

## Distant Neighbors

### The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder

EDITED BY CHAD WRIGLESWORTH  
*Counterpoint Press, 2014. \$30, 288 pages.*

**WHEN SHOULD YOU FIGHT** and when should you be still? What is the correct balance between action and contemplation, between the local and global, between a righteous rage and a morning of work in the fields? In April 1978, Wendell Berry asked these questions of Gary Snyder in a letter, one of a series they had been writing to each other since the early 1970s.

“I see with considerable sorrow,” Berry wrote, “that I am not going to get done fighting and live at peace in anything like the simple way I once thought I would. So how to keep from becoming evil? Maybe the answer is to fight always for what you particularly love, not for abstractions and not *against* anything: don’t fight against even the devil, and don’t fight to ‘save the world.’”

This beguiling volume of letters between two of the most interesting and influential writer-activists in recent American history is full of quandaries like this. Though Snyder and Berry live half a continent apart and rarely meet, three decades of correspondence between them digs deep into issues of action, place, spirituality, meaning and, of course, wildness. How to live, what to do, how to stay connected to the world beyond the human? The questions come faster than the answers, which is always a good sign.

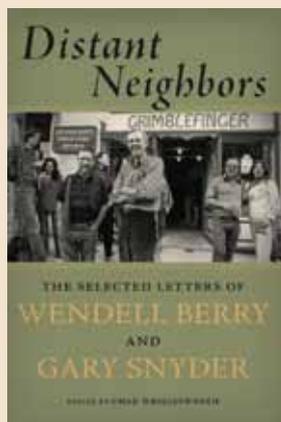
Berry wonders in one letter how farming can survive in what he calls an age of “technological despotism.” Snyder’s answer is to take the long view. “What you

and I are really talking about,” he writes, “is reviving the value system and integrity and authenticity that belongs to the Neolithic. The Neolithic mindset has been struggling to retain itself—in terms of what is called “folk culture”—against the taxing powers of government ever since.”

That sounds like a big theme (and a big ambition), yet it is typical of the sweeping vistas of this volume. The meaning of spirituality, of God and of religion, flows similarly through the book as these two men, a “forest Christian” and a Zen Buddhist, tease out the spiritual imperatives of their work. There are some polite, sometimes spirited, disagreements, but there is more common ground. “I’m not interested,” writes Berry to Snyder in 1980, “in spirituality that is dependent on cheap fossil fuel, soil erosion, and air pollution. . . . No use talking about getting enlightened or saving your soul if you can’t keep the topsoil from washing away.”

Often in correspondences, writers do not perform in a way that they might if they were producing a book for publication. For that reason, in volumes such as this, you may get to see deeper into those writers’ souls, and especially into their fears and insecurities. In *Distant Neighbors*, both Berry and Snyder come across as honest and open-hearted explorers. There is an overall sense that they possess a deep and questing wisdom, hard earned through land work, travel, writing, and spiritual exploration. There is no rushing, no hectoring, and no grand gestures between these two, just an ever-deepening inquiry into what makes a good life and how to live it, even in the depths of the machine age.

— Paul Kingsnorth



## The Last Animal

BY ABBY GENI

*Counterpoint, 2013. \$24, 304 pages.*

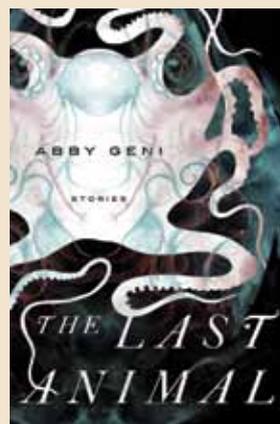
**THERE ARE TWO** themes that pervade Abby Geni’s new story collection, *The Last Animal*—loss and how humans connect to the natural world. Nature is a mysterious force applying tension that in some stories is a backdrop, in other stories, a character.

Geni’s characters often see nature as impenetrable. Delilah, the main character of the title story, “The Last Animal,” thinks, “Animals had never been her forte. . . . It had something to do with the unpredictability, the unfamiliarity. These creatures existed on another plane. Their movements were disconcerting, their minds impenetrable. You could stare all day into their dark eyes and never know what they were thinking.” And while the stories themselves are full of animals—ostriches, dogs, octopuses, sea turtles, stingrays, manatees, beetles, and even dinosaur bones—it is the people in the stories who are inscrutable, unpredictable, and alienating.

“Humans might have had the brains, but animals had the brawn. I was all right with that equation,” says nine-year old Jack in the story “Terror Birds,” in which he watches his parent’s marriage fall apart as they struggle to sustain an ostrich farm in the Arizona desert. Told by alternating

narrators, Jack and his mother, the narrative finally revolves around the birds. Their behavior applies more pressure on the family than any infidelity within the disintegrating marriage.

Like “Terror Birds,” many of Geni’s stories resonate with lost con-



nections, not just to our environment, but to each other. In “Captivity,” an octopus handler working at an aquarium looks for comfort from the sea creature, even one night walking him around the premises in her arms, all the while wondering about the fate of her missing brother, who disappeared seven years earlier. And yet, in nearly every one of the ten stories that make up the book, animals exert more strength than their human counterparts.

A popular counselor at a Girl Scout camp goes missing in “The Girls of Apache Bryn Mawr.” Told in second-person plural point of view, the we voice becomes almost an incantation of the rituals of the campers, teenage girls, as the search continues in the background. By telling ghost stories and using a Ouija board, the girls try to control the story of what has happened to the missing counselor, all the while maintaining normalcy. To enter the world of camp, to enter any of the worlds that Geni presents, one must relinquish oneself to the strange, to the astonishing, to places where the lines between wild and domestic are blurry.

Throughout most all of the stories, there is some kind of disappearance or loss. For Geni’s characters, learning to cope with that loss and disconnect allows them to move forward. Of Isaiah, a young man who has left his missionary family to live on his own, Geni writes, “Nowadays he scarcely feels that empty space in his chest; he probes it absently sometimes, as though testing the stump of a missing limb. It has taken him years to understand what it means to rub elbows with the raw world—to find beauty, and even significance, in chaos and confusion, the exquisite profusion of a thousand shades of gray.” It is those thousand shades of gray that Geni explores in her fiction. Her work looks beyond the question of what it means to be human in this natural world to ask, How does one live and be connected when the world is, in many ways,

becoming more disconnected? The answer, in this book, is in looking beyond the landscape of oneself, looking outward to our environment, to the solace the natural world can bring. It has not only the brawn but the ability to heal.

—Nina McConigley

## Translations from Bark Beetle

BY JODY GLADDING

*Milkweed Editions, 2014. \$16, 96 pages.*

**PAW-PRINTS** dotting the snow, rain squiggling down a window, tunnels raised up through the lawn—do designs like these tempt you to read them? As if, “written” by the fox, cloud, and vole respectively, each conveyed a necessary message? Those predisposed to scan the natural world for signatures and missives, as if it were all one gigantic three-dimensional book, may also enjoy Jody Gladding’s third full-length poetry collection, *Translations from Bark Beetle*.

It’s easy to see how Gladding, who translates French novels such as Jean Giono’s *The Serpent of Stars* and Pierre Michon’s *Small Lives* into English, might be inspired to attend to lesser-known foreign literature, yet in this case, she’s reached beyond human language entirely to render testimony from a species rarely observed, much less heeded—the jottings of the subfamily *Scolytinae*.

Overturning conventional ideas about texts and writers, Gladding forfeits her *authority*, and instead hands authorship over to bark beetles, which eat into wood fibers, thereby creating cursive tunnels resembling written script in the bark of white pines, elms, and other trees. It’s these accidental inscriptions that Gladding trans-

lates into slivers of text skittering across the whole page: “. . . through work the quietly / puncture begins in a dark / if not there’s no / telling / (rue mores of light and lying) / some have remained here burrowed . . .”

In addition to presenting poems of insects in their “galleries,” another section of the book presents Gladding’s own gallery of work. Perhaps inspired by beetles’ unique writing implement (mouthparts) and alternative substrate (phloem), Gladding creates a group of poems using a variety of “scribes,” including paint and a wood-burning stylus, to write on a variety of substrates such as a feather, slate, a hunk of wood, even an icicle.

Channeling (or perhaps translating) the voices of the material itself, evocative passages of writing emerge. For example, here’s what was written on an icicle: “why / I / am / like / this / place / is beautiful / and / cold /.”

Cumulatively, Gladding’s gallery, her photographs of three-dimensional poems, which are as sculptural as they are poetic, prompts readers to consider the potential authority of everything (icicle, rock, feather, beetle) as interpretable.



In yet another segment of the book, Gladding examines her ongoing impulse to translate—in one case, she attempts to translate *The Spiral Jetty*, a curlicue of landscape art installed in Utah’s Great Salt Lake. Her words pace out across the page like footprints left in the shore’s wet ooze, as she beach-combs for meaning: “so often

**ORION READERS  
TO BE DESIGNED**

**Short, themed essay collections that bring together the best writing from Orion's first three decades.**

**To Eat with Grace  
Animals & People  
Leave No Child Inside  
Thirty-Year Plan  
Wonder and Other Survival Skills  
Change Everything Now**

**Find out more and order your copies at [www.orionmagazine.org/books](http://www.orionmagazine.org/books).**

now I'm searching / for a word and I can't find it / have to skirt / around / say it another / way."

The eccentricity and audacity of Gladding's translations suggest that her real work might be an investigation of the origins of text itself. In David Abram's astonishing book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, he proposes that the act of reading is inseparable from the ancient act of tracking, and that "which lurks behind all the texts that we read is not a human subject but another animal, another shape of awareness (ultimately the otherness of animate nature itself)." *Translations From Bark Beetle*

manifests Abram's idea, and expands nature poetry's domain by revising notions of who writes it, where it's inscribed, and, of course, what subtle and sure impressions it makes on a reader's awareness.

I recently heard Gladding read a poem from the collection called "Sonogram of Raven Calls," a piece composed entirely of avian syllables. As she broke the hush of the bookstore with throaty notes—"pruk," "quork," "rrack"—the place seemed to fill with another creature altogether, while we sat spellbound. Though far from fluent in Raven, I knew exactly what she meant.

—Julia Shipley

## The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus

BY MITCHELL THOMASHOW  
*The MIT Press, 2014. \$27.95, 236 pages.*

"UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP is our last best hope for addressing the global climate challenge, and campus sustainability initiatives are the foundation of that leadership," writes Mitchell Thomashow in *The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus*. After serving as president of Maine's Unity College, successfully transforming the campus and curriculum by implementing initiatives ranging from a net-zero energy president's residence to campus "eco-finance," Thomashow would know. His experiences at Unity and as a consultant to college presidents across North America since then are the basis for this excellent book. Thomashow's goal here is to present a "philosophical and practical vision" for campus transformation in nine

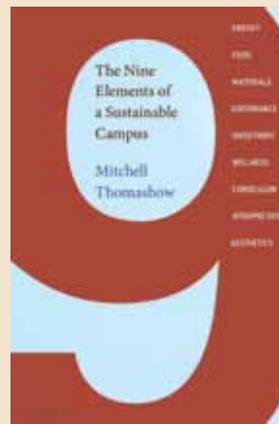
areas: energy, food, materials, governance, investment, wellness, curriculum, interpretation, and aesthetics. It is quite nearly a step-by-step manual for overhauling the physical and cultural spaces of a campus. Yet it is also a self-help book rich with ideas and encouragement.

As I read *The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus*, however, I came back to a single question: How can these elements also be applied to corporate, industrial, and government campuses? If a college campus is "an ideal setting for exploring and practicing sustainability," as Thomashow says, and "colleges and universities offer our best hope for raising awareness about the climate crisis and other environmental threats," what kinds of settings and hopes do those other, often suburban environments offer?

Take Denver West, a 220-acre business campus in Lakewood, Colorado, where I worked in the 1990s. More than 1.5 million square feet of office and light industrial space in over twenty stand-alone buildings are nestled on a rolling landscape of lawns, ponds, pines, and green ash—plus a wide, looping road and plenty of surface parking. Bucolic, even with its 20 percent vacancy rate. Do Thomashow's elements apply here?

In the chapter about wellness—one of three elements Thomashow focuses on (alongside governance and investment) that speak broadly to community—he writes, "A campus is rooted in the cultural landscape of the ecological region." At Unity College, students understand that relationship through required service work: growing organic

food in partnership with regional hunger organizations, for example, and participating in research on arsenic in the local



water supply. And yet at Denver West, I found myself outside of the High Plains culture and ecology altogether. Every worker there does, because it's an artificial landscape with non-native flora, fabricated water features, and for the most part an insistence upon driving single-occupancy vehicles to get there.

And that's precisely why *The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus* can make a real difference, not only within but also outside of academia. Here is a typical suburban office park in which Thomashow's elements can be explored and implemented. Some are easier than others, of course. Energy, food, and materials, the first three elements, are among the quickest and most visible ways to enhance sustainability. Think of all that available solar and wind west of Denver.

But the physical implements of sustainability cannot be effective, Thomashow says, without a real commitment to sustainability, such as he demonstrated at Unity through a climate action plan, an ecological endowment, and an overall sustainability ethos. An ecological endowment for a non-academic campus? Sure, if an entity is willing to "expand our concept of endowment beyond financial criteria" and ask new questions like, "What is property, if not ecosystem services organized through ownership?"

What Thomashow offers in this book, then, is guidance and inspiration, ideas and resources for an array of campuses and communities, academic and otherwise. Others have said *The Nine Elements of a Sustainable Campus* should be required reading for every college administrator. I agree. But as long as we're requiring this essential book, let's make sure that the decision makers and implementers at non-academic campuses read it, as well. If they do, we'll find a broad approach to sustainability. And that's what it's going to take, isn't it?

— Simmons B. Buntin

## All the Land to Hold Us

BY RICK BASS

*Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.*

\$25, 336 pages.

**AFTER THREE DAYS HIKING** in the Chisos Mountains, driving up from the Big Bend country of West Texas, through the scrublands and creosote hills of the Chihuahuan Desert, something went wrong with my eyes. The light, the glaring gradations of dun and ochre, and the blown and blowing dust and sand—I blinked and blinked, and for a moment I could see again, though soon a searing crescent crashed across my vision and the bright pain returned. I pulled over, stumbled out. While I reclined in the passenger seat with a wet cloth over my face, my wife drove us the rest of the way. We camped that night north of the Guadalupe Mountains, mountains I hadn't even seen on the way in for the pain in my eyes. When we woke, in the cool of early morning, the day already bright but not so harsh, so glaring, we hiked into the surprise of McKittrick Canyon—clear, cold water and stands of oak, ash, and maple—and though we were worried my eyes might not be healed of whatever ailed them, that afternoon we drove south again, back the way we'd come, so I could witness El Capitan, a peak rising thousands of vertical feet from the desert floor.

All that was a decade ago, before marriage, before kids and careers. We were driving a little Honda Civic that didn't have air-conditioning and often overheated; we survived for days on canned beer and whatever we could scrounge at

lonely, roadside gas stations. We didn't know what was going on with my eyes, and we never did get them checked out. We just kept driving. We were in the high desert. We were whipsawed by escarpments and ocotillo and all manner of astonishing sights. We simply had to keep going; we felt called.

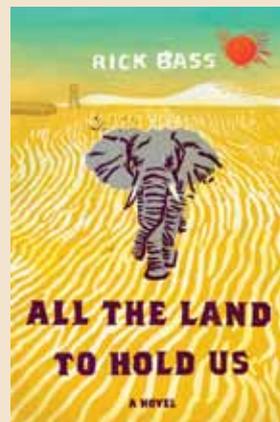
"There was once, and still is, a place in the West Texas landscape, Castle Gap, that drew travelers toward it as the eye of the needle of heaven is said to draw human souls," Rick Bass writes in *All the Land to*

*Hold Us*, a novel attuned to the passing of centuries and minutes, a novel of myth and lyric intensity, of salt and leviathan and ruin, of greed and skulls and, finally, the finding of love and clean water—and all played out across the beautiful, plundered deserts of West Texas and Mexico.

Like my wife and I those years ago, a whole host

of travelers are called to this mysterious landscape in the pages of Bass's novel: the Spanish explorers Cabaza de Vaca and Francisco Coronado; the young, virile oil geologist Richard; the local beauty Clarissa; Marie Omo, the suffering wife of a would-be salt baron; Ruth, the progressive, lonely schoolteacher; the one-legged skull hunter Herbert Mix; and many, many others. The novel's major project, in fact, is a reckoning with the many claims and passages human beings have made upon this landscape, how these journeys of greed and acquisition always end in disappointment and death, the salt-encrusted bones all that's left to show—including, of course, the final and deepest incursion, the intense oil-drilling that has contaminated what little good water can be found beneath the desert sands.

Though we might call Richard the protagonist here, it's a mistake to read *All the*



## THE ORION PODCAST

Hear interviews with writers and artists, author readings, and more by subscribing to the Orion podcast. Find it in iTunes, or go to [www.orionmagazine.org/multimedia](http://www.orionmagazine.org/multimedia).

*Land to Hold Us* with the usual expectations we bring to character-driven fiction. This is a book rife with historical discussions, lyric digressions, and nearly fantastical spectacles; much of the first section is even rendered in the habitual past tense, using the word *would* before nearly every verb, which both mythologizes and distances the action. It's not until the novel's final movement, when Richard returns from a sojourn in Mexico, that we settle into a story in which characters begin to matter as much as landscape.

Which, perhaps, is as it should be. With *All the Land to Hold Us* Bass has crafted an extended meditation on the mysterious power of place, on the many ways a landscape might call us, on our responsibilities to the land and, finally, to one another.

—Joe Wilkins

## The Attacking Ocean

BY BRIAN FAGAN

*Bloomsbury, 2013. \$28, 268 pages.*

**BRIAN FAGAN'S** *The Attacking Ocean* gives us a fifteen-thousand-year perspective on rising sea levels, storm surges, and the other wet and salty threats that have killed millions of people throughout recorded history. In a comprehensive though sometimes geologically paced narrative, Fagan makes clear that while past sea level rises, including an astounding seven hundred feet in the last ten thousand years,

can be attributed to the natural variability of climate, ice ages, tectonic shifts, and other forces, the present period of rapid sea level rise is directly linked to human production of greenhouse gasses. Plus, fifteen thousand years ago when fewer than 5 million humans lived on the planet, it was no big deal, comparatively, to pick up camp and move out of the way of rising waters. That's what the hunters and clans of what scientists have dubbed Doggerland did as the North Sea reclaimed their marshes and highlands between 8,000 and 3,500 BC. From there, Fagan takes us on a global tour of how the seas have defined and imperiled coastal civilizations along the Nile Delta, Black Sea, Medieval Netherlands, the East China Sea, Arctic Circle, and post-Sandy Jersey Shore.

What the book (which offers two tables of contents so you can read it chronologically or geographically) sometimes lacks in immediacy it makes up for in the sheer scope of its geographic, hydrographic, and anthropological vision; one cannot question the author's concluding concerns about our lack of preparedness for the coming calamity.

Fagan predicts 17 to 40 million people will be displaced by rising seas in this century—a permanent wave of environmental refugees in an increasingly crowded world. He suggests the importance of planning today for more adaptive infra-

structure, urban and coastal innovations that may include planned retreat from Bangladesh, south Florida, Shanghai, and other exposed impact zones. I asked President Anote Tong of Kiribati (a low-lying Pacific nation mentioned in the book, and home to more than 100,000 people) what the legal status of “submerged nations” might be. “That’s an issue we’re now discussing in the United Nations,” he told me, hoping his people will be able to keep title to their two-hundred-mile Exclusive Economic Zone as a source of revenue after their relocation.

Reading *The Attacking Ocean* you come to understand one key impact of climate change on our blue planet: rising seas, storm surges, and flood tides that threaten densely populated shorelines. But at the same time, as climate change heats the seas, it also allows the oceans to absorb more carbon, making them more acidic and so increasingly difficult places for critters like plankton, clams, and corals to capture calcium carbonate from seawater to build their living shells. Warmer, more acidic seas also hold less dissolved oxygen, which is bad news for the fish and the mammals, both marine and terrestrial, that feed on them. As a result, our attacking ocean is also a dying ocean.

The crucible of life on our blue marble planet not only threatens our shores but our food security, and given that marine plankton generates half of our oxygen, perhaps the very air we breathe.

What Brian Fagan's book makes clear is that we have enough historic knowledge to do the things we need to do to adapt and survive. It's not a lack of practical answers but rather the political will to enact them that is our greatest challenge.

—David Helvarg