

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***The Poor Children***

by April L. Ford

Santa Fe Writers Project, 2015

177 pages

\$15.95 (paper)

Reviewed by George Hovis

The title of April L. Ford's debut collection of stories, *The Poor Children*, promises irony and double meanings, and the book fulfills that promise many times over. The children in these stories are, indeed, often impoverished, materially and spiritually. They are the victims of all kinds of neglect and abuse. But they are rarely helpless. Quite the contrary—these dragon's teeth grow into deadly adversaries of their parents and each other. Take M—, for example, the protagonist of “runawaybitch13,” whose parents are guilty of little more than constant self-absorption, arguing over what movie they will watch, while their disabled child, D—, wallows on the carpet, regurgitating his supper. D—'s older sister, M—, is no less self-involved than her parents (but she's only thirteen!), and her sass and verve make us forgive her excesses, at least until the very end of the story, when she and her boyfriend, who believes he is a three-hundred-year-old werewolf, brutally murder her parents and then consummate the deed by having sexual intercourse on her parents' bed. Ford provides that last bit of content in the form of a news report; in her good taste she tends to render the most salacious content “off stage” or to suggest its trajectory rather than make it fully explicit. And often, as with Flannery O'Connor or Dale Ray Phillips, the most heartrending trauma borders on the darkly comic. Don't be mistaken: there's plenty of edge to this collection, but Ford senses how far a reader is willing to peer into the abyss, and she teeters right on the knife's edge of innocence and its utter loss.

Only slightly less Gothic than “runawaybitch13” is “A Marmalade Cat for Jenny,” in which the titular protagonist, at thirteen, is impregnated by her twenty-one-year-old foster brother, Mark.

“Marmalade Cat” begins when Jenny is nine and being routinely raped by her Pa, while both her biological brother Scott and her foster brother Mark (both seventeen) stand by as witnesses. Whereas Scott is helpless to intervene, Mark routinely stands up to Pa and eventually murders him, which results in his being sent away for four years to a minimum security prison. With Mark and Pa out of the way, Scott assumes the role of Jenny's caretaker, and their lives approach normalcy. But Mark's release coincides with Jenny's entrance to puberty, and the brother and foster brother square off to see who will become the new patriarch.

Like Mark, minors in other stories are frequently in and out of institutions, and Ford convincingly explores the relationships between these troubled teens and the adults who attempt to care for them—not always with good intentions. Consider, for example, Madame Jasmine of “Isabelle's Haunting,” who takes in foster children solely for the purpose of staffing her tourist destination that doubles as haunted house and bordello. By contrast, in “Bleary,” the well-intentioned Avril learns that only by treating the institutionalized teens at Bleary Center for Today's Youth as fully human can she induce them to come to show promise of rehabilitation, and yet such trust comes with tremendous risks to herself and her charges. Similarly in “Bananas and Limes” (which appeared as “Project Fumarase” in *New Madrid*, Summer 2014) Peggy jeopardizes her career with Child Protective Services by helping a teen mother named Karaleen attempt to nurse her infant. In so doing, Peggy experiences a level of intimacy that challenges her ability to see Karaleen merely as a member of a religious cult and an informant who might assist in the cult's demise. In “Layla,” Andrea simultaneously navigates the early stages of pregnancy and her entry-level position at the Clermont Girls' and Boys' Correctional Facilities. At stake is her willingness to participate in bringing a new generation into a world that is already glutted with “little rapists and murderers, the future arsonists and other monsters being preened for society.” In the midst of such unadulterated evil, though, Andrea meets “beautiful Layla,” a girl with a prosthetic leg

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who drinks “an entire bottle of bathroom cleaner during chore hour,” just for the chance to be touched with gentleness by her caretakers. Andrea tempers her anxiety for the new life inside her by concluding that if it is a girl she will name it Layla.

Throughout *The Poor Children*, our gaze is held on the lives of children who demand our empathy but will not tolerate our sentimentality. In this hard-edged debut, winner of the Santa Fe Writers Project Award and shortlisted for the Scott Prize for international debut story collections (Salt Publishing, UK), April L. Ford shows promise of a brilliant career.

### ***The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre:***

*An Anthology of Explorations in Creative Nonfiction*

Edited by Sean Prentiss and Joe Wilkins

Michigan State University Press, 2014

155 pages

\$22.95

Reviewed by Melissa Kiefer

My high-school students groan when they hear the word *essay*. They slump in their chairs and put their heads down on their desks. They seem intuitively to understand Ander Monson’s observation in *Essay as a Hack*: “I fear for the essay, friends, and its bad reputation. It feels white and dull, dusty, old.” Writers, in short, need to realize that creative nonfiction is not a static genre; it does not have to be standardized, traditional, or dull. We needed a groundbreaking book to remind us of the essay’s experimental features and to revive us for the opportunities of the genre. *The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* fits the bill. Part craft book, part anthology, and part good advice, it features as its contributors the rebels, the rule-breakers teetering on the edges and testing the boundaries of our fourth genre, an exciting genre that can encompass all of the other genres, too.

*The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* gives writers permission to spice up the essay. Play with words, form, time, and scope. Make the essay gritty. Make it sultry. Make it illuminate. Educate but complicate. Allow it to question itself. Let the essay tease, sidetrack, and interrupt. Each essay in the volume tackles specific challenges curious nonfiction writers must face in moving forward. Some writers wonder about whether time should be measured in minutes or moments. Others try to distinguish among facts, blurred memories, and plain pretending. Still others try to negotiate the varieties of truth—for example, objective truth versus emotional truth.

In “Eternal Sunshine of the Nonfiction Mind: A New Philosophy for Understanding Truth and Creative Nonfiction,” Sean Prentiss writes, “...CNF is the art of crafting shifting memories.” In “Night,” in the context of a father’s death, Joe Wilkins writes about how and why memories shift between childhood and adulthood. “The boy needs a story,” he writes. “As does the man who was the boy. For it is in the weaving of a story that the boy begins to understand.” Writing connects us not only to others, but also to our past selves, making creative nonfiction truly the genre of human experience. In “The Art and Absence of Reflection: What is the Why?,” Kim Barnes reminds writers always to remember the audience: “Readers of your nonfiction should come away knowing more about themselves than they do about you.”

The scope of imagination in creative nonfiction is demonstrated in “Lines that Create Motion” by Robin Hemley. In pondering a stranger’s scrapbook, Hemley discovers that in order to tell the most authentic story, he must take the risk of going beyond the sepia-toned pictures and reinterpret or translate a new significance to the stranger’s life. Judith Kitchen takes a similar approach in “Gone A-Sailing: A Voyage to the Edge of Nonfiction.” When she (also looking at a scrapbook) allows herself to color her mother’s life and go outside the frame of the black and white photos with the cliché captions, she ends up finding a bigger truth, a stronger connection, and a more authentic version of her mother’s life.

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Some contributions match form to function especially well. Lia Purpura ironically writes her essay as an advice column. The first letter begins, “Why do some men wear such tight pants, and why are they getting tighter these days?” In speaking cleverly and subtly about the human body, she creatively teaches us about the essay’s body.

Some of my favorite essays (both in this book and in other anthologies) are ones that I do not completely understand. Nancer Ballard observes in “Time in Narrative Nonfiction” that the writer may have to settle for a reader learning something as opposed to completely understanding something, and that’s okay. Maybe learning is what we should actually hope for. Learning is complex. A story may be over, but the insight, the wrestling, and the learning have just begun.

*The Far Edges of the Fourth Genre* is sure to make writers stretch their techniques, experiment with styles, reinvent their writer identities, and reach for new possibilities. In fact, it constitutes perfect required reading for serious writers brave enough to push their boundaries. As it very much proves, the essay is not dead. In fact, the essay is more exhilarating and alive than ever before.

### ***Radiant Truths:***

*Essential Dispatches, Reports, Confessions, & Other Essays on American Belief*

by Jeff Sharlet

Yale University Press

408 pages

\$20.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Andrea Stang

In *Radiant Truths: Essential Dispatches, Reports, Confessions, & Other Essays on American Belief*, Jeff Sharlet compiles and introduces twenty-four essays on the subjects of religion and culture, spanning one-hundred-fifty years. The authors, all of whom contend with

the presence of belief surrounding them, range from Whitman and Thoreau, to James Baldwin and Norman Mailer, Mary McCarthy and Garry Wills, to Amy Wilentz and Anne Fadiman. Seldom is a trace of organized religion evident. The essays are more about how belief is infused into the American mind.

As an assistant professor and former research scholar himself, Sharlet writes for the academic, not for the layman, yet the book is still accessible to a wide audience. Sharlet’s major focus in his previous books—*Sweet Heaven When I Die* (2011), *C Street* (2010), *The Family* (2008), and *Killing the Buddha* (2004)—was also on religion and culture. Thus he is well-equipped to assemble an anthology on the subject.

It’s a challenge not to lecture when it comes to the topic of faith, something most of these writers avoid. Instead, the collected essays in *Radiant Truths* allow deeper truths to be told by exposing readers to encounters with difference and in the process creating a bridge between history and the present. Some of these encounters lead to epiphanies.

For instance, “The Devil Baby at Hull-House” details Jane Addams’s experience of visitors flocking to Hull House—Chicago’s first social settlement—to see a baby rumored to have been born as a devil after a father’s curse that he would rather have a devil in the house than another daughter. The story is transformative and heartrending, particularly in its portrait of the elderly women who sought something to heal their “distracted spirit[s].” Reading it made me consider that people who spread rumors of any oddity—a devil baby, a bearded woman, an elephant man—might be only be out to “subdue the fiercenesses of the world about them,” as Addams concludes. These gossips have faith that there is something more severe than the experiences they have endured.

Abraham Cahan’s “Dead After Purim,” takes the form of a journalistic eulogy cataloging the last day of an average Jewish man—in reconstructed reality. Within its rhetorical spaces, the color and flavor of the neighborhood come to life in the details of how the family sets

the dinner table and cheerfully celebrates only to find the father of the house dead in the building's courtyard the next morning. The aftermath transpires and readers can see how much the neighborhood hopes for the doctor to rule Harris Freedman's death accidental so that they can "bury him like a Jew." The doctor does (whether due to science or compassion), and the scene fades with a beggar jingling coins in a tin and calling out, "Alms, deliver from death! Alms, deliver from death!"

William T. Stead's "Maggie Darling" explores one woman's fall from grace into a brothel. To its author, the narrative "seemed a microcosm of the history of the human race. The whole of the story was there; from the Fall to the Redemption; from the Redemption to the Apostasy of the Church, and the blighting of the hopes of mankind." Sharlet's foreword for "Maggie Darling" provides insight into how Stead was viewed in his day as a new, democratic journalist—which was not then a compliment. Stead wanted "government by journalism" and instead "helped make a democracy of stories."

A narrative arc isn't present in all of the essays—some paint only portraits or give anecdotes from a larger story. An excerpt from Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* stands well alone. Much more than a snapshot, it gives a timeless look at human nature, particularly the nature of those seeking "to worship, the holy places whereon their happy eyes were resting now" when Twain travels with fellow Americans, many of whom seek only to find souvenirs by dismantling ancient architecture, to what was then—in 1869—Palestine. He furiously uses his wit to struggle for meaning in a strange but effective combination of observation, scripture, and farce in an absence of the expected divine.

*Radiant Truths* embraces an ethic that within each story is the potential for empathy, enlightenment, and inspiration. Faith can be found in any place and at any time. This is why Sharlet's manifesto-seeming introduction initially confused me. Sharlet puts an inordinate amount of focus on defining—in depth—literary journalism, yet spends less than fifteen percent of the section discussing faith and religion—

supposedly the connective tissue of his anthology. After reading the book in its entirety, however, I can see that he simply wants to explain why literary journalism is the ideal genre to illuminate the complexities of religion. His introductions to each essay are informative, well-written, and digestible. They also help bridge the connection to how literary journalism has so much to do with faith and religion. Writers can go beyond the "constricted I" as Josephine Herbst has called it, to look at differences not just as material for exotic anecdotes but as part of their own internal experience—a communion of sorts.

Read as a continuum, complete with Sharlet's insights, the essays in *Radiant Truths* spark meaningful thought on both religion and literary journalism. They are—in Sharlet's terms—the "cacophony choir," which comes alive to contemplate "when we say religion, out loud."

***Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel, 1987-2007***

by Liam Harte

Wiley-Blackwell, 2014

274 pages

\$34.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Josh Adair

Liam Harte's undertaking in this critical work is an ambitious one, which he immediately identifies: "This book examines some of the most well-known and critically feted works of contemporary Irish literary fiction, all of which were published during a twenty-year period that witnessed accelerated change in virtually every sphere of the country's economic, social, cultural, political, and religious life, and which was paralleled by an uncommon flourishing of literary and artistic creativity." What may not be immediately apparent to all readers, though, is that addressing a significant cultural moment that may yet still be transpiring is a bold move and one which Harte executes admirably. Framing the work as one directed primarily at

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“third-level [university] students,” it’s extremely unlikely that such students especially can understand the full scope of a study that examines literary works spanning nearly their entire lifetimes in most cases, not to mention the continuing unfolding of the social events and atmospheres which inspire the works Harte moves them to investigate.

Examining works by such literary luminaries as Roddy Doyle, Patrick McCabe, Edna O’Brien, and Seamus Deane, to mention a few of the nine included, Harte delivers a dynamic, insightful examination of an intriguing range of Irish novels, and not all them well-known. He does so by dipping into a range of critical approaches—a strength of the work—rather than reading from one set of critical tenets or from the lens of a single school of thought. Furthermore, his engaged, thoughtful close readings of the various works he selects models an important skill and mindset which often eludes beginning literary scholars; Harte understands the significance of digging into a literary text and exploring it as-is rather than hurling oneself toward it filled with preconceptions, eager to ensnare it with some theory or another with all the enthusiasm of an amateur hobbyist. Theory, Harte reminds us, is a tool, not an end in itself.

In his reading of Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007), for example, Harte carefully establishes contexts and historical significance (as he does with each text) before applying feminist theory alongside his in-depth explorations of the shape of postmodernism in the text. Foregrounding the importance of meeting a text where it’s at, Harte skillfully brings his audience up to speed by neatly outlining various cultural and historical issues, which may inform an engaged reading of the text *and* the culture that produced it. In the specific case of Enright’s novel, Harte traverses her depiction of trauma—a concept central to so much Irish literature—highlighting the author’s formal and stylistic innovations in attempting to depict, interrogate, and perhaps, understand, what it means to live past trauma—possibly even to recover. With care and precision, Harte impressively offers thoughtful, accessible readings and provides important insight about a range of novels which have, to date, escaped sustained critical attention in many cases.

Despite the framing of *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel* as a book to be directed at upper-division university students, as a scholar in the field I found it pleasantly accessible and satisfyingly insightful at the same time. It offers an excellent primer in each chapter that I can easily imagine being of great use not only to students of literature, but also to those of us engaged in the work of teaching and studying such works.

### ***Bloom in Reverse***

by Teresa Leo

University of Pittsburgh Press

92 pages

\$15.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Anne Delana Reeves

Reading *Bloom in Reverse* could not have come at a more significant time for me. This summer, the sudden death of my dearest friend left me questioning every aspect of my life. I considered staking a *For Sale* sign in my front yard, abandoning my garden, and escaping for parts unknown—anywhere my friend’s memory could not find me. Teresa Leo knows the kind of grief that leads to impulsive, even desperate, decisions. Her poems are as fierce as they are graceful and as unsettling as they are controlled. Leo’s gorgeous language, inventive imagery, and full-tilt intensity make her a modern-day Emily Dickinson with a sledgehammer and Grrl Power moxie.

*Bloom In Reverse* chronicles Leo’s own effort to confront the suicide of her best friend, their relationship, and Leo’s own history of disappointments. Rilke’s admonition at the end of his poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo”—“You must change your life”—comes to mind, although Leo’s aggressive stance toward the painful process of accepting grief transcends Rilke’s romantically dramatic tone. Sometimes that process turns destructive as when Leo grapples with her friend’s favorite flower, the riotously bright Gerber daisy:

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... Compelling is the urge  
to work around the center,  
dismantle a thing of beauty into the least  
of its parts.

Home, reduced to a shell, also becomes a metaphor for the chaos of the grieving self:

and she will keep dismantling  
the home until it reverts back  
to wood, stud, brick, dirt,  
until it becomes the shell  
that contains the shell of her;  
a prairie, leveled now,  
scorched and then rebuilt,

The first section of *Bloom in Reverse*, titled “NO,” includes an epigraph from Emily Dickinson: *She could not find her Yes*. Here, Leo examines not only loss, but also the fluctuating emotions that come with it. “NO” expresses Leo’s wrenching disbelief in her friend’s death combined with the impossible, yet all-too-natural, hope that one word might negate reality and bring back her friend who said *Yes* to death. This conflict is at the heart of *Bloom In Reverse*, resulting in images of despair and beauty.

How does one make sense of a loved one who refused to stay? Describing herself and her friend as statues in the poem “Bronze,” Leo writes:

...  
After the news I could no longer move –  
  
In our metallic suits, we were safe

from everything in the world,  
but inside the armor,

where we really lived,  
also dwelled our very own

unrelenting and brutal thing against which  
there was no second skin to protect us.

One of the most touching and convincing images comes in “Poem for a Troubled Room.” The “invisible cracks” in her friend’s room are like:

fissures, spider cracks that remind  
of the hand of an elderly aunt  
that reaches across the table

to grab the arm of someone  
who wants to leave,  
the way she had wanted to leave,  
but was held back briefly,

maybe a year longer than she’d intended.  
But each living hand had lost its grip  
and she slipped away from the table  
when no one was looking.

Leo balances such poignant moments with hard-edged images and humor as she remembers the cigarettes and endless glasses of wine once shared with her best friend, both sympathizing over the complications of romance, the persistence of traditional male/female roles, and the arrival of online dating and internet porn.

Leo reserves much of her anger for home and the repression it represents, “a trap, cell, rope, hell,” where “the caulking gun will

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hang / loaded in the basement,” and “Ghosts, ghosts, ghosts, ghosts,” overwhelm the stability of four walls. Leo, examining the loss of love in the poem “Your Rose Bush” asserts, “I killed it today, and not by accident.” Destroying the roses’ “fleeting, temporary” beauty removes expectation and significance; “and so your rose bush is not,” Leo writes. Love, like beauty or memory, becomes, then, “a bloom in reverse,” unseen, unable to wound or to heal.

The speaker’s journey with grief is an arduous one. In the end, after two years of false starts, her willingness to “thrive” comes as naturally as that of a robin returning to last year’s nest. Just as the first shoots of spring arrive at last, “the living ready to burst / through the dead,” Teresa Leo’s *Bloom In Reverse* leads the reader to the vibrancy of the survivor’s blossoming.

### ***Language Lessons: Volume I***

Edited by Chet Weise and Ben Swank

Third Man Books, 2014

321 pages

\$50.00

Reviewed by Christine Cutler

*Language Lessons: Volume I*, like other anthologies, offers its readers a smorgasbord of works by contemporary writers whose voices are as different as the writers themselves. Chet Weise—poet, musician, instructor, and editor of *Volume I*—says that while their backgrounds are diverse, the contributors “...are real people who have taken the time to speak, write, and even more, to listen, and all of whom share a love for the creation of language ... . All have shared many of the same experiences in both the world and their writing/music.”

Many of the writers are up-and-coming, while others—including Pulitzer Prize nominee Dale Ray Phillips, National Book Award finalist and National Book Critics Circle winner CD Wright, and National

Book Award and Pulitzer Prize finalist Adrian Matejka—are well-known and established in literary circles. Befitting Weise’s and Third Man co-founder Ben Swank’s vision of combining words and music, *Language Lessons* is, however, more than a printed anthology. Included in the large, black case are the book, two LPs, and five frameable posters featuring the poetry and art of various contributors. The content, heavy on poetry, is as diverse as James Brown and *Beowulf*.

Separated into five sections, the works vary from the seemingly traditional (for example, the storytelling in “Joe Messinger is Dreaming” and “Creole,” among others) to the experimental (for example, EMOEMOJI : DANCING and HTIAF). The collection is eclectic, to say the least.

Most of the prose in *Language Lessons* looks like easy reading, but it really isn’t. Casual readers will surely enjoy the romp Tav Falco takes them on in “Chapter the Thirteenth: Discourse of Rage, Conjunction & Exile,” yet they might still fail to grasp that “Chapter the Thirteenth” is an excerpt from Falco’s memoir and that the supposedly fictional narrator watching Falco is actually the writer himself. Likewise, readers will find Pinckney Benedict’s “Joe Messinger is Dreaming” a wonderfully imaginative tale, but will they realize that as Air Force Captain (and hero) Messinger climbs to 120,000 feet in a weather balloon, he is awake but hallucinating because the increasing altitude affects his mind?

Of course, the majority of work in *Language Lessons* is poetry. Truth be told, poetry—the innovative rebel of the writing world—is the stepchild of the reading world. Because many readers find contemporary poetry complex and intimidating, they avoid reading it. Said readers should understand the questions M-Dot Da Poet (Marquise Person) poses in “Fairytale” (“*What if Unicorns were real?*” and “*What if Cupid had no heart?*” among them). The stronger message M-Dot sends, however, is that the fantasies and inventions that comfort us in our youth gradually dissolve as we grow up. Imagination, he says, is “... the weapon in the war against reality.” Adulthood is colder and more fraught with peril, and over time, reality corrupts our innocence.

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In the final lines of “Fairytale,” M-Dot does suggest, though, that maybe we do need to keep a bit of youthful whimsy to protect us from ourselves:

*What if Trayvon Martin had been seen as Batman instead of a young man in black—*

*Would that bullet had been just as quick to heal as it was to kill—*

*I wish that men like Zimmerman would go back to wanting to be Superman*

*and not the men of steel—...*

Perhaps the most eclectic piece in *Language Lessons* is Dan Boehl’s “EMOEMOJI : DANCING.” The lead piece to Section III, the poem begins with an entire page filled with special keyboard characters, a mystifying mix of symbols and spaces that brings to mind hieroglyphics. I had to “read” and study the mosh pit of characters on page 149 five or six times before I realized each set of six-eight characters (emoji) was itself a dancing character. For example:

*o(^o) (o^^)o (Can you see the eyes, fists, and plump body enjoying the music?)*

The rest of the poem consists of 11 pages lined with columns of single-word musings void of punctuation. Boehl formatted this section perhaps in homage to the text-speak-Twitter world in which we live today—abbreviated thoughts that fit the 140-character limit:

*want  
to  
grow  
up*

*to  
be  
mick  
jaggers  
daughter*

Some of Boehl’s lines, though missing punctuation and capitalization, do express complete thoughts—in the digital world, an indication that they are important and worth the reader’s attention:

*heres  
to  
feeling  
good  
all  
the  
time*

And:

*im  
okay  
with  
this  
ending  
guys*

Experimental poetry such as Boehl’s would probably confuse readers who pick up the book to relax and enjoy, and I do see the eclecticism of *Language Lessons* as its weakest attribute. As is the case with our preferences in music and art, what we like of literature is intensely personal. While I didn’t like everything included in the collection, I must admit that fragments from some of the selections play over and over in my mind, getting stuck like lines from annoying songs.

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I suppose, too, that references to stuck records are fitting here, since *Language Lessons* is the first book published by Third Man Books, a division of Third Man Records, which still produces vinyl records in this era of everything digital. In a day when we can carry fifty or five-hundred books or songs on little handheld devices, the publication of a book only in hardcover, with accompanying records in vinyl, is unusual, but that's the Third Man way. From the records to the posters to the book, every piece of art in *Language Lessons* is part of the essential aesthetic experience.

### **White Indians**

*Being the First Part of Two*

by Michael Gills

Guide Dog Books, 2013

\$13.95 (paper)

124 pages

Reviewed by Jacque E. Day

*White Indians* begins with a drowning, and it ends with a baptism. In summing up Michael Gills's latest effort—a visionary memoir rooted in his close encounters with the beautiful mess of living in this world—I have come up with *fleeing in search of*. Whether Gills is facing down a forest fire at Flaming Gorge, Utah, or enduring a Zuni Sundance ceremony in the July New Mexico heat, he is both seeking and running from the specter of his mother, whose own drowning death has left him inconsolable. This relentless quest for solace puts the man he wants to be—a grounded husband and father—at war with the man raging to emerge, one who seeks out the extreme and lunges into it. It is a battle of elements, with earth and air in the middle, and fire and water pulling him hard from the outside.

Gills begins his collection with the essay “What the Newly Dead Don't Know but Learn.” Had the first sentence borne a different

outcome, this book wouldn't be here to be read, and we'd have never known a Michael Gills: “My cousin found a hand-grenade in a Camp Robinson stock pond that summer, pulled the pin and tossed it at me. *Die*, he said ... .” It was a dry, Arkansas summer, and the twelve-year-old Gills had been sent to live with his Uncle Earl after “Mama and Daddy had started burning each others' clothes in the backyard ... .” Earl ran an outfit called Diamond V Stables, offering weekend horse trail rides at \$100 a clip through Camp Robinson, an Arkansas National Guard training center, where it was “not uncommon to find a booby-trap behind every bush.” The young Gills stands, frozen, the dud grenade at his feet, and the adult author reflects that perhaps his decision to do nothing—to not run, nor tell his uncle what his cousin had done—brought on the bad luck “that summer afternoon that severed me from my childhood.”

Earl has decided to take the horse tour across the Saline River, and like with many situations that go terribly wrong, it starts out calm and okay. The tour enters the water, begins to cross. Earl goes first, riding Chico, then Earl's friend Macky on a Palomino named May Day. Gills, riding a horse named Blazed, is the last in line. The lead riders don't see the lurking death trap, a fisherman's leftover quivering line stretched the full width of the river. The scene quickly turns surreal. May Day, neck-hooked to the line, panics in the water. The rest of the team quickly returns to shore, “some crying out and some just staring, the way you look at a house on fire,” while Earl and Macky attempt to free the terrified animal. But the current is too swift, the hooks too fixed and the struggling horse too strong. “Maybe five minutes passed and I don't think anyone knew what to do—it's like that, watching a drowning. People scream for you to help them, they beg and plead and cuss and pray, but finally there's not a whole lot that can be done ... .”

Years later, reeling in horror and grief following his mother's drowning, Gills travels with his wife and daughter into Flaming Gorge, Utah, the setting of the second essay, “Earth's Last Night.” Once again, Gills begins with an idyllic moment, this time on the banks of the Green River.

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The looming danger eases into their space with a kind of serenity that you'd expect from a quiet cloud overhead. In fact, Gills tells his wife, "Clouds. It's just a cloud," when in fact it is a raging forest fire bearing down on them. In the moments to follow, an officer tells them to leave, now, and even to leave their dogs (they don't). As they flee on the only open road out, Gills calls the fire ahead, about to cross in front of them, a "red tsunami."

*... I drove straight into it, this quiet place, thinking this is it, here she is.*

*The road out was two narrow lanes, fairly straight, though there was one stretch with a hard S-turn, a steep switchback. We were the very last. The helicopter flew straight above us. Our windows were down. Roaring to our left, the fire was near enough to have sucked the oxygen, and therefore sound, from the air. I would later learn that we drove into an actual vacuum.*

In the third, and longest, essay, "White Indians," Gills recalls his experience at a Native American Sundance on Zuni Territory, New Mexico. Four years after his mother's death, he is still running, and now, he runs headlong into the fire. The result is a relentlessly hot essay. In the sweltering desert, Gills serves as a fireman—one who tends the sweat-lodge flame—for the violent days-long ceremony, in an effort to connect more closely with the earth and with the spirit world (some, though not Gills, even undergo flesh-sacrifice). He is still *in search of*, and he has come to this place to look death in the eye: "... where the dead go, is there love? Part of me is here for her, Mama."

The experience of reading *White Indians* is to stumble into the presence of a man who plunges into danger as if he has nothing to lose, then follow him into the pits of hell for the sheer curiosity of finding out how it all ends. You go with him into the Sundance because it's almost unbelievable that such a thing could occur, and when he escapes (after fulfilling his obligation but before the ceremony

has ended), you'll know, *feel*, that he can't fast enough get out of the realm where the living and dead exist together. "As I leave ceremony, a hundred, a thousand beings, pissed beyond belief, they scream behind me. The souls of all the dead rage behind my back. They feel like fire. They *are* fire." And when he camps next to a river on the way home, then completely submerges himself in the current—for now choosing the danger of the water over the peril of the flame—maybe, as I did, you'll breathe a big, giant sigh of relief for him.