

BEING HOME is about the spirit of place, the juncture of memory and emotions. It is different for everyone; it is different for members of the same family, and it most likely has nothing to do with where you were born or grew up. Award-winning essayists Sam Pickering and Bob Kunzinger selected the essays for this collection, selecting essays about being home where setting becomes character, where time becomes the antagonist, and where we make our most important discoveries.

Contributors:

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| Johnnie Bernhard – “Ignorance or Innocence” | Deb Liggett – “Marking Our Place” |
| Rick Campbell – “Celibacy and Ancestry” | Mel Livatino – “Going Home Again” |
| Maryah Converse – “Becoming Bedouin” | Geoff Martin – “Birdland” |
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| John Flynn – “Living Between the Leaves” | Vicky Oliver – “Alice in Motherland” |
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The Ones We Call Home” | Claude Clayton Smith – “Blue Heaven” |
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| Robert Iulo – “The Neighborhood”* | Elizabeth Templeman – “In Place” |
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| Judy Johnson – “My Brothers” | Lee Zacharias – “On a Rocky Inland Coast” |
| | Madelaine Zadik – “Triumph” |

THE EDITORS:

SAM PICKERING grew up in Nashville, Tennessee. He spent 67 years in classrooms learning and teaching and has long been a rummager and writer wandering New England and the South, the Mid-East, Britain, Australia, and Canada. He has written some thirty books and is a member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

BOB KUNZINGER is the author of eight collections of non-fiction, and has been widely published in publications such as World War Two History, Southern Humanities Review, the Washington Post, St Anthony Messenger, and more, including notations for essays in Best American Essays. He lives and writes in Virginia.

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Being Home

Pickering & Kunzinger, eds.



Being Home

*an essay anthology
edited by*

Sam Pickering & Bob Kunzinger

Birdland

Geoff Martin

We moved to Birdland when I was four years old. My family had only jumped a few streets over in town, from one former cornfield to another. But in leaving the semi-detached house on Aspen for a larger side-split on Oriole, my younger brother and I had crossed over into a wider, more labyrinthine world. This was a part of town to get lost in, what with its long arching streets and spiraled crescents darting off from dogleg turns and sudden short roads cutting through to other curlicue streets. Anti-grid by design, the subdivision's developer, on a whim in the mid-70s, had named each street for a different bird.

In short order, I knew all the names: Grosbeak intersected with Oriole about ten houses down—its stop sign signaling the initial limit to my free-pedaled territory. A year later, I was allowed to venture as far as Cedar Waxwing in one direction and Nighthawk in the other. Up and down Barnswallow along the town's western edge, I rode the bench seat three times weekly on our way to church. I had a friend over on Killdeer, ate chocolate bars from the corner store on Flamingo, went to middle school on Mockingbird.

As for the actual birds around me though, I was remarkably indifferent. Sure, I knew a robin to see one in April, hopping about our spongy yard hunting for worms. And if pressed, I could identify an oriole or cardinal but only because of Major League Baseball. Same for a blue jay, the Blue Jays, the back-to-back champions of my Ontario childhood. But truthfully, for most of my life, I have had a disconcertingly poor eye and ear for birds. Those streets back home were just blacktops to bike and friends' houses to find—not the common English names for animate flesh.

So, I had no inclination to ornithology, few kids do. Yet that speaks more to my own indifference than a lack of curiosity. There's also the fact that the birds we did have were more a declared nuisance than objects of study or appreciation. In the early 1990s, the town even went to war against them after fielding too many complaints, ironically enough, about all the birds in Birdland.

The problem was the grackles, the thousands of them. One summer, they chose to roost in the tall tulip trees clustered in several conjoined backyards nearby. Each evening, the branches heaved with their squabbles and dripped with their droppings. Lab tests came back listing e-coli and salmonella along with bacterial and fungal exposure risks with Latin names ("histoplasmosis," "cryptococcosis") that sounded as horrifying as the pulmonary diseases they represented. Naturally, the birds had to go.

Saddled as we thought we were with early bedtimes, my brother and I found ourselves trying to sleep at the edge of sound cannon booms and odd squiggling noises that the birdman—pest control—let loose each evening.

It didn't seem to work, as I recall. And the next summer, when the grackles gathered a few streets over, the cannon blasts grew fainter beyond the backlit pull-blind on our shared bedroom window.

Such were the bombs of my youth.

This matter of background, the ground zero of childhood, reminds me of the writer Michael Martone's insistence on drawing attention to the "ground situation" of a story. "It implies," he states from the open fields of Indiana, "that there is more in the background than just scenery. That 'the setting' is really integrated into the situation of the characters, that the characters are part of the setting, not just placed before it." His point is that all writing covers some kind of ground, so it's worth paying attention to the soil of a given story.

Perhaps it's our mutual experience, mine and Michael Martone's, of growing up on relatively flat, glaciated ground, but I like his line of thought. I'm no painter, but when I write it's the landscape of home and its various vantage points that preoccupy. The ground situation is more interesting to me now in my nascent middle years than a story's forward action. Which is odd, given that I had always thought the ground of my youth to be rather banal. Certainly, the fields surrounding Birdland lacked any kind of monumental panorama—no ocean's edge, no ice capped mountain, no seeming mystic ancient ruins. Just long horizon lines punctuated by grain silos and postage stamp forests.

From an early age, I had been eager to move off and away, curious to see the wider world from different heights and angles. And yet Birdland remains something of a nest I keep returning to, tethered as I am by my relations and by a persistent, recurring need to understand where I am

now. It's as if I go back in order to measure how far off from home I've wandered.

Or maybe this is simply a commonplace adult experience for many of us. We lose ourselves into our individual lives and atomized jobs and then realize, a decade or four later—in the silences of late evening or from the corner of a therapist's couch—that the one thing we can never quite shake is the topography of our youth.

At the house on Oriole, we were soon six. In large families with shared bedrooms, the bathroom becomes the one place of privacy and withdrawal. It was the only room we could lock. And it was there in the windowless basement bathroom that I recall finding an owl shaped into dark wood grain, locked behind vertical grooves of paneling. Once noticed, it proved impossible to ignore. The two orb eyes were translucent, bearing a milky varnish. Their knotted swirls looked like elongated galaxy rings. They seemed, in hindsight, to swallow time.

Sitting up on the toilet, elbows boning into skinny legs, chin cradled in upturned palms, I stared back in a kind of quiet hypnosis, ignoring the pounding of others at the door. I tried to match its unblinking, nictitating membrane by crossing my own eyes, creating the illusion of greater depth. The ceiling and floor would crack ajar and the striated lines of wood grain would pop forward. I knew nothing then of augury, the ancient talent for mapping out omens in the flight paths of birds or reading prophecies transcribed into their entrails (I would have been suspicious of such dark illusions anyhow), but I sensed, in this owl, the offerings of a sign.

I was taught that God could speak not just through scripture but through the Book of Creation, the wider natural world, and who but God made this owl? It seemed placed there, imprinted with such obvious intent. And yet the owl's meaning evaded me, which is the trouble with signs—they carry the trouble of interpretation.

And it wasn't just the single owl that gave me pause. I had learned about the Nazca Lines the year before, had read about Peruvian pilots newly airborne in the 1930s swinging back around, swearing that there were enormous patterns etched into the desert plateau: a perfectly geometric hummingbird, a great, wide-feathered condor. Could the cursive streets of Birdland, I wondered, be patterned into some kind of shape or symbol, some signification inaccessible to those of us stuck to ground?

In the last several years, the ground situation of our collective stories has become, unavoidably, about the atmosphere and the environmental surround. No longer just backdrop, the setting is foregrounding itself. The climate *is* the climactic action. Now, we truly do gather all the news we need from the weather report.

In this emergent story cycle, we find ourselves confronting anew both the limits and the power of human life on planet Earth. And the feeling—if it can be so pinned down—is one of great and general unease. Among us North Americans, the bottomless consumers of the world, there's a wringing of hands and pointing of fingers and plugging of ears.

The other day, I awoke to an essay shared on Twitter that stated, "The period of world history since the 1980s

has been the most extractive in human history." From bed, I doom-scrolled by thumb through the argument, sensing our ongoing, present-tense culpability for this growing climate crisis. "56% of the atmospheric carbon since the dawn of the industrial revolution," noted the writer, Ajay Singh Chaudhary, "has been produced in these past four decades." I have been alive for all but three of those years, a too-young GenXer and too-old Millennial, born to parents nearly too young to be called baby boomers. Wedged into the comforts of the Canadian middle class, I have participated, by the centrifugal energy of my life in the terrible plundering of the carbon stores of prehistory.

The problem is a grave one, endemic to and accusatory of an entire way of life. It has us now leaning over our steering wheels, starring through bug-less windshields, searching the skies for answers. We're wondering about the birds and worried about the bees. North America's land bird populations, another news article tells me, have declined by more than three billion over the past forty years, with dozens of avian species having lost more than fifty per cent of their populations. Snowy owls, I read, are down by sixty-four per cent. And now that we're losing the birds, the impulse is on to spot those we can. Our canaries in the continental coal mine.

A few years ago, while living in Chicago, I made an effort to begin taking note of the ecology of my city neighborhood. The false binaries between city and country, between culture and nature, no longer hold. But old myths die hard. They take effort to unlearn. I decided to start with the birdsong filtering through my apartment window. I wanted to live up to the reputation of someone who grew up in Birdland.

A week after my resolution to start noticing, I heard an auspicious, assonant hooting from the spruce branches that scraped the redbrick exterior of our third-floor walk-up. I was sure it was an owl. I just didn't know what species.

Later, while catching a ride with a friend and avid birder, I crowed about the owl outside my window. When I imitated its cooing sound, he grinned.

"Wait a minute," he said, fishing his right hand back through the clutter of Coke Zero bottles behind his seat. He pulled up a double CD of birdsong and punched through the tracks until landing on a field recording of exactly the call by my window. It was a mourning dove. A telephone-wire turtle dove. It certainly makes a plaintive call, but from his car's speakers, it was far less enigmatic than I had first heard in my ear. The mourning dove sounds nothing like an owl, any owl.

My ears, in other words, wanted immediate rarity but they weren't yet attuned to even the most common. The singular needs to be earned. It needs to be sought out and then waited for. It's an egg that needs sitting on.

I've been thinking about all this lately—my childhood, the birds, our changing climate—because my partner and I are nesting for the first time in our lives. We're camped out in a rented house near the Connecticut River, and C. is five months pregnant. With the homeowners returning in a few months, we're making plans for yet another move, this next one coming just ahead of the baby. Our own nest keeps shifting, and it's cause for some nervousness.

A nest, according to Merriam-Webster, is a specially modified structure that serves as an abode of animals,

especially in their immature stages. And that's just the trouble. Given our own peripatetic behavior, it's been hard to imagine inviting a child to share in our rootlessness. We're the ones still maturing.

Our living arrangements have been so different from those of our parents, both sets of whom still live in the houses they bought in the 1980s. Theirs has been a long-term sedentariness, a committed placed-ness that I respect, even envy. And many of our friends and siblings who are now parents are ensconced in mortgaged houses or condos of their own.

Meanwhile, we feel a bit caught out-of-doors, albeit in winds of our own choosing. For the past decade and a half, our year-to-year rental agreements have enabled us to fly the coop as needed, sign a new lease, site-unseen, in some new city, and then set about making a temporary life for ourselves there. San Pedro, Costa Rica to Daejeon, South Korea. A twelve-month stay in Hamilton, Ontario, followed by seven years in Chicago. Short-term stints in Providence and Western Massachusetts. And up next, a transcontinental move, whether temporary or permanent we do not yet know, to San Francisco. Throughout the changing seasons of our itinerant, adult lives, we've continued to migrate.

And this whole time the question of children, whether to have one or two or none, has followed us around, happily ignored until it wouldn't be. We considered adoption but while we wait in the lengthening queue for a more secure status in the U.S. or some sudden, sizable uptick in our savings, the route seemed precarious. We wondered, too, about the resource demands of adding another human being to the planet, along with the ethics and challenges of

raising a child within manifest global climate change. But then, following after the surprise of a miscarriage and the frank desire to try again, we now have this immanent child, one whose tiny feet and bird-bone elbows are pressing already at the uterine wall.

This baby, if given the gift of long life, will be eighty-one years old in 2100. That strange proximity to the next century makes me better understand the sociologist Elise Boulding's idea of the "200-hundred-year present"—the way in which each new day's oldest elder and youngest child tether together two centuries of time. My one great grandparent to hold me in her arms was born exactly a century ago. And her elders, her own grandparents for example, were all born before 1850, at the dawn of the industrial revolution. This is how swiftly the centuries spill forward, seven generations to now. How long-reaching and consequential our actions. And our inactions.

Recently, the baby passed twenty-four weeks of development in utero, the threshold of viability our midwife pronounced with a smile, so this time we've begun to nest with decisiveness. But rather than scrubbing the baseboards, which the *Complete Pregnancy Encyclopedia* describes as "a well-documented phenomenon of nesting," our readying thus far looks more like a great off-loading.

At long last, I'm jettisoning my old notes from college. Thousands of blue-inked pages scrawled out in the early-aughts, foldered according to course title, and hauled up and down the stairs of a dozen-odd apartments and storage basements. I'm refusing to move them all again.

And yet I can't help but peruse the papers a final time, which is why the task is taking up entire evenings instead of providing immediate fuel for one great conflagration

in the backyard. Midway through the Classics 101 folder, I stumbled across a half-remembered lecture on the symbolism of the owl. Athena's ancient emblem, the owl marked the goddess of wisdom and stood as guardian of the Acropolis. Its eyes, rounded spirals like knots of wood, were stamped on Greek coins to signify a vigilance over earthly commerce.

The notes reminded me of Kathryn Miles's essay "To Wit, To Woo," where she describes the owl as a species out-of-joint in a warming world, irrupting now in haunted daylight. For Miles, the barred owl perched in her sunlit backyard in Maine stares back impassively, full of complex, mythic associations: symbol of Greek wisdom and justice, yes, but also the emblem of Lilith, the Babylonian goddess of death. The owl is full of paradox, she notes: the purveyor of fertility and health for women in medieval Brittany and Saxony, the "bird that brings fear" in Cameroon and the deaths of children in Malaysia, and yet its hooting enunciates safety in Japan.

Infamously difficult to study, the owl carries the weight of many of our known unknowns as well as many more unknown unknowns. For all the contradictory associations humans have been ascribing to the owl over millennia, its uncanny hooting foils our attempt to pin down the meaning of the sign. The owl's call, in other word, renders us speechless.

While we wait out the gestational clock, we've been going about our regular lives, and it all feels surprisingly mundane. There's something of a "look at the birds of the air" simplicity to this second trimester season, which has surprised me.

Regardless of my anxieties and all the unknown unknowns of this child and our joint futures together, thinking too much about it all bears no good fruit. So, instead, I'm rushing to write before an extended sleeplessness draws a fog down over my small patch of draft work.

For much of this summer, I've relocated my morning writing to the side porch where I set up a makeshift plywood desk. Out here for a few hours each day, I've learned to greet the pair of tufted titmice who cycle through the skeletal branches of what is, as best I can figure out, an American Bladdernut. The titmice don't stay long, just turn their coxcomb heads about, squawk a few cycles, and then dip out, low and fast over the vine-covered fence. They don't seem to be nesting by the house, so I presume they flit back to feed their young somewhere in the forested creek below. What is clear is how hard they're working for their altricial chicks, born utterly helpless, featherless and blind.

Human infants are classified as "secondary altricial." Our babies are born as weak as featherless birds, with substantial postpartum development coming in the first few months, but ours are also, like foals and baby whales, precocial for the gestational energy we devote to a single progeny. Birds seem willing to lose an egg or two, given the odds, while orcas will mourn the death of their young for weeks, if not longer.

The other morning percher in this backyard tree is, oddly enough, a catbird. Titmouse and Catbird, as if trapped in some cartoon. They tolerate each other, but never on the same branch. One of the titmice is often here first but then yields the lowest branch when the catbird swings in, two inches bigger and sleek grey, with a long, svelte tail

balanced by a thin, elongated beak. Silently, it holds the branch for a few minutes, and then they're both off, the bladdernut leaves fluttering in empty air.

These passerine birds need only a nest, a temporary place to house their young. These birds, they neither sow nor reap. Their seasonal home is just the general vicinity, this species-shared neighborhood, which includes me, mug-clasped man in mismatched shorts and sweater.

We are not the greater permanence here, they remind me. Perpetuity belongs to the roots of this giant silver maple and the old stones stacked into the foundation of this house. Our lives on branch and porch are much more provisional—claw-to-beak, as it were—and cyclical.

These dune hills, too, are vastly older and fundamentally strange. Just below the substrate, all over the wide cleft of this valley, sit the fossilized, three-toed imprints of dinosaur steps. In the 1830s, Edward Hitchcock, Professor of Natural Theology at Amherst College, collected thousands of such stone slabs from around the nearby villages of Greenfield and Turner's Falls. After meticulous study of the claw marks, he hypothesized the prior existence of giant, flightless birds. He had no dinosaur bones to study just yet, only these trace effects of heavy, saurian foot-stepping. Imprints of absence.

Hitchcock's rock collection hangs now in the Bernerki Museum in Amherst and tells a different story of the ground situation here. And in a strange way, the persistence of these prints grinds down some of my own anxieties as we lope our collective, heedless way deeper into the Anthropocene. There is urgent work to do, individual and societal actions to take, *in haste*. Yet, I'm convinced that speed alone will work to amend only one of our symptoms

(namely, atmospheric warming) rather than the disease itself. Something more fundamental is at stake.

The environmental writer Fred Bahnson, riffing on Thomas Merton's question, "what can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?" asks instead, "what can we gain by fixing climate change...if we remain alienated from ourselves?" How, in other words, do we tether our supposedly individual, free-floating selves back to the ground under our collective feet?

One response, urges Robert MacFarlane in *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, involves looking down into the ground beneath us and looking back into the far reaches of geologic time. "When viewed in deep time," he writes, "things come alive that seemed inert. New responsibilities declare themselves. A conviviality of being leaps to mind and eye. The world becomes eerily various and vibrant again. Ice breathes. Rock has tides. Mountains ebb and flow. Stone pulses. We live on a restless earth."

Those claw-marked slabs of stone at the Berneki, housed alongside dinosaur skulls and an imposing mammoth skeleton, they time-stamp sandstone rock in a way that presses my 200-year worries into wonder.

We were awakened suddenly, back in late April, by the pulsing, proximate hooting of an owl. C. had just confirmed that she was pregnant again. The night air had turned decisively to spring, and we'd left the window open wide.

It wasn't obviously an owl at first. Pulled from the strange reaches of sleep, I thought some fenced dog was barking me back into consciousness. Or someone was

calling up at us inexplicably. But when it hooted again, I sank back into the mattress, eyes wide in the dark.

"Do you hear that?" C. asked through a quiet exhalation of breath.

The repeated call hollowed out the frost-nipped air, vibrant and sonorous. It encircled the feet of the bed, crawled up across the bedspread and over our goose-bumped flesh. It repeated its urging, of aggression or love, I don't know, across an extended pitch-dark hour. The chirrups of a thousand insect wings went still as they yielded the edge air to this entity that had arrived.

The owl's recurrent hooting was crisp, like an apple, as sharp as an axe splitting hardwood. It struck in a way entirely opposite to the intermittent highway noise nearby: loud trucks hurtling through the sacrosanct night in a long swelling and recession of rubber clawing at asphalt. I cursed the combustion noise, fearing that the racket would drive off the owl.

But the call continued. Stay, I invited, as I tried to memorize the call. There was a spondaic questioning to the cycle, a two-part repetition with a difference. It had an extra, trailing hoot at the end. It was lonesome, imperial and singular.

Utterly alert, sleepless now, I traced my fingertips to my phone. In the funnel of indigo light, I searched for New England owls. On my second hit, I landed on a page dedicated to the barred owl where its mnemonic call was transcribed as: *who cooks for you? who cooks for you, all?* Which was exactly the sound of the wordless question being urged from the trees behind the house.

For Thoreau this was "the most melancholy sound in Nature," the hooting owl. He heard in its "gurgling

melodiousness" both "the dying moans of a human being" and, with some distance in the woods, "only pleasing associations." Owls both terrified and soothed him. Their wild otherness caused him to state emphatically and plainly: "I rejoice that there are owls."

By now, C. had melted back into that first trimester sleep—long crests of inhalation descending into deep troughs of exhalation. The lungs of an oceanic womb. This child, I know, will be as stunning and as foreign to us as *strix varia* in the cry-split night.

Quietly, I padded down the stairs for a glass of water. The hooting seemed to follow me through the rental house. I was cold in bare feet by the kitchen sink, contemplating a quick step to the porch to see whether I could better guess its position, maybe see it by moonlight. I knew it was futile though, this urgency to see. Instead, I spent a few minutes with nose pressed to the screen above the counter. Chin cradled in upturned palms, I tried to conjure its unblinking eyes and wondered what it might mean, this sign in the night.

What is the point of an apparition, I wondered, if we can't know whether it offers a blessing or an omen?

But I've long since accepted that adulthood offers no fewer answers than childhood, that age does not necessarily consign wisdom, that the idea of home is too slippery an object to clutch. Simply holding one's palms open to the grief and the grace of this life seems enough.

I had only one thing to do: I climbed the stairs and crawled into the warmth of the sheets, burrowing back into a night humming with an unknowing as taut and as thin as the skin of the earth.

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