

a quiet letter to the world

an interview with Holly J. Hughes

by Mike Dillon



photo by Isolde Pierce

Holly J. Hughes, born in Winona, Minnesota in 1955, is the author of *Sailing by Ravens* (University of Alaska Press, 2014), a book of poems based on her years at sea. Poet Tess Gallagher called it a “courageous book,” and Hughes “a venturing soul whose arrival replicates the fearful exuberance of freedom.” Hughes’s newest work, an unassuming handbound chapbook with letterpress covers titled *Passings* (Expedition Press, \$20), contains fifteen poems, each about an extinct bird, plus notes and suggestions for further reading.

Hughes, who has spent more than thirty summers working in Alaskan waters on boats ranging from kayaks to cruise ships, is also the co-author of *The Pen and the Bell: Mindful Writing in a Busy World* (Skinner House Press, 2012) and editor of the award-winning *Beyond Forgetting: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer’s Disease*, (Kent State University Press, 2009). A writing instructor who also teaches mindfulness workshops, Hughes divides her time between her log cabin in Indianola, Washington, a small town on Puget Sound northwest of Seattle, and her home set on three acres on the Olympic Peninsula.

This interview was conducted in Hughes’s Indianola studio in spring of 2016.

Mike Dillon: *Passings* strikes me as a kind of quiet “letter to the world,” as Emily Dickinson said of her own poems. The poems and the object we hold in our hands somehow harmonize.

Holly Hughes: That was a deliberate decision. In many ways that was the great pleasure of working with Expedition Press because the publisher, Myrna Keliher, also held that vision for the poems. Not only are many of today’s birds endangered, but letterpress as an art form is endangered, so it only seemed fitting to bring them together. In our fast-paced lives we don’t take the time to stop and listen to birdsong, or to set type one letter at a time. So we made the choice to present the poems in this way. We’re barraged by so much information, so much noise, our hope is that this “quiet letter” will get through.

MD: The poems reflect Pound’s dictum about the luminous detail—just the pith and gist—so there’s just enough information, but not too much. The reader gets these flashes of imagery. At the end of each poem, after getting to know the bird, when the bird is gone, we feel it. It’s really gone.

HH: I’m glad to hear you say that, Mike—it’s what I’d hoped the poems would do. I wish I could show you the box of books I read to do research for this collection. There’s a lot written about extinct birds and I read volumes. The challenge was distilling the information down to the luminous details that would tell the story of the bird. There was always a balancing act between the information and the image. I wanted the reader to feel an emotional connection with the bird.

MD: I think the end of the first poem in the book, “Passenger Pigeon,” captures how you do that.

They say the pigeons flew over the banks of the Ohio River
for three days in succession, sounding *like a hard gale at sea*.

Years later, guns splattered shot into skies stormy with pigeons.
Thousands plummeted, filling railroad cars bound for fine restaurants.

Now, of those hundreds of millions that once darkened
the skies, we are left with Martha, who never lived in the wild,

stuffed in the Smithsonian, Prussian-blue feathers stiff,
glass eyes staring, waiting, still, for her mate.

HH: A lot has been written about Martha; that poem was actually written decades ago, well before the hundredth anniversary of her passing in 2014. I wrote it when I bought the Audubon print in an old bookstore in Sitka, when I was still fishing in southeast Alaska. That poem really started the collection.

MD: The irony is all too obvious: The plenitude of certain species almost guaranteed their extinction. Sort of like the American buffalo’s near-extinction. The supply is endless so why worry about it?

HH: Right. The Eskimo curlew, the heath hen, the passenger pigeon—all of them were so plentiful no one could imagine they would someday be gone.

MD: Keats had his nightingale, Shelley his skylark, Yeats his swans at Coole. Jeffers liked hawks more than people. Somehow birds seem symbolic of the poetic experience. In your preface you talk about the importance of birds in your life. You write: “Like birds, poems are fleeting, flitting through our consciousness before they come to roost in our hearts. Perhaps it was inevitable that poetry and birds would come together for me.” What started you writing poetry in the first place?

HH: That’s a tough question. I always kept a journal. Probably during my fishing years the journals started turning into poems. I think of that wonderful line from an E.B. White essay about feeling “charged with the safekeeping of all unexpected items of worldly or unworldly enchantment,” that if I didn’t write them down, they’d slip through my fingers. I remember stumbling across the poems of Tess Gallagher and Sam Green, our own Northwest poets, and discovering I could write poems about *my* experience. I had been reading, of course—Wordsworth and Keats and all the poets we read in college—but it didn’t occur to me that I could write poems about my everyday experience, too.

MD: What causes a person to write poetry when most others certainly do not? Someone once wrote that a terribly happy person doesn’t write poetry.

HH: (*Laughs*). That’s probably true. I think I really started writing poetry when I needed to work out emotional knots. I can’t do it in prose; I somehow have to do it in poetry. The writing is always helpful, but it’s usually the poetry that allows me to work through it. There’s something about the metaphor, the image. There’s something that happens

with poetry that doesn’t always happen in prose.

MD: In an essay published in “Women’s Voices” you write about early experiences on the water in Minnesota. You had a close encounter with a great blue heron in your youth that was a turning point . . .

HH: Well, an encounter with a cardinal was one of my earliest childhood memories—that cardinal was a friend, it was a relation to me. But yes, the great blue heron: I was probably six or seven. My family used to go to a YMCA camp near Brainerd in northern Minnesota and we’d go out canoeing at sunset. I remember looking eye to eye with the heron and feeling seen by this creature, seen in a way that I felt acknowledged. I felt a connection with the mystery.

MD: You were not just the seer but also the seen.

HH: Yes. Jane Hirschfield has that wonderful poem about three foxes that ends, “Something looks back from the trees / and knows me for who I am.” What I felt as a young child was that same sense of just connecting—that I was connecting with my family, a larger family. As a child I felt at home in the natural world, that the four-legged creatures and the birds were all part of my family.

MD: You were also at home on the water from an early age, so it wasn’t such a leap for you to go from Minnesotan to Alaskan waters. And you became a skipper at some point in your life. What drove you to that?

HH: Well, we fished on a 33-foot gillnetter for four years until we sold that to run tenders, which were 80- to 100-foot boats that bought fish from the fishermen and ran them to the canneries or processing ships. My former husband Dave and I ran them together. I was interested in learning how to navigate and run the boats and I had all this sea time. When Dave sat for his Coast Guard license, it made sense for me to get my license.

MD: And you skippered a rescue boat after the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound in 1989. That was another profound experience for you, obviously.

HH: I was actually running the medic boat. But there weren’t that many medical emergencies and there were a lot more dying seabirds to pick up. So we were busy most days just doing that.

MD: What was that like?

HH: Oh, you know, it was heartbreaking. I can still barely think about it decades later.

MD: What kind of birds?

HH: Kittiwakes, murrelets, auklets. A variety of seabirds. The ones that really broke my heart were the loons, because I grew up with loons in northern Minnesota. I still have an image of a loon coated with oil that I can’t shake—it will be with me until the day I die. We picked up a lot of birds and took them to the rehabilitation center in Seward. I hope some of them made it. But it felt pretty futile at that point. We were doing what we could. I left my job writing catalogue copy for Eddie

Bauer because I had to do something. I couldn't bear to watch the images on the news and be so far from it.

MD: We touched on this earlier, but just the act of paying strict attention to birds has an affinity with writing poetry and the work of a letterpress. It's almost a sacramental perspective on the world, isn't it?

HH: It is. I think just taking that time and paying attention is important, and birds are good reminders. I was lucky enough to spend a week at Deer Park Monastery (in Escondido, California) with Thich Nhat Hahn many years ago. He would ring a bell every hour and we would stop and listen. We were practicing mindfulness. What I loved about Thich Nhat Hahn was that we practiced mindfulness throughout the day, not just when we were seated on the cushion. I think of birdsong as another bell, another opportunity. When I hear birdsong, I try to stop and listen, really listen to it. Maybe I'll see it, the bird. Or maybe I'll just listen to it.

MD: Audubon was a strange bird himself, wasn't he? He killed thousands of birds in order to paint them—which led a movement to save them. One of life's little ironies.

HH: (Laughs). That is one of life's ironies, though I must admit I'm very grateful to Audubon, the organization he founded, for its efforts to protect birds today, given the threats they now face from habitat loss and climate change.

MD: How did you team up with Expedition Press?

HH: That's actually a lovely story. I first met Myrna when I moved to Indianola in 1991. She was a young girl. I was walking down Division Street to the beach and Myrna was curled up inside a nurse log reading a book. I thought, I've moved to the right town; this would have been me when I was her age. I remember talking to her, and we just bonded in that moment. And so, it's wonderful, many years later, to have the opportunity to work with her as an artist. When she founded Expedition Press, I was really interested in what she was up to, and

she did a beautiful job with her first book (*Full Immersion* by Northwest poet Sally Green). I asked what's next? She said, I don't know, what are you working on? I said a book on extinct birds. We looked at each other and that was it. It was right here on Division that we decided to collaborate.


MD: Auden said, famously, poetry makes nothing happen. But this book, in its quiet way, wants something to happen.

HH: That line from Auden has always bothered me, because I believe poetry *can* make things happen. I believe it's up to the artists and poets to make things happen. Even if it just helps people to slow down, spend time with each bird on the page, be a witness to that loss. To me, that will be something. If somebody will then go out and learn a little more about the birds or join Audubon, that would be all the better. What is it Pope Francis said? If we're going to change everything, we need everybody. I don't have any great aspirations that this book will reach everybody, but I hope it will reach a few.

MD: Let me read something from "Heath Hen." You note in the poem that maybe the first Thanksgiving Day turkey was really a heath hen, and that from Maine to Virginia, "they were so plentiful that servants asked not / to eat them more than three times a week." Then you trace their decline and end with this:

By 1927, only thirteen heath hens—all but two males—still boomed for a mate's affection. On March 11, 1932, the last

survivor, Booming Ben, was believed seen, but not again. His remains were never found.

HH: You know, it's interesting: In so many cases, that last sighting is elusive. That was one of them. There's actually a statue of Booming Ben on Martha's Vineyard. So by the time we get down to the last one of the species, there's a lot of interest in trying to preserve it. There's something both tragic and beautiful about that. In the end, it's still the natural world. Booming Ben chose his own end, whatever it was. 

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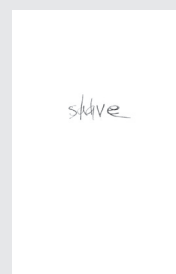
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