CHESTER RIVER REVERIE

PRISCILLA LONG

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BIRDWATCHING IN AMERICA

Birds on ladies’ hats counted by ornithologist Frank Chapman within two hours, New York City, 1886

Consider the heron-hatted ladies shopping Fifth Avenue, New York, 1886. Hats feathered and furred with plumes of pheasants, faces of kittens peering out, entire merles—that Brazilian blackbird—wired to move just like a bird, The grey swallow, coveted as millinery ornament. And pigeon, pheasant, peacock. Ferruginous hawk, harlequin duck. Four robins, a brown thrush, three bluebirds, three warblers, three black-capped flycatchers, three scarlet tanagers, white-bellied swallows, waxwings, a pine grosbeak. Fifteen snow buntings, a bobolink, a meadowlark… Birds too mutilated to name, wings and beaks, purple and blue. Naturally, I wished to be very stylish....
STRIP MINE

*Dickinson County, Virginia*

One old woman still lives
down in the holler.
Mineguards block the road
till the sun sinks, Earth tilts
its load of fallen trees.

In the Appalachian night
Brushy Ridge caves
into Nuce Creek.
Floodwaters rise to hickory
root, fox pup, bear cub.

No more the hawk’s cry.
No more, the fiddle’s air.
WHAT HAPPENED THIS MORNING

Dawn roars, beeps, whines.
A demolition excavator knocks down
my neighbor Barbara's corner
of the world: plaster walls
painted blue, dust and concrete,
old rebar. Bucket-shears uproot
the old cherry tree as if
it were shotweed or chickweed.
Away white petals of May!
Before lunch, the skimmia hedge
gets pulled up, piled up.
The western hemlock Barbara
transplanted from her mom's woods
felled with chainsaw and bucket-butt.
It booms down on the brush pile.
Next to go, the apple tree, its apples
fat, Sudden sun on my side of the fence
smacks the giant fern, shocks osoberry
and mock orange. More chainsaw,
screach and tear, a dirt mountain.

Evening. In sudden silence, I water
the garden, wash dust-choked
leaves. I speak to birch,
huckleberry, maidenhair
fern, my incensed cedar.
Look, I say, remain calm.
We have time, more autumn rains,
more seasons to flower
before the future comes
to rip us out.
That year, 1967, smoke
drifted over from Detroit or
was it crazed eyes and smoke-
choked clothes, fear-sweat escaped
to Ann Arbor, fire this time.
She and her pals borrowed bread
back and forth, conspired to pay
the rent, talked politics, smoked
Kools, cooked spaghetti dinners.
She worked at the Perry Nursery School.

Good morning Miss Long, the children
chimed, eager for story hour.

The other story: Going from door to door
to talk the war, the sweetness of the summer
of love, jazz in the park, beautiful
children playing as children will play,
as Tanya Blanding, age 4, shot
in Detroit, will never play. Vietnam
Summer, and then October, the march
on the Pentagon. That was the music

of that time, her man in prison
her weekly ride to the prison
with Jehovah's Witness women
whose men had also spurned
the war, kindly asking was he
the one who believed
in evolution.
Time is a room to enter,
to savor the fervor, the long nights
of talk, the joy of the march,
youth's proud crazy dream
*Hell no, we won't go*
and *Oh, Freedom...*
CHESTER RIVER REVERIE

Eastern Shore of Maryland

I open my eyes underwater to seaweed, to green sunlight. I dog-paddle to shore. A kingfisher sits on a willow branch.

This is my childhood place, we kids swimming like sea turtles or catfish, squishing our feet in the muddy bottom or rowing out to eel traps set by watermen, pulling them up to watch eels curl and writhe.

Did I even think of beauty, the staggering numbers of bugs and birds, the black locust, the swans on Fore Creek, the wild geese?

We were dirt-streaked and proud, our bare feet calloused, good swimmers, good workers, socially competent with cows.

The beauty we lived in, natural as an old boot, I see now as a slow wide river, a blue wing, turkey buzzards spiraling down.
ABOUT THE WRITER:

PRISCILLA LONG is a Seattle-based writer of poetry, creative nonfiction, science, history, and fiction, and a long-time independent teacher of writing. Her seventh book is Dancing with the Muse in Old Age (Coffeetown, 2022). Her two poetry books are Holy Magic (MoonPath Press) and Crossing Over: Poems (University of New Mexico Press). Her how-to-write book is The Writer's Portable Mentor: A Guide to Art, Craft, and the Writer's Life. She is also author of a guide for creators, Minding the Muse, and a history of coalmining in the United States. She grew up on a dairy farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.
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