about, was eclipsed by global confusion and lockdown's pleating of collective time sense. Charles kindly sent me a copy, but according to our email exchange, I didn't find it in my school mailbox until late 2021. *Ishmael Mask*, his second book with Autumn House, followed in 2023, which likely drew attention from *Cage*. Both books sensitively investigate confinement and concealment. In *Cage*, speakers are stuck in prison cells, addiction, family legacies, destructive and often involuntary patterns—the poems

are sometimes brutal, tough to take, in part because they neither sensationalize nor romanticize speakers and subjects. *Ishmael Mask* turns to psychological traps, particularly lethal masks of masculinity without which the speakers would be invisible. These are accomplished collections that raise important questions about literature's relationship to literal and metaphorical cages. I read the books back to back and thought, at first, they were about the ways literature can help us endure isolation. Nineteenth-century stories and characters live within the speakers, keeping their minds active and accompanied, overtaking the mind's attraction to despair. I still think so, but Kell's work suggests that literary history also confirms we've learned absolutely nothing from our own mistakes or anyone else's. I admire Kell's ability to face and cope with ugly, irrefutably human imperfections with graceful directness. A lot of readers, including me, could use some help doing just that in the Current Impossible.

Liana Quill's poetry is a very different, pre-pandemic story of neglect and disappearance, maybe deliberate, maybe not. In 2013, I sent a manuscript to the *Mississippi Review's* Poetry Series contest. I lost, but as a reward for paying the submission fee, I received a copy of the winning book, Liana Quill's *50 Poems*. This wasn't the first time I'd had what felt like my nose rubbed in my defeat, but this was the first time I was exhilarated to lose. I think I read half the book still standing by the mailbox.

Quill's poems are distillations of sound and association. Few of the fifty poems reach ten words, all too slight to hold a title,

> late autumn rain
>
> Grounded
> swift—
> chimney bred.
> Now, hermit caved.

Like this poem, all fifty look and read like Sappho's fragments and mimic their sense that every surviving, precious word carries the emotional charge and history of a lost origin, like lyric DNA.

More than a decade later, I still open *Fifty Poems* regularly as affirmation and encouragement for my own writing. The poems continue to fascinate and move me. A few years ago, I published an essay on allusion in which I discussed Quill's poetry in connection with Lorine Niedecker's. When I was researching for the piece, I could find only two responses to *Fifty Poems*: a laudatory review in *Blackbird* and, elsewhere, a sour little rant predicting the downfall of the *Mississippi Review* and poetry journals generally for celebrating

such "indulgent" poetry. When the allusion article came out, I sort of hoped I might hear from Quill, but no dice. Once in a while, I'll try to track her down and see if she's writing again, but so far, I've learned only that she published *as a flock of goats*, another poetry collection, with Groundhog Press in 2016; that "Quill" is a pseudonym; and that she might be working in San Diego. I respect that she may have needed or wanted to disappear from the poetry world, but I wish she hadn't, at least not so completely, and I really hope it was her idea to stop publishing and not the discouragement that attends neglect.

—Elizabeth Savage

Danielle Beazer Dubrasky, *Drift Migration*

Drift Migration's sensory poems draw us in with complex family and nature-filled poems. Danielle Dubrasky has a deep connection to myth and the natural world, especially landscape, and how they intersect within her psyche and physicality. A hiker, she finds herself on remote nature trails, reanimating her past through the story of Eurydice and other myths. We discover Dubrasky has faced the loss of her brother, lovers, friends, and her childhood self in lush Virginia where she grew up. A sudden family move to Utah and into its mysterious and stark landscapes at first don't resonate with her, but eventually they open a door to move forward, and she slowly falls in love with openness, desert scents and formations, lost ancient seas and their buried past, connecting to her own buried past. The book, a favorite of mine partly because I, too, am drawn to write about family, myth, and nature, was written over a number of years, the time it takes to know oneself in mid-life, one step forward, one back:

> Great Basin
>
> I am no nearer to what the sea tries to loosen in wedged in rock—
> a sorrow slipped between a trapped metal cap
> and glass shattered along another coast.
> The truth is I don't live near the ocean
>
> but in a desert town I refuse to see
> built on an alluvial fan of gypsum soil shifting
> beneath cracked plaster and skewed door frames;
> beneath miles of silver sage, rabbit brush, dry lakes

and wind trembling through pinyon rooted along the highway
that stretches through Paiute land. I leave my own trace,
planting wisteria, honeysuckle—southern foreigners thirsting
for water.
I blink and the town is gone, drowned in a sea of fossils.

What that sea left behind is the desert I walk through,
a sorrow slipped between trilobites and shale.

I find these to be courageous, honest, and skillful poems about how the natural world can lead us to find ourselves.

—Nancy Takacs