

suffering not only from jet lag, but also from an existential identity crisis. Exhausted by the demands of her work overseas and a series of broken romantic entanglements, she finds herself at geographical and emotional crossroads as she struggles to find some semblance of home in the world.

Miller's narrative follows the parallel lives of two couples: Frankie and Bud, the local newspaper editor, who embark on a tentative, lurching relationship as they stumble into love, and Frankie's parents, Alfie and Sylvia, whose decades-long marriage has been marked by anger and resentment. As the novel unfolds, it becomes clear to all that Alfie has Alzheimer's disease, something his wife clearly resents. "She didn't want to assume responsibility for him yet again," Miller writes of Sylvia. "She was tired of being responsible."

There are some heartbreaking scenes as Alfie's disease progresses. As she charts his decline and its impact on his family, Miller writes from experience; her own father died from Alzheimer's disease, a plight she movingly recalled in a memoir, *The Story of My Father*.

In the novel, Frankie's return to Pomeroy—a summer resort community—coincides with a series of fires that claim the homes of part-time residents. The investigation into who is setting the fires provides Miller the opportunity to probe the thorny subject of class differences and the tension that exists between summer people and year-round residents. As one fire quickly turns into a dozen, Bud begins to question "whose home Pomeroy was, whose experience defined it—the chatty, self-assured summer people or the observant, perhaps resentful, year-round folks. A question about who owned the town and who merely used it." Miller provides no easy answers.

The subplot concerning the fires is based on real-life events. A number of years ago, Miller was

helping her father clean out his summer home in Randolph, N.H., when a series of arsons in the nearby town of Jefferson held the community in terror.

Miller says she is drawn repeatedly to the subject of marriage in her fiction because it represents "a deep and difficult and complicated encounter between two people, the nature of which is unique and really asks you to imagine what the other person is thinking, to try to be empathic in a way that I think is difficult for all of us." The question of identity is tested in marriage, maybe even shaped by marriage, she says.

*The Arsonist* is set in 1998 during the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, in part because she wanted to write about the US embassy bombings that occurred in Tanzania and Kenya at the time. The bombings marked "a particular point in the consciousness of our nation, when the notion of terrorists who might have some intentions on us was not on our radar at all. These bombings, which initially nobody in the States understood to be something that connected to us, seemed extraordinary to me," says Miller.

There was another reason she decided not to set her novel in the present. "I'm increasingly perplexed about the contemporary use of cell phones and the internet and internet issues," she says. "I just don't want to be on it, and I don't want to write about it....I know there have been some brilliant books that make use of it, but I just can't and I won't, and because of that I can't imagine I will ever write a really contemporary novel again." Miller, who still writes first drafts in longhand, says she was scared off from writing them on a computer in the 1980s, when a student of hers at MIT told her of research he was doing that showed the use of vocabulary and sentence structure changed when people used computers. "I just remember thinking, Oh my God, I can't do that," she says.

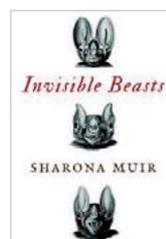
## Fiction

### Invisible Beasts

Sharona Muir (GRS'80)

Bellevue Literary Press

IN A LITERARY WORLD INCREASINGLY arranged in tidy genres, Muir offers up a wild and woolly hybrid that refreshingly defies classification. Compelling throughout, this whimsical, wise guide to "the animals that go unseen among us" begs to be read aloud and can be digested front



to back as a novel, but would prove equally enthralling cracked open at random. The personal bestiary of an amateur naturalist named Sophie, the narrative plumbs the dogged discoveries of a girl whose gift is known

to her quirky family. But even they need convincing, and the narrative capitalizes on all Sophie's hyperaltruistic senses as she navigates and reports on a parallel landscape crackling and thrumming stealthily through lush fauna, clinging to the undersides of visible creatures or burrowing along the urban infrastructure. *Invisible Beasts* toys with us, winking at the reader as it indulges the writer's love of wordplay as much as her infatuation with, and delicate observation of, her natural surroundings; it's the literary lovechild of Lewis Carroll and Rachel Carson filtered through the lens of zoology's godfather, Darwin himself.

The book, which, its author confesses, "began as an experiment," is divided into sections for common invisible beasts (the Pluricorn, Truth Bats), imperiled and extinct invisible beasts (the Foster Fowl, Beanie Sharks), rare beasts (the Hypnogater, the Oormz), invisible beasts in print (Fine-print Rotifers), and cyclically invisible beasts, the only representatives of which are Beacon Bugs, a firefly species that is invisible over 29-year periods until "they produce one generation that outshines every other firefly species." How lovely it would be if some (but most certainly not all) of these beasts existed

(assuming they don't; they're invisible, after all). The narrator is especially taken by Truth Bats (it's a pity they're invisible, she says, "because they're so cute..."). Truth Bats will only adorn the hair or clothes of a truthful person. The bats' chatter, a background to our speech like "the tingling echo of a waterfall just before your ears catch it," is the "ring of truth." "Your bats depart, scattering into the air as you trot out some whopper of a lie, your voice loses its reassuring background," Sophie tells us, "and people feel that."

Some of the creatures are poignant; a common invisible beast, the Couch Conch, appears in humans' bedrooms the morning after vigorous lovemaking (mollusks are full of lessons; they know all about the balance of hard and soft, rigidity and acceptance). And then there's the evolutionary marvel the Wild Rubber Jack, "evolved for the urban niche of business districts." The "Jack, for brevity's sake," she writes, "is an invisible American Ass...American Mammoth Jacks can stand as tall as a man. To this day, we lead the world in the enormous size of our asses."

Muir concludes her eclectic romp on a note of faith. After a meditation on communing with an invisible dog, she asks, "What is love?" Finally, she writes, "We are led to embrace a mystery too great to encompass, as unending as nature, because it is nature, the endlessness of the universe itself—that ultimate, unimaginable, ungraspable wholeness in which we are born and die, that haunts every intimacy." SUSAN SELIGSON

## Poetry

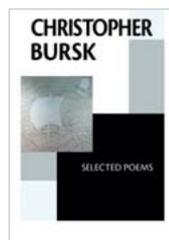
### Selected Poems

**Christopher Bursk (GRS'66,'75)**

*FutureCycle Press*

A MULTIPLE AWARD-WINNING poet for many decades, Bursk devotes much of his collection to ironic scrutiny of his chosen profession. Lacing his verse with searing wit and wreaking gleeful havoc with words and even individual letters, he is also adept at plunging a dagger squarely into the reader's heart. *Selected Poems* opens

with a kind of metameditation on a livelihood that, like the word market in *The Phantom Tollbooth*, puts a price on alliteration and simile, a business that offers crumbs for couplets. Crafting found verse from the names of publications that have turned him down—"Adastra, Anabiosis, Anhinga, Apalachee, Aquarius, Axe Factory"—he asks himself, "Why do I keep writing?" He responds by noting the poet's



toughness and code of honor, and finally turns to nature: "While I have been dawdling, the trees have been busy revising. The light's the only critic they can trust." Bursk's powers of observation are incisive yet humane, as in "The Pathetic Fallacy," when he describes a paraplegic professor clutching his chest as a young Bursk helps him into a car:

but he was only grasping for one of those notebooks  
he'd go nowhere without,  
like a lung he carried in his breast pocket,  
another way of breathing....

Some of the poems beg to be read again and again. An incantation of aching beauty, "Prayer" pays homage to a god not of pain and disease but a "God of lucky alignments, God of the condom a thirteen-year-old rolls and unrolls on his thumb," a God of "the hand on an inner arm," "God of long vowels that linger in our mouths." The poem concludes with a mantra of what it means to be acutely, defiantly human:

God of such beautiful approximations,  
a saying yes, that will have to do,  
to see it, feel it. Yes,  
that will do. ss

### The Forage House

**Tess Taylor (GRS'06)**

*Red Hen Press*

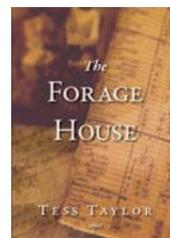
TAYLOR'S BU PROFESSOR, FORMER US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, praised the "poise, candor and reach" of the poems in *The Forage House*. The descendant of Virginia slave owners, Taylor writes verse that manages to confer fragile immortality on the

shreds of extinguished lives, of the Scottish ballads her grandmother "carried in her ears," of the vague detritus—"two pipe stems, seeds, three greening buttons"—excavated at an archaeological dig on a ridge near Monticello. She writes, for example,

of lives held here that now vanish off  
like blue smoke plumes I suddenly  
imagine –  
which are not, will not, cannot be enough.

Taylor's poems are haunted by the ghosts of slave owner and enslaved, of crude early photos—"All specific faces blurred"—hinting at times of Ladies' Academies, when shoddy acreage was granted to slaves "for purposes of church and school." In "Home of the Taylors," she writes of the "legend built on silence" that simmers in the land beneath a subdivision and a Comfort Inn. Her many turns on the poignant, random flotsam of past lives take a darkly comic turn in "Antiques Roadshow," in which the ampersands, which turn up in several of her poems, seem to ramp up the irony:

...In the pavilion experts finger  
a child's chair, hand-hewn & much  
mended –  
& question: What's it worth? & question:  
*Will it sell?*



Child of boomer-era seekers who, as the poem "Wedding Album 1977" recounts, married just as she prepared to emerge from her mother's womb, Taylor ex-

presses in "Song for El Cerrito" a longing for all that horrified her—the grid planning, the "power lines sawing hillsides"—of her working-class youth:

Now I want even the bad wood siding  
in our living room & my mother's aging  
books on modern Indian thought.

*The Forage House* publisher's notes inform us that Taylor's poems reflect years of travel and dogged research, referring to her verse as forming "a lyric journalism." As a reporter, she has an eye for the smallest, most strenuous detail. As a poet, she also honors all that we don't and can't know. ss ■