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(formerly Kansas Quarterly)

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Contributors

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Lucille "Mama Ceal" Hatch Eldridge and daughter LaRuth.

Newcastle, Arkansas, ca. late 1940s.

Photograph courtesy of Walter Pryor.

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Elsewhere: an essay

by Rachel Layton

For the fourth of July, my boyfriend, his brother and I take a weekend trip to McCarthy which is supposedly an eight hour drive from Fairbanks, but Alaskans know it really takes ten. The men rent a GMC with leather seats, glossy blue paint, and a towing hitch for the '60s camper we spent the last month renovating. All month my boyfriend, Garrett, worked fourteen hour days as a diesel mechanic at a gold mine out of town before returning home and installing new taillights. He sawed two by fours into a bed- frame and a bench. Rewired lights, tore out rotted wood, installed insulation. I painted win- dow trim and brought him beer. He reminds me of the men I grew up with in Mississippi. His grit; his handle-things-as-they-are attitude. I often think he would fit better in my hometown than me. I have moved so far to find someone who re- sembles so much of what I've grown away from. Garrett's brother drives us to McCarthy, stopping every hour to check the bearings on the camper which are overheating. Each time they re- turn from their check, it's a roulette of them claiming I think it'll make it and not looking good. My new life in Alaska is full of vehicles malfunc- tioning, men betting against their own odds, and riding passenger self- soothing—I haven't died yet. We make it the first hour to Salcha, and the boys point out a small river their grandparents used to boat on in summers. They have such stark memories of childhood it frightens me how connected they are, existing in a place where every memory they possess was formed. The sec- ond hour out of Fairbanks is Delta Junction, a drive-by town of gas stations and RVs for sale roadside. We stop for fuel, and my boyfriend feels the camper's bearings. They are not looking good. I ask the universe for a sign that the camper is going to survive this trip. Universe, show me a moose if we're going to make it. Show me a moose if things will work out. Garrett later tells me that sometimes he prays, and this ride he was praying. The fourth hour outside of Fairbanks, we pass a petite, boney beast with its head dipped into the highway-side pond. She is thin for a moose, and her neck stays dipped in the glassy rainwater, headless. Garrett calls the pools that form at the edge of the highways here moose holes. It's the first one I've spotted since moving. The camper makes it through the winding roads of Summit, the aptly named Rainbow Mountain sliding down from the above in iron- shades of copper and nickel. The boys talk about old mining shafts hidden in the rocks. I scan the slopes for sheep. The camper makes it to Chitna—a rustic village along the Copper River known for its salmon runs which are happening right now. As we press through the gap between boulders that divide the edge of Chitna from the bridge over the river, I see half a dozen land rovers down below in the mucky, splintering river. Bald eagles circle in tight cyclones, talons flexed. The camper even survives the two hour crawl down a gravel road, where the men pull over to piss and end up wrestling, head-locking one another, until Garrett who is seven years older and half a foot taller topples his brother, and they dive back into the cab dirt- dusted and laughing.

I'm a serial mover. Now in my mid-twenties, I've moved half a dozen times. From my rural Mississippi hometown with its cricks and mud- ding tracks and roadside ice cream to Cologne for my dad's piloting job, to Memphis for college. A study abroad in Frankfurt and brief return to Memphis. Another year later, and I moved to Missouri for my MFA. Less than a month after graduating, I uprooted yet again to Dallas, and in the process, surrendered my budding journal- ism career and writing cohort. I have this deep craving for change. In my mind, when I leave, I am moving forward, no matter what good I've just left. I stayed in Dallas ten months then—upon finding nothing but bar- tending and higher rent—abandoned that place to resettle in my once- long-distance boyfriend's hometown of Fairbanks, Alaska. In this last bit of my twenties, I've accepted displacement is comforting to me. Even as a kid who'd never left Mississippi, I sensed I was not home. My constant relocation has left my writing career stunted, misplaced. I will get close to some- thing I want, then fall. Then start anew, then fail. Then relocate, try, fail, repeat. I fear I have be- come a bad writer post-MFA. I don't work in the industry the way my cohort does—bartending supporting me ever since undergrad. When I write now, it feels like I'm failing. During our three-day stay in McCarthy, I imagine I've always been Alaskan, though I have been here just three months. In other places, my quick assimilating has left me feeling false, but in McCarthy, I feel my body recall its childhood. The last time I'd ridden a four-wheeler I was ten, but sixteen years later, I hold myself steady on the back wheel, bracing for potholes and bumps along the backcountry trails. I thought I'd be afraid, but I'm not. McCarthy's year-round population online is listed at 107, but the locals know it's just around a dozen. Yet on fourth of July, the grounds out- side the single, narrow iron bridge that crosses white rapids into town swell with military fam- ilies, hippies, and off-roaders. We take our four- wheeler across the bridge to get into McCarthy, which is just a block of five or six log buildings. One bar simply called Bar. One restaurant bewil- deringly named The Potato. A rustic museum. A general store selling everything from native-made earrings to condoms to cold cuts and mustard. McCarthy is what David Lynch probably envi- sioned Twin Peaks to be. Isolate, odd, alien in the massive swath of mountains nudged into even wider glaciers which in turn pool outside of town into crystal blue ponds. Still safe for the handful of icebergs bobbing in their nucleolus.

Upon moving to Fairbanks, I took a sea- sonal job bartending at a corporate hotel for tourists who experience two weeks of tour-bus- tracked Alaska. In the lower 48, I spent all five years of college and grad school in fine-dining, but now, I work at a disorganized, frozen-food bar & grill because it's temporary. The nomadic qual- ity of my seasonal coworkers seems to permit my own impermanence. A colony of little aliens, va- cationing in some distant place. Our real lives halted. People's favorite question at the hotel is, are you from here? They say it with awe in their eyes, like someone's first time seeing a wild kangaroo. Those things actually exist? I tell them that I live here now which invariably leads them to ask, Where are you from? I'm from Memphis most days, which feels true. I went to half of high school and all of un- dergrad there. I remember the street names, mos- quito bitten dates along the Mississippi. I had nicknames, hideouts, friend groups. My accent, when it shows, is easily mistakable for Tennes- sean even though in earnest, it's Mississippian

which is slower than Tennessee's. My hometown, an hour into Mississippi, is called Olive Branch. I grew up completely unaware we lived anywhere near a major city. The slow trudge of rural south I took for granted. I didn't discover Memphis until my early teens. Memphis felt like home because it was not Mississippi, but I grew detached. I got in fights, slept with people I shouldn't have, and the town grew unfamiliar around me. I wonder, when I left for my MFA program, if I really moved to write at all, or if I left to leave. Sometimes, I tell hotel guests I'm from Missouri, my preferred state, so we can talk Chiefs, and they may hand me a few extra dollars when they leave for Denali the next day. I claim Texas to the beer-bellied drunks with their Cowboys ballcaps, and we talk shit on the rich Texans. They lament the old Texas, the one they remember. When I hear a Mississippian accent, I'll give the name of my real hometown. To be from somewhere is an advantage. Your life becomes contained. As a writer, I often feel fragmented between selves. Explaining where I am from leaves me feeling the same.

In McCarthy, the weekend passes in stills. A fourth of July parade consisting of five floats and an emcee mysteriously dressed head to toe in a rubber alien costume passing out stickers that read Aliens of Alaska Are REAL. We take pictures with this Alaskan Alien alongside a drove of young daughters there with Garrett's childhood friend. We drink at the one bar, and my boyfriend's brother dances with a petite girl in a butterfly crop-top and a black bob. Garrett and I leave them to each other, return to the camper to see milky white trails jump unnaturally in the sky. These are the northern lights. He says he's never seen them in summer like that, when the sun never fully sets, but sure as anything, it's them. Pale and swollen, moving without motion. Our last day, the three of us take the four-wheeler several miles out to Kennicott mining camp, an abandoned copper mine that is the sole mother of McCarthy's existence today. We ride past the displays of old shops and cabins with their plastic fruit and glass-encased kitchen utensils and into the empty mountain path. I wrap an arm around Garrett, leaning harder into his side as the trail grows steeper. It reminds me of traversing the sharp cliff edges of New Zealand in my rented Kia last year, and I wonder how I have gone from solo New Zealand car camping to wrapping myself around a man on a mountain in Alaska. I wonder if this is really all that different than racing forest-lined backroads as a kid or speeding my dad's stolen Audi through a Memphis summer. Did any one of those places truly feel all that different than the other? As a kid, I saw the South as all arms of the same beast, vilifying the whole region. I claimed it was not my home, but the further I have travelled, the more I ache for its familiarity, its simplicity. At some point I became so complicated. My love scattered all across these places I thought I despised. Now, as far away as I have ever dreamed of being, I reach back to it. I put on my accent. I listen to Zach Bryan and Keith Urban and Shania Twain. My boyfriend will tell me how to change a tire, use a wrench, line up a door hinge, and I'll wave him off. I know how. I'm from the South.

The weather cooperates until we reach the end of the drivable path at the mouth of a still snowy hiking trail. None of us are dressed for the freezing rain that falls, and my leggings and windbreaker are soaked, so we go back down the mountain, ripping corners and lurching through mud pits. It's miserable—I'm warm-blooded by genetics. I used to say the only part I loved of the South was that feeling, walking outside and the humidity wrapping itself around you like a dryer-warmed blanket. Yet, now I'm freezing, and still

laughing and yelling. Turning my face to the sky because real Alaskans love this. The next morning as we drive back down the gravel road connecting McCarthy to Chitna, I let the boys shit-talk as I stare out the window. The whole weekend, I felt suspended, beamed into extraterrestrial light. But as we trudge further down the gravel, I wonder if my changes are not suspended but solidifying. I touch my hand to the window, and the chill cools my palm. I drift off to Garrett recalling a story of boyhood to his brother.

After returning to Fairbanks from McCarthy, Garrett and I spend a Saturday at the county fair. Alaska has boroughs, not counties like the lower 48, but I guess county sounds more civilized. Like most festivals in interior Alaska, the fair is rusted and busy. An old school Ferris wheel spinning slow in the center, the rest of the vendors bleeding out from this pinnacle like spokes of a wheel. We walk through aisles of street food, games, artisans and artists. Every few feet, it seems, Garrett runs into someone he knows. Family friends, high school classmates, coworkers. Back when I lived in Dallas and Garrett would visit, we went to hockey games and parades, and though he kept up, I knew he was not used to the metropolis crush. The seething of dozens of strangers fighting desperately to pick a bar with the shortest line, to elbow through bachelorette parties and families. There is anonymity in big cities, and most days in Dallas I felt I blended into the parade of faces. I used to want that, to be wiped clean. But as Garrett laughs and hugs and introduces his transplant girlfriend to people he's known since diapers, I wonder if I missed watching the slowness of change happen around me. Garrett has spent his entire life in Fairbanks. When I am with him, I cosplay being local. He is blue-collar and comfortable in his surroundings of mountain roads, four-wheeler trails, fishing boats. He makes it easy for me to look the part—outfitting me in Xtra-Tuff boots, rain jackets, Alaskan-branded hoodies. I thought I would feel extraterrestrial in a place where even the clothing must be strategic, but I'm a fast learner. After so many places, wherever I am may as well be where I'm from. Why not dress the part? One of the stalls we pass at the fair is a wood-carving stand, one where they take custom orders and carve the grain right in front of you. I'm a few feet ahead of Garrett when I read one of their premade signs: Fairbanks doesn't grow on you, so much as it makes you unfit to live elsewhere. I point it out to him. "I'll get that for you," he says. "I don't need it." "Yes, you do," he says, already handing the artist his cash. The wood phrase whispers to my writer-brain. Could I really be made unfit for the south—for Appalachia, the delta, the homeness of it all? I want to write how it is to try and fail at being elsewhere.

When I settled in Missouri, I began fitting into the puzzle of other people's lives. I drank too much. I got a boyfriend and was angry that he did not understand who I had been before him, that I needed to mourn what once was. I resented that I was still bartending. I tried to memorialize what I had once been in Memphis and wrote incessantly of dim bars, emerald kayak runs, Dr. Peppers on Front Street. This chaos I confused for traction. I wrote of Germany and its cool summers, quiet bars, long train rides. My MFA thesis was all wine-soaked tales of young women indoctrinated in the lifestyle of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll. My thesis director said I was writing about

my past selves and because of this, wasn't able to manipulate these characters into something new by the conclusions of my stories. He told me I should write nonfiction, and when I did, he told me I should write of Mississippi which I tried and failed and eventually, let go. I left so long ago, but it still feels too close. During my thesis defense—an event I had felt would propel me into my new life of success—whatever had driven my writing up to then was lost. The commentary was the same as every other workshop. One member failed to finish reading my thesis altogether. I felt untalented and disinteresting. When I stepped out for the committee to finalize their thoughts, I stood too close to the door and heard my director say, We should tell her something nice when she gets back. I knew writing would always be fraught with disappointment. I'd handled rejections from magazines, fellowships, and residencies. I don't know why this random comment I wasn't meant to hear gutted me. It felt like, Let the girl think she did good. Let her think she belongs.

One day in late summer, Garrett and I are sitting on the couch in his log house. Since over-coming so much distance, I feel like we are building something together. Beside him, I say, "I saw a reel of a comic talking about Fairbanks the other day." "What he'd say?" "That it's the worst place he's ever been," I say. "Bullshit. I've been a lot of places, and Fairbanks is definitely the best." I'm not sure if he's truly loves his hometown this much or if he's just come to the same conclusion I have. It's taken me half a dozen new states and hometowns to come to see place is amorphous and fickle. Maybe wherever you stick is where you belong in the end. Garrett and I met at a wedding in Kentucky a few years ago. I had been living in Dallas only a handful of weeks. He's the first person to enter my life post-MFA, and it feels like he missed out on the before-me. In Missouri, I was driven and writerly and involved. Since we've met, my relationship with writing has felt like that of an ex. The few times I've talked about my dreams of a career, I cannot get through the words fast enough before I'm waving away the notion of wanting it at all. It's comfortable for me to settle into who he is and has been. I live in his hometown. I see his friends, have dinner with his family. Realistically, he'll never have to see anything that's mine. Sometimes I like this. Sometimes I wish it was as easy for him to know the entirety of me, too. Garrett talks about the South like a tourist in the way I probably have about Alaska—the hunting, the catfish, the intimidating humidity. I have no way to drag together all my timelines and selves for him to examine. How can someone dissect a life they've heard only rumors of? When my lack of a writing career gets to me, I fantasize about moving back to Missouri, theorizing how that place could hypothetically fix what I feel is lost. After so much moving and distance and time, I feel just as I did in childhood. Homesick. Sometimes Alaska feels like Mississippi, and I wonder if there's enough here for me. Though I've been homesick most of my life, there's rarely a place I am homesick for. Missouri comes close. It's the only place I have roots—friends, the ability to navigate without maps. I'm not sure if this is what defines a home to most people. Maybe there's more to it that I just can't know. Since most of my friends everywhere I've lived are locals, I think I enjoy experiencing their locality parasitically. I spend just enough time to know their lore, their reality, the history of their places. If identity is rooted in location, am I destined to remain lost?

Garrett is gone for long stretches of time for work, out in the Yukon or on the infamous North Slope oil rigs. When he's gone too long, I threaten to go back to Missouri or Tennessee or Texas. I don't think I mean it. Over my first winter, I spend months alone in the dark cold. Returning to my studio apartment, resenting something. I miss my homes, but I don't go home. I should be used to missing things, but it gets more intense, more pervasive the longer I spend missing. Like we all are born with only so much missing inside us, and I've gone through my supply in record time. I see there's a life I could build in Alaska, and I'm not convinced it's worth throwing away. Then I wonder if I'll stay just because I've grown unable to live elsewhere. Because I can't seem to stop leaving, I know something in me must love being lost. There's a need to reassure myself I can survive on my own. I've done an excellent job at convincing myself nothing is permanent though I'm the only one in my life to ever leave. It verges on obsession, how compulsively I test my ability to rebuild. I ask Garrett what it was like to grow up in Alaska because I want to know what makes some- one stay. If he's ever thought being from a small place made him small, too. "I've always been happy I was born here," he says when I ask. He did leave once. After high school, to college in Idaho for engineering, but after one semester, he returned to Fairbanks and dropped out of college in favor of his current union job. I've asked him why he came back, and every time he says it the same. I wanted to be here. Not that he didn't like Idaho, but that he wanted to be home.

The first time I realized leaving had been a mistake was the day I got to Dallas. I had two cats and a mound of dismantled furniture tossed into my out-of-budget apartment. I walked into the "luxury" apartment I'd so carefully selected, and it smelled like cigarettes and bad weed. I lifted the blinds of the balcony door to look out at my new city and found it looked directly into the back of an Auto-Zone where the unhoused population had built makeshift camp. There were needles and 40s littered across the asphalt. I started laughing a long, crazy laugh like they do in movies. I knew this would not be the change I'd been chasing. Instead of committing to a new life as I have every other time, I spent my ten months in Dallas interrogating why I couldn't stay in Missouri. What was I so afraid of? I felt Missouri was too small, too limited. My thesis defense left me humiliated over my attempts at being a writer. I'd idealized living in a metropolis my whole life. I missed the South. I wanted to feel important, and I didn't. Eventually after arriving in Dallas, my Missouri roommate went to rehab, and my friends at my old job quit and found new jobs, and the magazine I freelanced for changed hands. When the opportunity to move instead to Alaska presented, I told myself Missouri would still be there and it will, in some iteration. At the start of winter, Garrett and I discuss two possible vacations—a week away in Hawaii or a week in Missouri. I don't tell him that I'm afraid if I return and my people are different or if I am different, it will strip my belief that I have any home at all. I pick Hawaii and browse bikinis on fast fashion sites, and he doesn't push me on why. In mid-winter, I interview with a local magazine that offers seventeen dollars an hour and no healthcare. With my seasonal hotel job now closed down, I take what I can get as a full time liquor distributor. My life takes on new structure working a nine to five. I pick up boxing and cycle classes. I cook, apply for copywriting side gigs, go to brunch with girls from my gym. My best

friend's mom tells me, I can't believe you moved there of all places. And now you're so integrated in the place. Like you've been there forever. Maybe I can belong, and yet—I stay on a month-to-month lease. I dodge my boyfriend's attempts at moving in. I keep it surface level with the gym girls at brunch. There is something in me that is not content with here—and here being anywhere—as home. I wonder if moving for love is sustainable. I wonder if moving for any other reason would matter.

Before I left Memphis, I had a falling out with a good friend of mine. When we were close, our favorite topic was how we were going to get out. Looking back, neither of us truly believed the other would do it. When I did move away roughly a year after our friendship ended, I had this sort of petty vindication. I accomplished The Thing, and you did not. It was spiteful, but at the heart of it, I wished I had her to share my little triumph with. Then, four years later, she texts me wanting to catch up. Turns out she had made her own great escape and now lives in Portland. She's never given a reason why she reached out. My theory is that her own departure from our hometown sparked nostalgia for our old talks. Not one of our old friends has ever left. We're alone in that regard, so I can see why she'd think of me. It's like Memphis is frozen in amber, she told me not long ago. Everyone is doing the same struggle, burning out.

I'm not convinced I miss home as much as I miss my own motion. It's harder to write because all of my selves can exist on the page, yet the person I was in each feels elusive. I pour the chaos on the page, braid the timelines, play with structure and form until it resembles something of myself, but I can never find the conclusion. Maybe my thesis director had me right. I morph things over and over but can't illuminate what they've become. I wonder if part of why I am in Alaska is because it signals an ending. I cannot go farther than this, not from Mississippi and not from society as I have known it. I ache and ache to find this deep sense of clarity, but only now am I beginning to see past the glitter of my own chaos. Life in Fairbanks is small, personal. You keep a good man, a stable job, a studio apartment. Values not much different than where I'm from. Here, you win a yearly vacation to Hawaii, a call back home. I think I first wanted to write to memorialize my many places and selves. Lend narrative to my nomadism. When people ask me where I want to be now, I have only a draft. I want to be elsewhere, then I want to come home.

Delta Sources and Resources

Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts

501 E. Ninth Street

Little Rock Arkansas

by Sierra Tribbett-Collins

The Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts, located in Little Rock and better known colloquially as AMFA, serves as a testament to passion for the arts in the American South. The museum prides itself on its reputable permanent collection, which spans eight centuries of two-dimensional and three-dimensional art, and features both local artists and artists from across the globe. The gallery represents a significant arc of Western history, from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century. The temporary exhibitions are often equally impressive, exploring themes within certain art movements or in-depth looks at a featured artist's career. AMFA offers free admission to encourage residents to take advantage of its many amenities, including gallery tours, dining and shopping, art classes, and events such as concerts, lectures, and dance and film productions. They also offer annual memberships with core benefits such as store and restaurant discounts, early access to temporary exhibitions, and invitations to member-exclusive events.

Although the grand opening of the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts took place in the spring of 2023, the history and impact of the museum has existed long before then. The seed for the museum was first planted in 1914, when a group of intrepid women formed the Fine Arts Club with the incentive to bring the arts to Arkansas. Over twenty years later, in 1937, supporters and members of the club contributed to the creation of the Museum of Fine Arts in Little Rock's Mac-



The exterior of the museum's entrance.
Photograph by the author.

Arthur Park, the first museum dedicated to fine arts in the state of Arkansas. As the museum's art collection continued to grow, a statewide campaign was launched in 1959, led by future governor and first lady Winthrop and Jeannette Rockefeller. The campaign's goal was to enlarge the museum significantly, serving all of Arkansas and encouraging residents to get involved. A new building for the Arkansas Arts Center, in addition to the original building, was successfully opened in 1963, featuring temporary art exhibitions, sculpture courtyards, an art reference library, a community theater, and a school of fine and performing arts.

Over the next fifty years, the institution continued to grow in both scale and scope, undergo-

ing seven further expansions to accommodate its collection. In 2016, Little Rock residents voted overwhelmingly in favor to renovate the original MacArthur Park building; the \$70 million renovation would include new entrances and expanded facilities, as well as a reimagined modern architectural design. The project broke ground in 2019, and two years later rebranded the museum as the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts. On April 22, 2023, the Grand Opening took place with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and other special events, and doors were officially opened for guests in May of the same year.

Today, the museum thrives in its image of learning, inspiration, and creative expression.

Approaching the front entrance, visitors will notice the beautiful landscaping of the 11-acre campus, with both preserved original oak trees as well as the 250 native trees that were planted during the renovation. The outdoor architecture, which



Outdoor architecture and native plants.

Photograph by the author.

was designed to “make it feel like a museum in a park,” takes inspiration from the bluffs of Emerald Park in North Little Rock, the Ouachita Mountains, and the landscape of the Delta. The exterior of the museum is just as visually appealing, featuring a pleated roof and glass-enclosed spaces at each entrance. The north entrance retains the original art deco facade that was first introduced in the 1937 building. The exterior is sleek and linear, preserving the historic elements of the original building with the elegant additions of the renovated architecture.

Inside the building itself, the museum is bright and airy, with an open floor plan and two stories of accessible galleries and classrooms. A particularly unique amenity in the structure is the Cultural

Living Room, a large community space with lounge furniture, art books, and a coffee bar. The living room features floor-to-ceiling windows, with a view of the courtyard and the MacArthur Park neighborhood, and encourages visitors to take their time and enjoy the space comfortably. The museum also offers a reputable gift store with works from AMFA-selected artists, a 350-seat Performing Arts Theater, and the full-service Park Grill, a contemporary American fare restaurant that overlooks the grounds.

The galleries themselves feature both temporary and permanent collections. Visitors can currently peruse several temporary exhibitions this summer. Downstairs, in the Robyn and John Horn Gallery, visitors will first encounter the 65th annual Young Arkansas Artists exhibition. This collection features 52 artworks created by students from kindergarten through twelfth grade from communities across Arkansas and represents both the caliber of Arkansas's teachers and the power of art in the hands of young artists. Notable works include colorful oil paintings, acrylic self-portraits, clay model and ceramic structures, and charcoal still lifes. The range in the artists' ages and abilities serves as an



Inside the Cultural Living Room.
Photograph by the author.

inspirational reminder of the future of artistic expression.

Upstairs, in the Harriet and Warren Stephens Family Gallery, another temporary exhibition

explores the concept of time. *A Month of Sundays: Art and the Persistence of Time* borrows the Southern turn of phrase “a month of Sundays” to demonstrate the way we experience time in our lives and in the environment, and features over fifty modern and contemporary works through painting, drawing, sculpture, and video. Ron Kleeman’s 1979 screenprint *Gas Line*, from the portfolio *City-Scapes*, tells the story of long waits in line for a Hess Gas Station during the worldwide energy crisis at the time of the Iranian Revolution. Bruce Comer’s surreal and dreamy oil painting *About a-Quarter-to-Six* depicts a rural isolated train station with a clock marking 5:45. Malvin Gray Johnson’s *The Letter*, an oil painting of a woman in the slow act of composing a handwritten letter, blends Western and African artistic influences and captures an everyday moment of Black Americans in the Harlem Renaissance. The collection is diverse and visually captivating, although previous exhibitions have notably been more cohesive in their exploration of a theme or idea.

In the Berta and John Baird Gallery, a smaller and more focused temporary exhibition depicts the life of artist Will Barnet through *Will Barnet: Seasons of Life*. Barnet was at the center of major American movements, and swung profoundly between realism and abstraction during his career. His earlier works documented social realities of the Great Depression, while his later work developed into abstraction in the postwar New York art scene. Barnet then returned to realism in the 1960s, when he created the famous screenprint series *The Silent Seasons*: lithograph paintings in his distinctively flat style that feature a solitary woman and a bird next to a window amidst the changing seasons of spring, summer, fall, and winter. The collection is a celebration of the artist’s eighty-year career, and the tender, quiet depictions of family life for which Barnet was most known.

A controversial and perhaps more questionable exhibition in the Fine Arts Club New Media Gallery is British artist Mat Collishaw’s film *Aftermaths*. The seven-minute film portrays uncanny and grotesque sea creatures that mutate and swim through a dystopian world. Collishaw created these mutations through artificial intelligence, attempting to depict the paradox of the promise of new technology and its potential to destabilize and destroy our ecosystem. But the artist’s statement is unclear as to whether it condemns or celebrates the usage of AI, seemingly arguing that the decay the film represents is not a warning but rather an essential in adapting to a new world. The film is haunting, perhaps not inside the Cultural Living Room. Photograph by the author.

WILL BARNET

seasons of life



Will Barnett: Seasons of Life exhibit entrance.
Photograph by the author.

for the reasons Collishaw intended, and has opened many conversations amongst museum visitors. The temporary exhibitions both succeed and sometimes miss the mark in their exploration of a changing culture and conversation around contemporary art. Some collections will stand out more than others, but visitors are always encouraged to form their own opinions, to learn something new, and to recognize the talent and hard work of the museum curators. The permanent collection will continue to offer stunning historic and contemporary works featuring famous artists such as Rembrandt, Claude Monet, Edgar Degas, Georgia O'Keeffe, Diego Rivera, Andrew Wyeth, and more. Arkansas artists Carroll Cloar, John Miller Howard, and William Davis, as well as other notable artists from across the American South, are also a part of the permanent collection. The permanent collection is a true success story within the history and evolution of the museum. The Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts is the only museum in the state that collects works from both

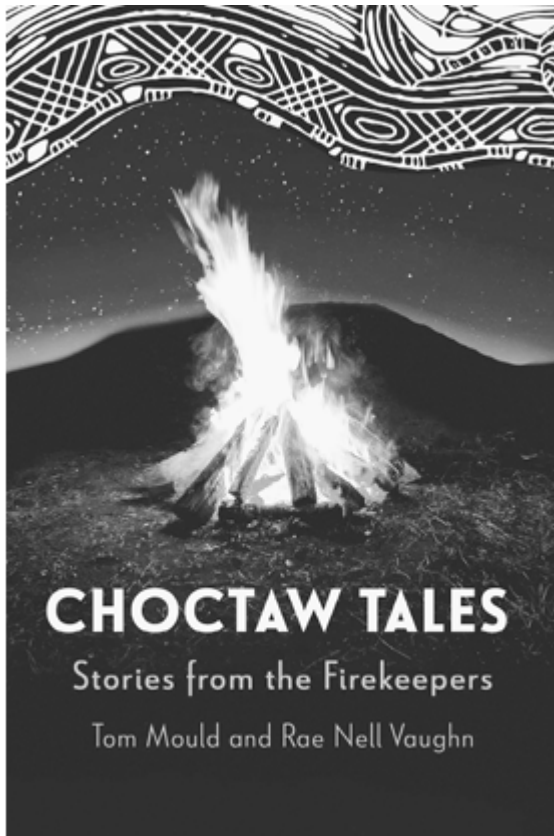
national and international artists, and the dedication to the collections and to the Arkansas community does not go unnoticed.

AMFA is located in historic downtown Little Rock at 501 E. Ninth St. It is open from 10 to 5 on Tuesday, 10 to 8 on Wednesday through Friday, 10 to 5 on Saturday, and 12 to 5 on Sunday. The upcoming exhibitions, which will feature German expressionism in art and film as well as Soviet cinema following the 1917 Russian Revolution, will be open to the public this fall.

Reviews

Choctaw Tales: Stories from the Firekeepers. By Tom Mould and Rae Nell Vaughn. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2025. Pp. xxix + 331, foreword by Chief Phillip Martin, preface to the second edition, preface to the first edition, annotations, notes, sources cited, index, and 45 photographs).

Tom Mould and Rae Nell Vaughn's new book is the culmination of well over two decades of fieldwork with the Choctaw of Mississippi. Mould began working with the Choctaw as a doctoral student, and he has written prolifically on Choctaw folklore, belief, and narratives. He published *Choctaw Tales* in 2004, and this new revised edition further develops important documentation and insights into their storytelling traditions. Mould used collaborative approaches and teamed up with Vaughn, who is member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and an elected official and archivist for the tribe. This new volume includes a wealth of newly documented and published narratives, reflections on the fieldwork process and collaborative research, and expanded selections of stories written in the Choctaw language. Mould and Vaughn pay tribute to the firekeepers who preserve and honor the legacy of Choctaw verbal artistry. Their work continues to contribute the preservation of Choctaw cultural expression as well as adding important resources for sustaining and supporting efforts to preserve the language.



Their book is a major documentation of American Indian expressive culture within the Delta and surrounding regions. The authors draw from archival resources as well as ethno-graphic fieldwork with keepers of Choctaw tradition. The initial work was encouraged by Choctaw leaders and educators who invited Mould to assist with the documentation of the narrative over thirty years ago. He has maintained his early connections within various communities and further expanded his work to include a wide range of contributors to this project. A major section of the book is devoted to the storytellers, past and present, and Mould and Vaughn completed excellent documentation to give short biographic sketches of the tellers and

to find photographs from a range of sources to preserve a record of those who contributed their narratives to written sources. Mould gives excellent content for a wide range of texts, and he completed a significant revision of earlier work that focused largely on storytelling genres and contexts in the original volume. The book also contributes to readers' understanding of the narratives through extensive annotations that provide information on the documentation of the texts as well as resources for finding additional scholarly sources for gaining richer understanding of the culture.

The bulk of the book consists of texts arranged by genres and themes. Originally, Mould wrote of an emic genre named *shokhanṇopa*. This term literally translates as "hog talk," and it conveys rich meanings that relate to Choctaw ideas about humorous discourse and the communicative norms about who may tell these tales. Originally, Mould had termed another class of stories as "talk of the elders." These narratives are more serious in content and tone, and they embody deep truths within the culture. Following Mould's original writing, a new term has emerged for this body of narrative. The Choctaw coined the term *hopáki ikhana* to classify stories connected more to tribal history than more recently told narratives. This second class of genre consists primarily of what they characterize as legend, old stories, and history. *Hopáki ikhana* would also include other etic genres—namely myths and etiological narratives—but the storytellers, themselves, do not necessarily make these kinds of distinctions.

Mould and Vaughn balance insider genres with external terms in their organization of the volume. Chapters consist of Creation Stories and Myths, Supernatural Legends and Encounters, Historical Tales, Prophecy, Jokes and Tall Stories, and Animal Stories, followed by a selection of nineteen stories that are told in the Choctaw language. It is especially intriguing to examine these untranslated stories and compare them with English translations to gain a sense of the lexicon and syntax of Choctaw. There is a resurgent interest in teaching the language, and the book provides important resources for educators and language enthusiasts.

The book is rich in its variety and scope of Choctaw folklore. Choctaw creation narratives are intriguing, and these stories continue as an on-going verbal legacy. One of my favorite selections is the story of "Fani Losa and the Sun." This selection is documented through an in situ recording of a 2024 telling by Ray Nell Vaughn to children. Fani losa is a black squirrel, who shows up in an old story about an eclipse. Vaughn's transcription of the story provides a vibrant representation of the telling, and gives readers a sense of her own abilities as a teller and her ways of engaging young listeners. Readers also will find accounts of important historical figures. Among the most important is Pushmataha, a 19th century chief who supported Indigenous rights and died a suspicious death in Washington, DC. These stories are important texts within the larger category of *hopáki ikhana*. Other figures also show up within this system, including a shape-shifter named Skate'ne as well as less directly named figures such as *na losa chitto*, a demon-like figure, and *nishkin chafa*, a one-eyed supernatural figure who is part of their supernatural belief system.

Other fascinating characters include the bohpoli. They are Choctaw little people, similar to gnomes or dwarves in European folklore. They are seen as having their own societies, and they can be mysterious and even mischievous. Other stories represent them as being connected to tribal medicine and healing beliefs, and their presence shows parallels to other Indigenous traditions throughout North America.

Choctaw Tales: Stories from the Firekeepers is an important contribution that continues the work of Tom Mould and Rae Nell Vaughn to safeguard the traditional expressive culture of the Choctaw. The range of narratives and the various forms of presentation are excellent. There is an excellent overview of the historical context that sets the stage for gaining a strong appreciation of their verbal artistry as well as the sharp humor that is part of the tradition. The discussion both the texts and contexts is supported by a clear discussion of metacommunicative devices, including the use of attributive phrases that connect the contemporary tellings to Choctaw history as well as subtle distinctions that relate to various construction of history as the long past—or ttók in Choctaw—versus the more immediate past termed tok. These points are intriguing and interesting to consider. They provide a window into the contemporary context for the tellings and add to the ways readers may envision how the stories have been told and continue to be part of contemporary storytelling. In this respect, both Mould and Vaughn continue to contribute to the important work of the culture's firekeepers.

--Gregory Hansen

Visual Chords. By Jianqing Zheng. (Raleigh, North Carolina: Broken Tribe Press, 2025. Pp. 100, \$14.00, paperback)

Jianqing Zheng offers readers a historic and visual view of the United States through his recent collection of ekphrastic poetry, *Visual Chords*. Zheng, Professor of English at Mississippi

VISUAL CHORDS



Jianqing Zheng

Valley State University where he founded and edits the *Journal of Ethnic American Literature* and *Valley Voices: A Literary Review*, has published three other collections of poetry, *The Dog Years of Reeducation*, *A Way of Looking*, and *Soulful Dancer*. He's also published four chapbooks of original haiku, written over forty articles on poetry, and edited or co-edited eleven scholarly books.

Visual Chords, one of two works published in 2025 (*Soulful Dancer* being the other), is divided into five sections. The first four sections of this book remain mostly focused on the South with the fifth section moving to other parts of the United States. In sections I, II, and IV Zheng reflects on works by particular photographers: Dorothea Lange, William Ferris, and Leo Touchet, keying readers through choosing quotes on their work from each photographer to open each

section. In sections III and V, readers will discover pieces that reflect on photography from various artists, each mentioned in the caption of the poem.

In Section I, readers will encounter poems about photos captured by Dorothea Lange, some quite familiar and others less so. I found myself often visiting the virtual collections for each of the photographers, trying to find the images Zheng so vividly describes in this collection. In this section, I felt struck by Zheng's "Responses," a poem about a photo titled "I Am an American" (and the book's cover art). In this poem, broken into four stanzas, Zheng explains the history behind the photo with prose poetry in stanzas one and three while allowing readers into a seeming memory or reflection in stanzas two and four. Zheng uses the technique of mixing prose and verse poetry effectively throughout this collection.

Section III continues the theme of centering the photos of one photographer, William Ferris. Ferris was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and has used his photography skills to document the daily lives of people living in Mississippi, especially in the Delta region. In this portion of the book, both Ferris and Zheng's love of Mississippi and the American South at large carries forward brightly. One poem that sparked for me is "After Church" which showcases a church in silence, between services. Here Zheng describes a fan left behind in a pew as "a kitten curling up to reclaim the good / of silence which sprawls like kudzu"

In Section IV, Zheng's focus turns to works by photographer Leo Touchet, images that tend to lean more abstract than ones chosen for other sections of this collection. Touchet photographed desert dunes and other natural landscapes as well as "jazz funerals" in Louisiana among other subjects. "Seeing the Shadows" from this section ponders an image of the Monahan Sandhills Dunes State Park, taking readers on a reflective journey, seeing one image in many different ways through this poem.

In Section II, Zheng's poetry focuses on photography from various artists that are mostly well-known. In this section, one poem that endured for me is "Time Off for the Hillbilly Cat" which describes a photo of Elvis Presley with his face pressed to a mirror taken by Ben Mancuso in 1957. After sharing the details of this photo, Zheng, in the next stanza, refers to "Maowang['s]" pompadour hairstyle, referencing some of the ways that Elvis is spoken about in China and offering an image of people dancing to 1950s rock 'n' roll in the wet streets of their own neighborhood, imagery which offers juxtaposition to the brooding visual of Elvis pouting at his own reflection. Section V showcases photos from many different parts of the United States, again from various artists. I found myself drawn to "Into Autumn" after a photograph by Scott T. Smith. In this poem, Zheng inserts the narrator into the position of the photographer, letting this voice guide the poem and tell a story. He uses this perspective in many poems in this collection, something that adds a layer of analysis into the poem that is refreshing and allows the reader into the story of the photo and the poem.

Many of the photos that Zheng references in this work could be described as having a voyeur- istic lens. Dorothea Lange, for instance, photo- graphed many people who were suffering the harsh consequences of poverty while she was her- self one-step (or more) removed from the circum- stances she was hired to document when she worked for the Resettlement Administration, later called the Farm Security Administration, during the Great Depression. Though the pho- tographs collected through projects initiated by the federal government provided invaluable doc-

umentation of American history and memory, these projects were also often extractive and representative of larger societal problems of racism and classism, issues we still face today. This collection reflects the artistic capabilities and expressions of the photographers more often than it reflects the struggles faced by their subjects; in some ways this collection could be said to uncritically romanticize the poverty inherent in the rural parts of the United States. Other photographers' images referenced in this collection contain similar points of view. They appear removed from their subjects or are seemingly unwilling to grapple with the ways their presence changes the very scenes they are documenting.

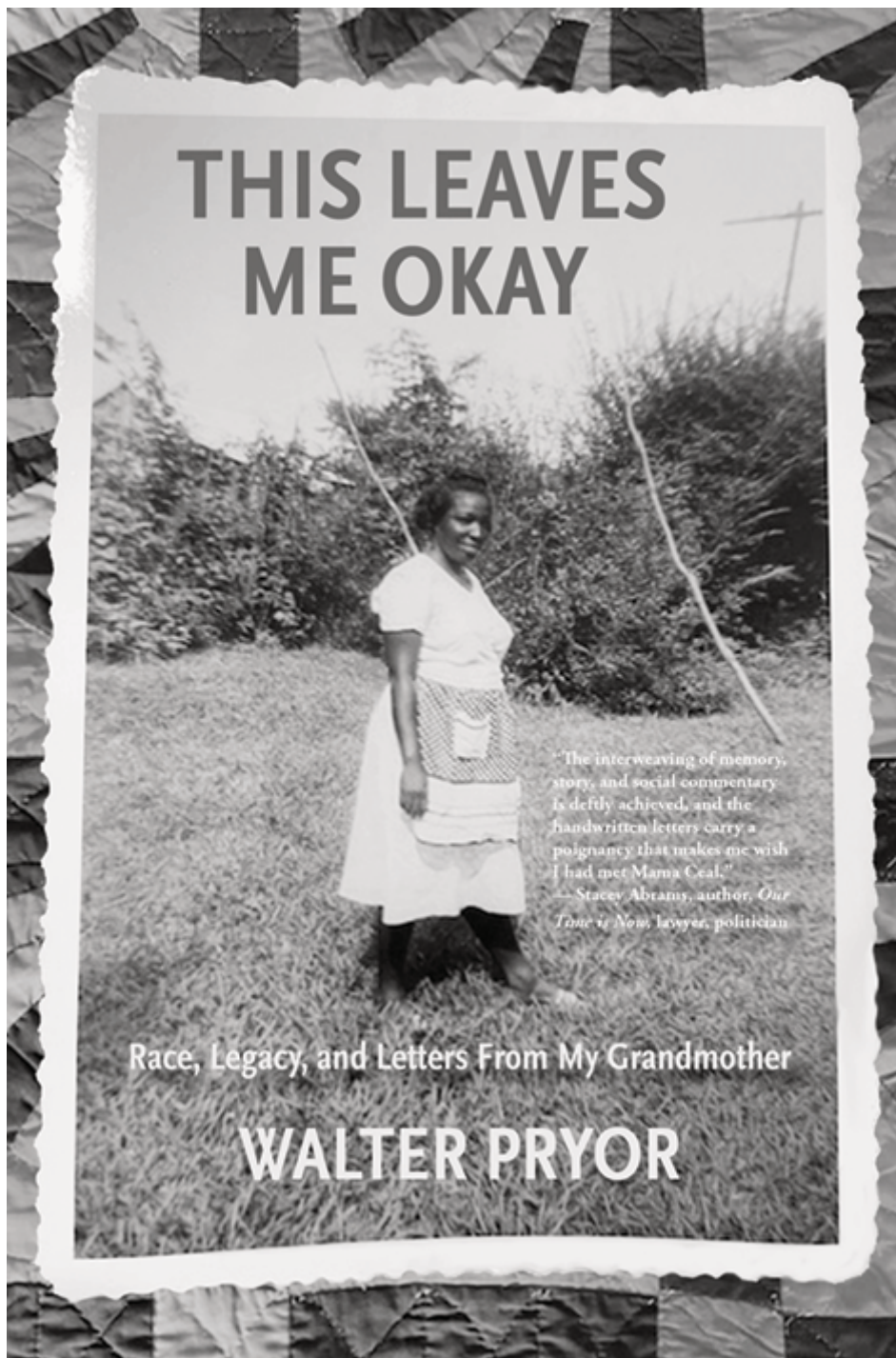
I would like to have seen the addition of an author's statement about these types of issues and concerns within photography and humanities fieldwork in the past and in the present. Yet Zheng, recipient of the 2019 Gerald Cable Book prize, the 2001 Slapering Hol Press Chapbook Award, and poetry fellowships from the Mississippi Arts Council, most certainly has a deep love and appreciation for the American landscape and people, especially the landscapes found in areas with sparse populations and wide natural vistas. Further, the value of his poetic voice, reflecting upon the world with an eye towards the past and future and with an eye towards joy and resilience, most certainly rings through this work clearly and loudly.

--Lauren Adams Willette

This Leaves Me Okay: Race, Legacy, and Letters from My Grandmother. By Walter Pryor. (New York: Heliotrope Books, 2025. Pp. 214, foreword, acknowledgments. \$20.00, paper)

Walter Pryor is a cum laude graduate of Hendrix College and graduate of Georgetown University Law Center. In his career, Pryor has worked in multiple legal sectors such as law firms, corporations, government, and higher education. With the publication of *This Leaves Me Okay*, he proves himself to be a gifted writer as well.

At the heart of the memoir is Lucille Hatch



Eldridge—Mama Ceal—the woman who wrote her grandson weekly letters beginning when he was a small boy and continuing until her death. As an adult, Pryor recognizes the unique nature of the correspondence: “What is remarkable about her letters is that she sat down to write at

all. My grandmother had only an eighth-grade education which she received at a time in our country's history when schooling for Black children—especially those in southern rural areas like Madison, Arkansas—was not well funded” (p. 20). Through these letters and Pryor's narrative of the contexts for them, the reader learns how southern black families formed communities to navigate and survive the oppression and violence of the early to mid-twentieth century.

In addition to the letters, which are the foundation of the book, Pryor also includes photographs, conversations with family and friends, and speculative recreations of the events of his grandmother's life. The text of the memoir includes facsimiles of the handwritten letters and Pryor calls attention to their reproduction: “It is not surprising then that Mama Ceal's letters demonstrate that her grammar was fickle and her handwriting sometimes unclear. Those details, however, endear them—and her—to me even more” (p. 20). With this material, Pryor pieces together a family history that is both representative and remarkable.

The memoir begins with four-year old Lucille and her younger sister Dessie Mae playing in the yard of their uncle Jerry in Cassoe, Arkansas, in 1920. The two girls had been sent to live with relatives after the death of their mother and their father's realization that he would not be able to take care of two young children on his own.

Although Pryor begins with a scene from his grandmother's childhood, the memoir does not follow a linear path. Facts about his grandmother's life, as well as his own, emerge poignantly through the juxtaposition of the letters and Pryor's reflections on them. We learn much about Lucille's life and consequently much about Pryor's family history including the birth of LaRuth, Pryor's mother; the death of Pryor's grandfather, Walter, from a tragic boating accident;

Route 1 Box 315-
Forrest City Ark

Dear Walter,

Oh it were so good to talk
to you and that you were
ok, this here were ok, I went
to Church and told Selmer
Lee that you said he say he sure
to come to the Church Bom Bom
& Connie was all send there love
Oh yes give Juliette Hixson
my ok I am getting excited
about coming to Washington
I hope the Buss strap will
be over soon is durn good
in school she were on over
Ras also Bakter & David
Will you be a good Bak
and pray for me love
Mama,

One of Mama Ceal's letters to her grandson.
Image courtesy of Walter Pryor.

LaRuth's move to her aunt Elizabeth's home in Forrest City, to attend better schools; and the marriage of Pryor's parents. Despite the documentation and preservation of his family history, which are valuable in themselves, Pryor's focus extends beyond the personal. The stories recounted in the memoir emphasize the significance of family, the importance of education, and gratitude for one's ancestors.

The nonlinear storytelling device allows Pryor to unravel meaningful parallels and contrasts between his life and his grandmother's. Pryor does not place the letters in chronological order. The first letter that appears in the book is not the first written to him but rather one from 1988 when Pryor is 22 years old. The letter begins "Dear Grandson, Well This leve me ok. Thank the Lord" (p. 20). Mama Ceal then expresses hope that he is well, gives him news of family and friends (including their pride in him),



Mama Ceal (middle), grandson Walter (right),
and granddaughter Jacquie (left).

Photograph courtesy of Walter Pryor.

advice to be good and continue praying, and ends with a recipe for brownies (p. 20). Other letters follow a similar pattern of Mama Ceal sending her love to Walter, hoping he is well, updating him on news from Forrest City, and expressing interest in Walter's life. Each letter allows Pryor to fill in details of his own life, present-day reflections on how the past continues to influence the present.

At the time he is writing the memoir, Pryor and his wife Juliette are successful professionals with a daughter in law school and a son interning with an architect in Italy. As they listen to a hymn one Sunday morning, Pryor thinks of Mama Ceal and how far he and his family had traveled from

her life as a maid for over forty years in rural Jim Crow Arkansas to that day in which her grandson who used to wear sandals made from too small sneakers had purchased a house in Martha's Vineyard. . . . I wondered what she would think and how she might be in awe of this achievement

had she lived to see it. I wondered whether she would be proud. For that matter, what would others of our ancestors, for whom property ownership may have seemed almost fantastical, have thought? Had I become the “hope and dream of the slave” that Maya Angelou wrote about in her poem “Still I Rise”? (p. 33)

Pryor’s beautifully insightful memoir shares his life and recollections of a grandmother whose letters arrived even before he was old enough to read: Mama Ceal’s writing, he says, “told me that I was important enough to receive mail. That I mattered” (p. 201). He dedicates the memoir to his wife, daughter, and son as well as “all the ancestors, families, and loved ones who hold us up and propel us forward” (p. 5). In the last words of the acknowledgments, Pryor encourages readers to do the same: “investigate the sheroes and heroes of your own family—deceased and living. Call their names. Celebrate them. Tell your children and loved ones about them. And whisper a quiet prayer of gratitude that they lived” (p. 213).

--Janelle Collins

Charles Portis for the Early Twenty-first Century

by Bryan L. Moore

Discussed in this essay:

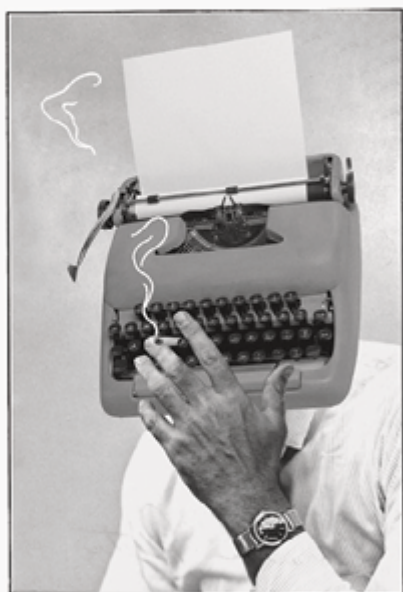
Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany. Charles Portis. Jay Jennings, ed. (New York: Overlook, - Pp. 364. \$19.00, illustrations by Mike Reddy, paperback)

A Haunted Man's Report: Reading Charles Portis. Robert Cochran. (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2024, Pp. 224. \$25.95, b/w and color photos, paperback)

Reading Jay Jennings's wonderful collection *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany* was for me an unexpected twenty-first century Portis bonus following the author's death in 2020, and it appeared at just at the right time, amid our current decidedly unfunny national period. I was aware of this book when it was published, but something would always come up, and I did not read it until now. Perhaps I unconsciously tabled it in the knowledge that Portis-wise this would be it. I have admired Portis's fiction since my brother recommended *The Dog of the South* to me in the early '80s. When I read it, my reaction was strong and immediate. I didn't know anyone

A CHARLES PORTIS MISCELLANY

ESCAPE VELOCITY



**COLLECTED
NONFICTION,
SHORT STORIES
& DRAMA
BY THE
AUTHOR OF
THE NO.1
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER
TRUE GRIT**

EDITED BY JAY JENNINGS

**CHARLES
PORTIS**



could write like that, could be so funny. Thirty years or so later, I read the novel for (I think) the fourth time, as I was dealing with a bulging disc in my back and an accompanying stabbing sciatica. I downloaded the novel to my reading device knowing it would make me feel better, and it was the best medicine, though thank God for opiates and Biofreeze patches. You know a book (or song, movie, etc.) is special when it helps you through a tough, unfunny time.

Yet my track record in selling him to others

has not been great. Long ago, when such an in-person summer literature class might make, I taught *True Grit* in American Novel. A few students enjoyed it, while others did not read it. One announced in class she did not like it or any of the novels we read that term, and another told me she did not like Westerns, period, and so during our viewing of the delightful 2010 Coen Brothers film adaptation she looked into her lap. I can't recall my reaction; it was, on some level, an impressive demonstration of boredom. (Is this novel a Western? Of course; it has all the basic elements. But it is also a realist novel and character study. I would not disagree with those who say it is his best.) Years ago, I had a gentle disagreement with a longtime friend at another Arkansas university concerning the state's "greatest novelist." I nominated you know who, while he insisted on Donald Harington. Of Harington's relatively large novel output, I have read only *The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks*, a sort of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* of our most rural Newton County, which made me laugh frequently. I've forgotten how I defended Portis, but it was a timewasting debate anyway, and we dropped it.

More recently, I recommended *The Dog of the South* to someone as the funniest novel I have read. I was impressed that he read it, but when I bumped into him a few weeks later, he said, "It's okay, but it's not as funny as *A Confederacy of Dunces*." I agreed that that novel, which I read not long after it was published, is funny, but I've, again, forgotten what I said, as I felt offended and defeated. It's not like this person has no sense of humor, but I'm not convinced his tastes go toward Portis's deadpan, which is not something I can explain well. It might be a snobby question, but did he get it? Portis's drollness expresses the center of our common oddness, our irrationality and crankiness, as in a gentle brag about beating a kid with short arms in three ping-pong matches. Arguably, some of Portis's jokes do not work, and some have not aged well, yet his trained eye for observation and pared style grounds him in a long line of great realists, including Flaubert and Chekhov, both of whom made the trivial interesting and were extraordinary deadpanners.

In 2012, Little Rock's Butler Center for Arkansas Studies did the world a great service by publishing *Escape Velocity*, which collects Portis's nonfiction, short stories, and a play. The edition reviewed was reprinted in 2023 by Overlook Press, which has also done the world a great service by reprinting all five of the author's novels. This printing adds a short story, "Damn!," which Portis published as a twenty-three-year-old journalism major at the University of Arkansas, following three years as a Marine (1952-55), including service in the Korean War. Readers familiar with the author will notice in this slight story the budding comic voice that would approach maturity after six years of newspaper reporting with his first novel, *Norwood* (1966). The earliest newspaper pieces included show comic traces, as in the opening sentence of the first piece collected, from 1958, for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* on city Jaycees "capturing" a flatboat with "cap gun volleys and a lot of rebel yelling" (p. 3). Similarly, in a 1962 *New York Herald Tribune* piece (referenced above) the author wins three matches of ping-pong against a kid: "He had little short arms and all I had to do was tip the ball over the net out of his reach" (p. 28). The collection's final published piece, "The Wind Bloweth Where it Listeth" (Oxford American, 2005), is an examination of the old idea that a hundred monkeys on typewriters would eventually write the complete works of Shakespeare. The ear and sense of humor are intact into our present century, as it is rough going for the monkeys, though it is perhaps the thinnest piece here. In addition to many mostly

brief newspaper pub- lications, the book collects eleven works, a 2001

interview with Portis conducted by Roy Reed for the Arkansas Gazette Project (see pryorcenter.uark.edu), and an Appendix with five tributes from admirers, including Dona Tartt on True Grit.

Editor Jay Jennings, who more recently edited the Library of America volume of Portis's Collected Works (2023), provides a good sampling of journalistic pieces, though these are the only ones I recall having read. They are in their way as illuminating and welcome as the more literary ones. Some of them, as shown, demonstrate Portis's comic precision and are all well-tuned to a general newspaper reading audience. These include a Commercial Appeal story on Elvis Presley and his mother and several "Our Town" columns he wrote during his year and a half employment for the Arkansas Gazette. More important because more serious are eight news reports for the Herald Tribune, where he was employed from 1960 to 1964, the final year as the paper's London bureau chief. In his Introduction, Jennings writes that although Portis's reporting has long been "recognized for its excellence," his civil rights reporting has been neglected by historians of the era (xvii). Portis's voice is restrained and sympathetic in covering Civil Rights Movement events in Alabama and Mississippi. In May 1963, Birmingham was the center of the movement as police used dogs and water hoses to attack Black children nonviolently protesting segregation. Television footage of these occurrences, which came to be known as the Children's March (or Crusade), would create global outrage and eventually lead to the Civil Rights Act.

A month later in Jackson, Mississippi, NAACP director Medgar Evers was shot to death outside his home. Portis's report on the murder is direct and economical as he allows the details to do their work, including an extended quoting of a fearless Evers from a year previous and his wife, who said, "Nothing can bring him back, but this cause can live on" (p. 56). In these pieces, Portis builds trust with his readers by indicating where the atrocities are coming from, who is kicking whom. He quotes Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety, regarding Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a key leader in the Birmingham campaign of 1963, injured by the police: "I been waitin' a week to see Shuttlesworth knocked down. . . . Too bad it wasn't a hearse." Portis wonders about racist ruffians taking such statements as a call to arms; he asks, "What will happen if young, white roughnecks—who have been the storm troopers previously against Negro demonstrations—come on the Birmingham scene?" (p. 37). As reporter, Portis is occasionally (and justifiably) pointed, as when he notes that a day after Evers's murder, the Jackson police are tired and frustrated but "seemed to draw relief by clubbing a Negro girl on the head and a white 'n-----lover'" (p. 57). He suggests how such unjust acts lead to more injustices, including threats against a free press: "The Jackson police do not like to have people taking notes when they are going about their business" (p. 58).

A very different piece of journalism is the first-person "An Auto Odyssey through Darkest Baja," which may be read as a rehearsal for his novels *The Dog of the South* and *Gringos*, both of which are set largely in Mexico. It shows a keen eye for everyday details and ear for funny, idiosyncratic dialogue that never falls into clichés or triteness. It shows a fascination with travel and cultures featured in all his novels but the fourth, *Masters of Atlantis*, which celebrates mundanity in its own secret society universe. Like *Norwood*, which was published the year before, the narrative

establishes the centrality of an automobile (often found wanting) and finances in general (often precarious), as he and an Arkie friend, Andy Davis, set out to drive down Baja California from Los Angeles in a Studebaker truck. They pick up a hitchhiker, Miguel, who, Portis

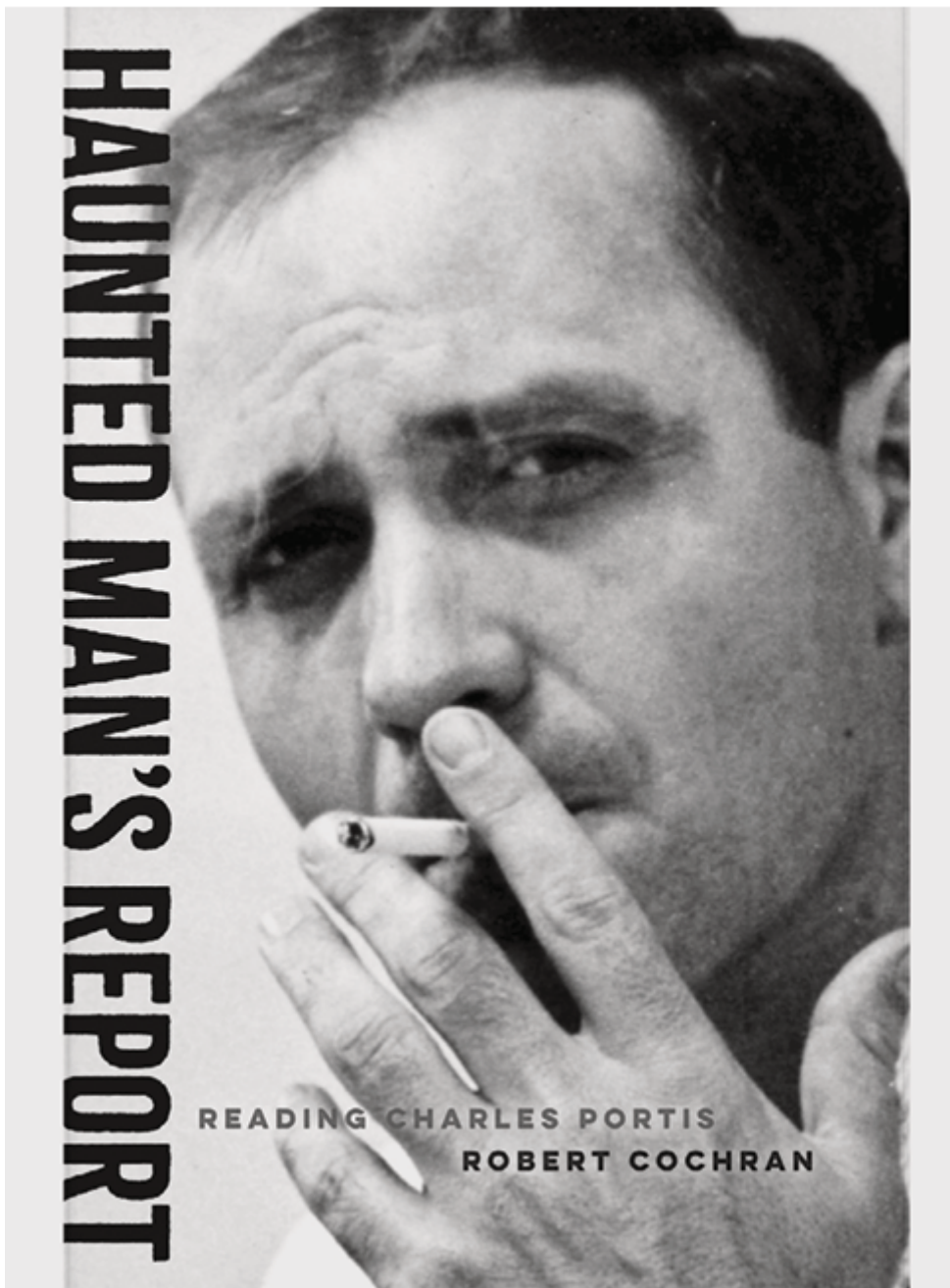
writes, “refused to understand my Spanish even after I had treated him to a pack of Dentyne” (p. 92). As the trip conditions grow rougher, Portis suggests snippiness between the travelers, as “Andy started belching, more than seemed necessary, and blamed it on the heat. I said that didn’t make any sense. He said it made as much sense as my wearing that stupid cowboy hat all the time” (p. 105).

The piece shows Portis as a practitioner of New Journalism at a time when similar, much more famous work began appearing regularly by Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and others, including Hunter S. Thompson, an excerpt of whose book *Hell’s Angels* also appeared in the same 1967 issue of the *Sunday LA Times* magazine *Home* as “Auto Odyssey.” This piece and the 1991 *Arkansas Times* first-person essay “The Forgotten River,” on tracing the course of the Ouachita River across southern Arkansas, where Portis grew up, into Louisiana, made me wonder about an alternate career the author might have chosen, a road not taken. The nonfiction included provides a fuller picture of how (arguably) the state’s greatest novelist, after fighting in a war and covering one of the most important eras in American history, retired from journalism and in 1964 returned to his home state for good to write fiction. Like Ray Midge of *The Dog of the South*, Portis traveled widely but never achieved “escape velocity” from Arkansas.

The five stories are welcome points of light from a writer known as a novelist. “Nights Can Turn Cool in Viborra,” a travelogue burlesque of a fictional place, and “I Don’t Talk Service No More,” which brings readers as close to the author’s Korea experience as we are likely to get, are the two standouts, moderate though they are. The author’s only published play, the three-act *Delray’s New Moon*, was workshopped by the *Arkansas Repertory Theatre* in 1996. It revolves around the imminent displacement of some senior citizens from their domicile, which is in the process of being, through shady dealings, converted into a glitzy club. This is the book’s longest work and is as satisfying as anything collected, as deadpans emanate from the mouths of mostly elderly Arkansans. Uncollected in the Portis LOA, the book is worth \$19 for this play alone. Predictably, reading *Escape Velocity* made me yearn for more Portis. I wonder about Jennings’s subtitle word “Miscellany”—is there more, somewhere? Not likely, though in 2025, *Harper’s Magazine* published “The Keys to Veracruz,” from an unfinished novel, *The Woman from Nowhere*, which seems like a cross between *Masters of Atlantis* in its (pseudo) hermeticism and *Gringos*, as it is set in Mexico. The notion of a major Portis female character is intriguing and, in that sense, comparable to Melville’s unpublished, lost novella *The Isle of the Cross*.

To date, Robert Cochran’s *A Haunted Man’s Report: Reading Charles Portis* is one of the very few (perhaps only) books on Portis, not including secondary sources on *True Grit*. It is the work of a Portis scholar and longtime University of Arkansas English professor who has published on a variety of subjects, including Vance Randolph and Samuel Beckett. He taught a graduate seminar on the writer, and his research is meticulously documented. Clearly, Cochran is also, like me, a Portis fanboy who understands as well as anyone the rare gift of the novelist’s comic vision of the world. On occasion, the book reads like a Portis *CliffsNotes* that recounts jokes from the novels, but Cochran mostly avoids this. Some Portis lovers may appreciate a well-organized, thought-out retelling with (surely reflecting at least some of the UA seminar) an often-enlightening

examination of the contexts. Anyone who does not care for Portis's writing will probably not be won over by Cochran (and certainly not by me). This is obviously not the place to begin



reading Portis; it is a book about Portis, by a Portis fan, for Portis fans.

Casting his critical net widely, Cochran draws from Homer (Norwood as Telemachus) and Dante (True Grit's Tom Chaney as thief Vanni Fucci). "I Don't Talk Service No More" and Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape are, he writes, "retrospective monologues by codger loners" (p. 148). He compares Portis's (inarguably?) greatest conman in a corpus filled with such characters, Dr. Reo Symes of *The Dog of the South* (1979), with Chaucer's Pardoner, Melville's herb doctor in *The Confidence-Man*, and Twain's duke and king. These are certainly in the ballpark, though it strikes me that Symes's scheming is ultimately— and typically for Portis—much more innocuous, less bitter than the others. One might easily add other similar characters, such as those populating Flannery O'Connor's fiction (e.g., Hazel Motes or Manley Pointer). Cochran's comparisons made me think of

an article I wrote on Portis more than thirty years ago, as I was entering the job market and eagerly welcomed any publication to beef up my thin grad student CV. It was good student paper, but it is not a good scholarly article. (I got up to dig it out as I was drafting this, but anticipating the cringe involved, I sat back down.) I attempted to show how Portis, though traditional in respects, is akin to post-modern fiction writers born around the same time as him such as Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme in their absurdity, though they are absurdities of different types. Portis's fiction, True Grit excepted, is more purely comic, about the gags themselves, than philosophical.

Cochran quotes a passage in which Symes tells the novel's young main character, Ray Midge, about one of his schemes, the ridiculous theme park idea of "Jefferson Davis Land." Symes says he would himself dress up as "Davis in a frock coat and greet tourists as they stepped off the ferry." In the afternoons, General Lee would appear, "take off his gray coat and wrestle an alligator in a mud hole" (qtd. p. 73). A few years after my article appeared, I read latter-day postmodernist George Saunders's brilliant 1996 debut collection *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, partly because of the glowing Pynchon blurb on the back cover, and I reconsidered whether my article was really all that bad. Saunders's readers will remember that in the title story, the ridiculously conceived theme park CivilWarLand, a tasteless gimmick in a world shorn of good will, is in the process of going belly up. A reader of the Saunders story would see immediate similarities, though I have no idea if Saunders has read Portis or did so before writing his story. (Saunders would revisit the bad theme park concept in other stories.) Though Portis does suggest some skepticism toward our thoroughly commercialized world, it becomes a firehose in Saunders.

The subtitle, "Reading Charles Portis," states clearly what this book is up to—the author's reading of Portis, based on his research and

teaching. It is not a biography, though some bi- ography is relevant here and there. Before reading this book, I had not thought much about Portis at UA, where he was, Cochran points out, a student when the highly respected Ben Kimpel and Duncan Eaves taught in its English Depart- ment. This would surely have helped open ave- nues of thought for the young veteran, who obviously showed some bookishness, yet there is no indication Portis took either professor. Co- chran helped me think about Portis's reading, which he does not particularly show off in his fic- tion (as compared to Borges or Woolf). It is dif- ficult to imagine a scholar investigating Portis's many literary and historical references more thor- oughly. Occasionally, Cochran seems to go off into the weeds, as when he suggests Portis, with Gringos in particular, may be read as a critic of Euro-American colonialism. This surprised me; I have never read Portis that way, anything like the way I do, say, Joseph Conrad or Chinua Achebe, but perhaps I will come around to this notion.

Readers and researchers can draw and find value from the book as needed. He lauds Portis the reporter but wisely points out some less than stellar stories, such as "The Marchers: A Blue- print for Protest" (not included in the Jennings collection), which Cochran writes, "comes across as a puzzling, peevish, even slapdash perform- ance" (p. 18). He provides fresh information (for me) about True Grit, which, he notes, "has out- sold by a factor of at least five the author's other four efforts combined" (p. 45). He skillfully navigates Portis's occasional use of (at least arguably) dated, insensitive language. His thoughts on the complexity of his greatest character, Mattie Ross, are open-eyed, as he points out that though academics typically conclude she is something of a bigot, such obser- vations "have gained little traction outside the faculty lounge" (p. 59). The concluding para- graphs are, I think, persuasive in summing up Portis as, overall, rather affirmative.

Many of the illustrations in the Cochran are interesting and, as far as I know, unique. (The Overlook Edition of *Escape Velocity* preserves the breezy Butler Center illustrations by Mike Reddy.) The photograph of George Maledon, real-life jailer and hangman for Judge Parker, who employs the (fictional) Rooster Cogburn, jumps out, and I had never seen the photograph of a young Portis as a Marine in full gear, leaning against a rock, presumably in Korea, writing in a notebook with a pencil. The author did not talk much or write explicitly about his service, yet his simple grave marker—Cochran's photo of which is included—notes his name, dates, and (presum- ably) his preferred identity, "SGT US MARINE CORPS / KOREA." I was initially surprised by the cover of the book, with a full-sized photo- graph of Portis smoking. Somehow, I had not seen it before. Given the strange, insidious, but undeniable idea that smoking makes anyone look cool, it seemed more like a book on Kerouac or Bukowski. (I asked AI if Portis ever quit smok- ing, and for what it is worth, it said he did not.) Available pictures of the reclusive author are a lit- tle scarce, so why not use this one? It is a rare Por- tis closeup, and it does make him look cool. Part of me loves this photo, but for some reason, per- haps for its daftness, the Overlook edition cover seems to me the better representation of the au- thor, who always preferred that readers know him through his writing. It uses a small insert of the same portrait, a portable typewriter hanging, obscuring his face, the cigarette inserted in the space between the keys.

