

Collective Task August 2015
Back to nature: unearthing in broad detail
Kristen Gallagher

the buffheads live in isolated communities, conjoined by docks and boats and rope, small houses or sheds to keep stuff, out on the water is where they live, eat, drink, do and deal drugs. they sell marijuana, and marijuana gummies and vodka gummies and eat the fish they catch, usually mullet, sometimes mahi or bass, and everyone brings a case of cheap watery beer or makes punch out of leftover punches, and no one speaks of race, because everyone here is white, and just wants to have a good time, I am told.

One guy i really liked named Rudy,
who was missing a front tooth and
who was super charming and cute
who told me the missing tooth was from one of his many boat accidents and
who wants to move to the cayman islands
who wishes to no longer pay taxes
who knows who Zora Neale Hurston is
who didn't even flinch when i said i was there for Zora Neale Hurston
who just seemed happy and impressed and gave advice about a museum i shld go
to
who knew about the art history there
which is the art history of fort pierce
which is the nearest town,
the town i am in,
the town where Zora died
the town where Zora was buried and was buried without even a headstone
until Alice Walker came and found the unmarked grave
until Alice Walker raised money and got her a headstone
and Rudy knows about that
and Rudy knows the art that is there
Zora was here and
Zora was part of the big group of artists that all hung out and drank and had sex
with each other and
made this art
and Rudy is impressed by that
so he takes me out on his boat and everyone says be careful
as we are leaving be careful be careful
and i hold my cheap can of beer and prepare myself for death.
We find a dark cove and snorkel
the reef has eyes inside of it that look out at night, there's something in there

The Case of the Exploding Stars

Mison Gora knows a sea star has no blood, brain, or central nervous system. They are called Asteroidea for a reason. Still, she has formed an emotional attachment with the starfish near her home, though her experience studying them tells her the stars can't reciprocate. She built her modest clay home in this place because stars were known to congregate here. All her life she was fascinated by the stars. She watched them in tanks as a child in the midwest, she read every book about them she could find, even the ancient books like The Creation Song, "an ancient prayer to the gods who made the stars take form on earth," and Georg Eberhard Rumpf's 1705 The Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet where he reports the sea stars "see thunder storms approaching, grab hold of many small stones with their little legs, looking to ... hold themselves down as if with anchors." She also read The Divine Mystery Fort, from 2002, where Indian saint Sri Sai Kaleshwar Swami writes: "Sometimes at the full moon time, when the moon is really dazzling and hitting on the ocean, a starfish jumps out of the water and falls down. If you can get that star, you can suck unbelievable cosmic energy from it. You can use it as your own power object."

Mison says mostly it's been a peaceful life here, but she told me one disturbing story from Labor Day weekend 2013. On that Saturday she woke and found the bat stars, normally active scavengers, all glommed together in one single ball, perfectly still. Asteroidea reproduce asexually, so this wasn't a mating ritual, she knew that for sure. She peeled them apart, one by one, which they resisted, so it took about 30 minutes, until she found what they had been consuming: the corpse of an ochre star, their neighbor and mate for the past five years.

Two days later she noticed that some of the other stars did not look well, their arms were twisted around their stomachs like they were trying to hug themselves, their texture looked thin and mushy, "like fading party balloons." By the next day one of the stars had lost an arm, but then the next day, she said, was horrible, the rocks looked "like an asteroid battlefield." The stars were squishy and pockmarked with white lesions, their guts spilling out of the lesions, oozing all over the rocks, pink and white and melted, fleshy, more arms detached, and the arms continued to crawl, disembodied, along the rocks.

She knew sea stars shed their arms in times of stress. She said it is not uncommon to see from her window a curious child pick up a star out of a tide pool by one of its limbs, and then to see the child jump back, shudder, and begin calling for its mother. Mison laughs and smiles wide, she likes this story, the star jettisons that arm to escape, she says, imagine if someone grabbed your arm and you didn't like it, you just let that arm fly off, see ya sucker, which is no problem she says, it'll regenerate a new arm later.

But this was different, these stars were using one arm to rip off the other, "they twisted their arms together," she watched for hours and hours, days and nights, "they pulled and pulled and pulled, until one of the arms popped off, then the arm walks away, like it doesn't even know it's dead." This continued for about a week, nearly every species of star ripping off its arms, one after the other, she'd have

coffee watching them rip off one or two arms, then she'd go make lunch and by the time she came back each one had ripped off two more. In the final days, the leather star and the last of the ochres liquefied. The bat stars were the only ones unaffected, at least not negatively, for them the mass death of their friends was a bonanza, they gorged on the corpses.

The scrub jays of Venus, Florida are not going to make it. They rely on territory for survival, and territory is on the decrease, ever since US Sugar moved into real estate. I had heard they were friendly, the famous nature writer in the New Yorker said they were garrulous, trusting, friendly. I didn't care. I just wanted to know what was happening in Venus because Cheryl said it was a special place and I trust Cheryl, she used to be secretary of the Florida Sierra Club, so I paid an ambulance driver to take me two hours into the wilderness to see. We passed Immokalee, famous town famous for being full of exploited latin american workers, tomato pickers, sugar cane cutters, past the sugar cane fields, endless sugar cane, the part of Florida only the bosses and immigrant workers know about, and the one Walmart and neighboring small pizza shop, which we stop at, and it turns out they are from Brooklyn. When I arrive, the first person I meet is a young graduate student here to earn credit for observing scrub jays, she invites me for a beer, her visiting scientist dorm room is next to mine even tho I am a visiting writer, she invites me out the next day with her boss to take part in the scrub jay census.

Scrub jay, scrawny, filthy, matted, spastic. Little blue and gray bird who is easy to trick with Planters peanuts. Come closer little bird, let me see your identification bracelet, yes I have the peanut.

The head scientist refers to the New Yorker article, asks if I've read it, says he didn't like it, calls the scrub jays "kind of a stupid sucker species," "snacks for hawks sitting in a bowl of exposure," and describes to me how they swarm and peck the brains out of their enemy mockingbirds, peck out the mockingbird's brain through its eyes, which is what the real nature writing would tell you, he says, but he concedes she probably felt the need to market the scrub jay, that the New Yorker would most likely prefer the story of a friendly sweet bird going extinct, because it's sad and people will feel moved and more actively involved with nature by reading that, he says and it is sad, but they aren't nice, they are stupid and mean unless you have planters peanuts on you. It's just another moment in a territory, another history and uncertain future, a trajectory of earth through one bird, and yes, of course its human activity that's forcing them to die off, we all know that, now it's just a matter of watching it happen.

It's true what the critics say, we never know exactly the exact effects of events exactly. But sometimes you feel lucky, sometimes you can see exactly what's happening, and here it's through the lens of a tiny dirty matted blue bird skidding out into a sandy path pecking around for the peanut I threw out to bring it here, to get a close look at its many tiny identification bracelets piled on its tiny legs, which

is the true point of observation for the bird census, the bracelets, the real facts, and the extinction scientist, what he says, and the sense of adventure in the eyes of the grad student statistician from Tampa who's here to run the numbers.

Dash azure silver is routinely w cops, he tells me, and then a swarm.

Q dash

No qn dash b

We did not have white lime last time

Qr dash a

Q dash hot orange is male from nwtr

Q red dash flesh silver flesh

Green white clover dash hot

Clover dash lime white

Clover dash lime green

Lime hot clover dash

have you read this guy something-Shames, writes about key west and abt New Yorkers in fla?

no, i haven't!

have you seen David Attenborough's life of birds?

no, i haven't!
Is that sheep?

No it's an eastern narrow mouth toad
Which isn't a true toad

To study frog calls you have to stay up all night
and I'm a morning person

Bullfrog sounds like a hand bike pump

have you seen Beast in the garden that documentary about big cats coming into Colorado?

no, i haven't!

have you seen the tiger story abt a Russian pacific coast tiger who ate 2 people?

no, i haven't!

have you seen The ghost into darkness-- about these lion brothers who killed many many people because they were encroaching on their territory?

Silver dash lime green hot

hot pink clover dash silver flesh silver

Qr-z what's he doing over here?

Q dash hot pink

Q dash flesh gold blue, that's really strange what are they doing here?

Clover dash lime white

Green white clover dash hot

it keeps threatening to rain. the last few days they say we are going to have a storm and it may be a tropical storm. and periodically black clouds roll overhead and the wind picks up, once it even drizzled a little. but nothing much happens.

i check accuweather.com because over the years i have found it fairly accurate. they have this feature called "minute cast" , from the hourly forecast page you hit minute cast. and from the minute cast page you can scroll down and hit "radar" and get radar of the weather for the past hour. i see it has been raining in Okeechobee. they keep getting these huge red blobs over them, that means the rain is drenching and blinding, tropical downpour, and its over the north half of the lake, where a huge hurricane in 1928 came and flooded everything so hard it killed 2,500 people, mostly african americans. it also happens at the end of Zora Neale Hurston's novel their eyes were watching god, which draws from first-hand accounts of the hurricane. the burial grounds for the local dead sprawl for miles.

my apocalyptic future fantasy has come to be all about floods and the world is all water right now and a few survivors live on a series of boats tied together by rope, a flotilla-city, how is that not true, how is that not a documentary about the weather, because it's the future weather? we know it's going to happen, its already happening in our minds.

somedays i think the only thing real is the coming flood, all the other stories are distractions from that fact. so i'm not concerned with making fun of the guy in florida who thought he could steal a chainsaw by stuffing it in his pants and then yes of course he sawed his own leg off in the store and it ended up in the newspaper,

then on the twitter feed of "Florida Man" and then in a Carl Hiassen book. I'm not interested in that except for how it relates to how distracted we are from the coming flood, the red blob over Okeechobee that will soon be a red blob over the earth that will eventually become the Fulfillment of My Fantasy, and you know what Lacan says about that--you die when that happens.