weber studies

voices and viewpoints of the contemporary west

VOLUME 21 | NUMBER 2 | WINTER 2004

EDITOR
Brad L. Roghaar
ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Michael Wutz, Kathryn L. MacKay
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Kay Anderson
ASSISTANT ART EDITORS
Matt Bass
Lori Lundell
Susan Spransy
LEGAL COUNSEL
G. Richard Hill
EDITORIAL PLANNING BOARD
Bradley W. Carroll, Carol Hansen, Brenda M. Kowalewski, Angelika Pagel, John R. Sillito, Michael B. Vaughan
EDITORIAL REVIEW BOARD
Thomas H. Brown, Russell Burrows, Katharine Coles, Fred Erisman, Alan Farnham, George Garrett, Duncan Harris, Nancy Kline, James A. MacMahon, Fred Marchant, Felicia Mitchell, Julie Nichols, Bill Ransom, Walter L. Reed, Scott P. Sanders, Daniel R. Schwarz, John Sillito, Susan Szewczak, James Thomas, Robert Van Wagoner, Melora Wolff
READER ADVISORY COMMITTEE
David Eisler, DeAnn Evans, Elaine Englehardt, Shelley L. Felt, G. Don Gale, David M. Greene, Barry Gomberg, Graciela Italiano-Thomas, John E. Lowe, June K. Phillips, Aden Ross, Robert B. Smith, Mikel Vause
TECHNICAL COMMITTEE
Mark A. Biddle, Al Davis, Sheree Josephson, Garth Tuck
EDITORS EMERITI
Sherwin W. Howard, Neila Seshachari, LaVon Carroll, Nikki Hansen

PUBLISHED tri-quarterly by The College of Arts & Humanities at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah 84408-1214. Full text of this issue and historical archives are available in electronic edition at http://weberstudies.weber.edu/

INDEXED IN: *Abstracts of English Studies, American Humanities Index, Index of American Periodical Verse, MLA International Bibliography*, and *Sociological Abstracts*. Member, Council of Learned Journals

SUBSCRIPTION COSTS: Individuals $20 (outside U.S., $30), institutions $30 (outside U.S., $40). Back issues $10 subject to availability. Multi-year and group subscriptions also available.

SUBMISSIONS AND CORRESPONDENCE: Editor, *Weber Studies*, 1214 University Circle, Ogden, UT 84408-1214. Phone: 801-626-6473.
E-mail: weberstudies@weber.edu

COPYRIGHT © 2004 by Weber State University. All rights reserved. Copyright reverts to authors and artists after publication. Statements of fact or opinion are those of contributing authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the sponsoring institution.

This publication is supported in part by a grant from the Utah Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C.

ISSN 0891-8899 Published in print and electronically in the United States of America.

CONTENTS

CONVERSATION

2 Brad L. Roghaar, *Writing a Life: A Conversation with Gary Gildner*

ART

72 Meri Decaria & John Collins, *Mindscapes and Landscapes*

ESSAY

44 David James Duncan, *My Advice on Writing Advice*
98 Robert Schnelle, *Over the Line: Robert Frost and Trespass*
106 Robert Schnelle, *Voles in Their Prime*
112 Jim Young, *Homesteading in Virginia: An Academic in Exile*
128 Julia Corbett, *Fashion Stories*

FICTION

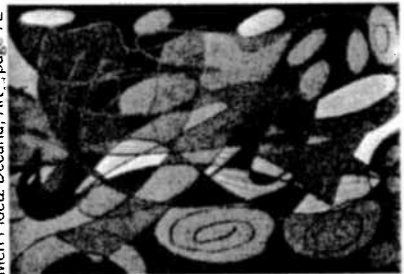
24 Gary Gildner, *The Romona Tomorrow Story*
52 John Purdy, *Clear Cut*
86 Arthur Winfield Knight, *James Dean*

POETRY

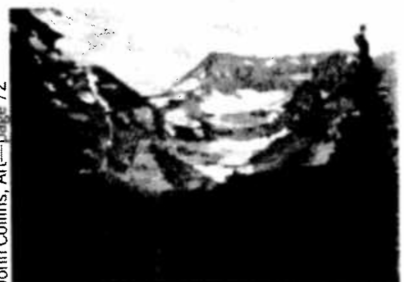
40 Joel Long, *The Iguana Knows Your Voice* and other poems
66 Dennis Saleh, *Belladonna Nightshade* and other poems
70 Barb Lundy, *Hat Tricks* and *Wildfire*
93 Gary Fincke, *Porch Moths* and other poems
96 J. L. Kubicek, *Fallen Leaves* and *Still Life*
110 Catharine Savage Brosman, *Dust Devil* and *Snow in Taos*
122 Ingrid Wendt, *Give Us This Day* and other poems
125 Simon Perchik, poems

140 *Reading the West*

Gary Gildner—page 2, fiction—page 24



Meri Ploetz Decaria, Art—page 72

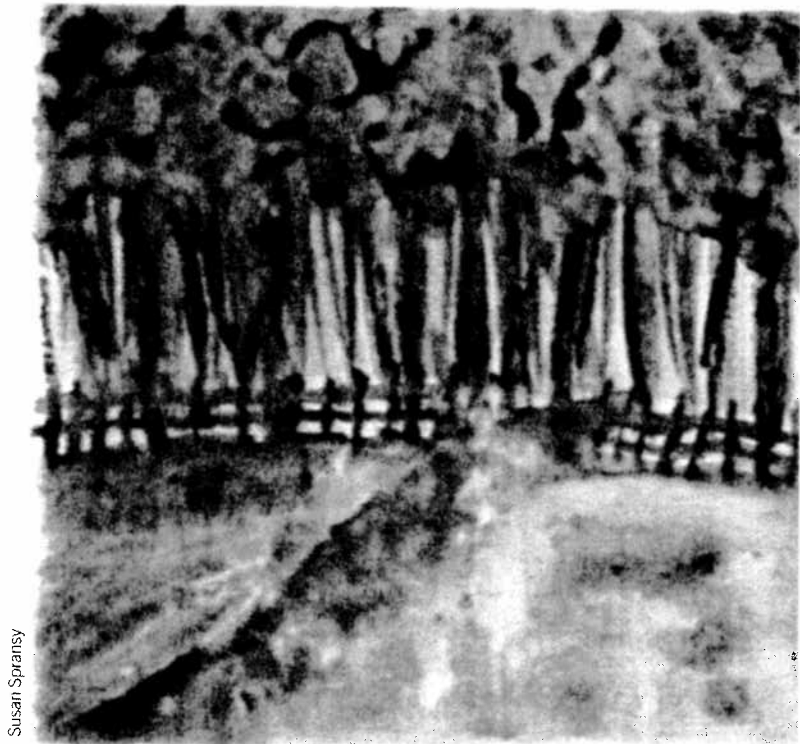


John Collins, Art—page 72

ESSAY

Robert Schnelle

Over the Line: Robert Frost and Trespass


Susan Spransy

TRESPASS IS A grave offense in the part of the country where I live, but it's one that Robert Frost might have committed had he ever visited the inland Northwest. Washington's Kittitas Valley, though riven with section lines and stark, rectangular hayfields, resists human order where it rises from an irrigated plain into jumbled bitter-brush and pine-staggered foothills, a dry and testy land between the Cascade Range and the Columbia River. Panoramic, dusty, and wind scoured, it looks very little like Frost's New England, where this writer grew up dreaming of the Mountain West. Still, after living out here for eleven years I've begun to find similarities. Dark and snowy winters, aspen stands imitating groves of paper birch, and flinty natives working rock-ribbed soil call to mind the Yankee land of Frost's narrative verse. What's more, through my dealings with one of these Kittitas natives I've imagined more deeply the poet's own cross-grained humanity. I meet this man, sometimes, when I trespass on his land.

It is the habit of Robert Frost's oven bird to be an elusive creature that is nevertheless "a singer everyone has heard." Likewise, Don Lilja is both

familiar to his neighbors and unknowable. An abrasive, purse-mouthed retiree rumored to brandish his pellet gun at evangelists, Lilja has seemed, for most of the time I've known him, too bad to be true. He ignores passersby waving to him at his mailbox, and yes, I've read his screeds on the letters page of our local paper. But whether scorning the United Nations or shooing trick-or-treaters from his door, Don Lilja at first appeared more intriguing than worrisome. Here was a former college professor, returning late in life to his boyhood home, who fashioned himself as a porcupine. Wisdom, for him, showed itself in contempt for the world, which, after all, was a diminished place crowded with spoiled latecomers. The best government he knew governed least, and property taxes were an instrument of vengeance that weaklings visit on the strong. Don Lilja's idea of good sense tasted like bile to me. Even so, I interpreted his performance as protective coloring. If nothing else, the poems of Robert Frost teach subtlety, and when you flip a porcupine on its back it's soft under all that bristle.

FROST HIMSELF WAS BORN AND FLEDGED in San Francisco, where he ran in street gangs, arriving at age ten to his family's ancestral home on the border of New Hampshire and Massachusetts. After graduating as co-valedictorian of his class (the other was his future wife), he employed himself as a sort of bouncer in his mother's country schoolhouse. He ran errands, worked for a printer, and then, unlucky in love, took a long walk in Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp, where he intended to die of neglect. Instead, overcome by hunger and a lifelong fear of the dark, Frost walked out of the woods again. In doing so he crossed many miles of private land, there being no other ownership in that time and place.

FOLLOWING THE MORE USUAL migration route, I grew up in New England and came west a decade ago, pulling into the Kittitas Valley in a U-Haul and exploring it first from behind the wheel, then on foot. Right away I was struck by the proliferation of fences here—barbed wire barriers to walking scored the countryside, fences in excess of need filleting the landscape as if division were the image of local character. It was clear that property lines conditioned the West more than I was used to, but I told myself to be patient. Perhaps after I had lived here a while I would understand.

Six years ago I built my house on the site of a former gravel quarry.

"Trespass is a grave offense in the part of the country where I live, but it's one that Robert Frost might have committed had he ever visited the inland Northwest."

People used to drink and hunt ducks in this place, to judge by artifacts less poignant than the crockery and crumbling cellar holes described in Frost's great poem "Directive." The U.S.G.S. Manastash Creek quadrangle locates my land where the words *Borrow Pit* label a shaded blob enclosing crossed shovel icons. Beside them the map shows the pale-blue amoeba of Cove Pond, and southward, lines of altitude massed or kinking up where run-off drains the hills. What the map doesn't show is the resurgent wildness that drew my family and me to buy these acres. Among the slag piles left when rock was quarried, we walk today in cottonwood shade like the shade of New England beech and maple trees. Below the surrounding sagebrush steppe, the ground falls into a charmed circle where year-round springs water scrub oaks, willows, dog rose and hawthorn thickets, clusters of yellow currant, snowberry, and the crimson-barked osier dogwood. The pond draws herons and nesting orioles; in spring, hyla frogs cheer loudly at twilight. The place gives sanctuary to anyone wandering by, which most often is only myself. Two hundred yards through the bush lives Don Lilja, my closest neighbor.

The reason why Lilja was angry, I thought, was circumstantial. Because of people like me, he woke up one day to find himself living in a low-density suburb. North of his retreat, lonesome homesteads had given way to ranchettes and the monster developments of a transient gentry. Motorists whisked along the county roads now, flattening quail and farm cats en route to the Yakima and Seattle-bound interstates. Ride-'em lawnmowers droned on weekend afternoons, and yard lights bleached the night sky. Of course, what Lilja hated was only the familiar irritant of too many people, the product of building booms from Kennebunk to Eureka. What's noteworthy here is the shape and ownership of the unbuilt land surrounding this neighborhood, 3500 vertical feet of it buckling into a broad alluvial fan. A winding canyon to the west spills Manastash Creek across the wider valley, while on either side of it our little elbow of the Kittitas is socketed with a wedge of forested uplands—territory of the Fish and Wildlife Department. Whatever abuses public lands suffer, they aren't real estate, and that makes them a refuge far beyond the scale of our little Cove Pond oasis. By crossing a few acres of thicket and the length of Lilja's hayfield, I can reach the reserve on foot; otherwise I

"The evidence of Frost's poems suggests that during the years before renown and fortune found him, he did a journeyman's share of sauntering."

have to drive my car a roundabout mile. My offense, I came to know, was my preference for walking. Like that of Robert Frost's narrator in "Acquainted with the Night," it felt subversive: "I have passed by the watchman on his beat/And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain."

THE EVIDENCE OF FROST'S POEMS suggests that during the years before renown and fortune found him, he did a journeyman's share of sauntering. In the poem just quoted, the speaker "outwalk[s] the furthest city light." In "Good Hours" he reports, "I had for my winter evening walk—/No one at all with whom to talk...." In "The Wood-Pile," he pauses while "out walking in a frozen swamp one grey day," debating whether to turn back before deciding, "'No, I will go on farther—and we shall see.'" Unprogramed walking becomes the characteristic act for Robert Frost. As a young and unknown poet, he repeats this device so frequently that it must have been central to his way of thinking, the way that talking—great, monologic discourses—were the mark of his later, highly public years. In a lyric called "The Sound of Trees," Frost seems to propose a walker's destination: the goal of "set[ting] forth for somewhere" is to "lose all measure of pace.../And acquire a listening air."

Eventually, the poet settled on property owned by his grandfather. He and his wife and four children took nearly ten years to fail at farming, though near the end of that period, approaching age forty, he became a high school teacher. His neighbors in the southern New Hampshire countryside would have had no reason to expect anything more from Robert Frost. He seemed a borderline ne'er-do-well, a vagabond family man glimpsed while vaulting fences at twilight. A trespasser.

"WELL, I WON'T CHASE YOU OUT OF there," said the voice in the telephone one day. As a new kid on the block I'd introduced myself—although, it being December with the ground sheathed in ice, I dialed Mr. Lilja's number instead of hazarding his road with a collie snapping at my heels. Now I was telling him how I'd admired his fruit trees from the trail on Manastash Ridge. When he didn't reply, I mentioned the six-inch spear point I'd found in my garden—an archeologist friend dated the piece at eight thousand years. Had Mr. Lilja discovered anything like it on his property?

"No."

It was now or never, I thought. "I

"Frost himself condoned trespass; at least I've believed so since I first held his poetry to my ear. Everyone knows that his line, 'I took the [road] less traveled by'... is a license for free spirits."

was wondering whether you'd mind if my family and I were to walk on your land. We wouldn't go near your house or trample your hay." Then came the response, however grudging, that I interpreted as permission. What he said was neutral enough at least that my wife and I were unprepared for an event that occurred several weeks later. Frozen in our seats at the dinner table we watched as a backhoe erupted from the trees beyond our window. Amid piles of slash and neatly stacked lumber, Don Lilja and his son, Rick, excavated postholes in the frozen ground. Though the act spoke for itself, I stepped out the back door to ask.

"We're putting in a fence," shouted Rick, stiffening beneath his feed cap.

"Well—what's it for?" The Liljas kept no livestock.

"What do you think? This is our *property!*"

In Robert Frost country, where I grew up, fence building has lapsed into the arcane pursuit of stonemasons and their well-heeled clientele. And since New England agriculture is pretty much washed up, even where walls exist you can often ignore the *No Trespassing* signs. People know whose sugarbush is whose. As teenagers, my friends and I made frequent if furtive use of private land. Besides, the vegetation in that cloud-wrapped country is so determined it breaches any barrier you raise. However thickly they are settled, the north woods of Yankee land make room for wandering.

All this is to the good. Frost himself condoned trespass; at least I've believed so since I first held his poetry to my ear. Everyone knows that his line, "I took the [road] less traveled by" (which I've learned to read satirically) is a license for free spirits. Likewise, in "Into My Own," the walker is "fearless of ever finding open land." But then there's the bit from "Mending Wall" that I feel sure is inscribed on Don Lilja's heart: "'Good fences make good neighbors.'" An endorsement of property rights, this? No, it only seems that way.

Composed for the 1914 volume, *North of Boston*, the words are spoken by a farmer (in real life, Frost's Derry, New Hampshire neighbor, Napoleon Guay) whom the narrator compares to "an old stone savage armed" as he hoists boulders into place on a wall between their land. "He moves in darkness" the speaker observes. Neither of the two men pastures cows along their border, nor will the narrator's apple trees ever "get across/And eat the cones under his pines." So the wall is gratuitous. And yet, in the mind of the speaker, its moral weight is heavier than its bulk:

> Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
> What I was walling in or walling out,
> And to whom I was like to give offense.
> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That wants it down....

Seasoned observers may note that this "something" includes winter frost heaves, which "spill the upper boulders in the sun." —And while natural destruction is bad news to most of us, for Frost it has a liberalizing effect, moving the speaker in "Mending Wall" to chide his neighbor's strict accounting. If not altogether absurd, the poet

implies, ownership is less meaningful than we pretend. From this viewpoint, the neighbor's repair job becomes "just another kind of outdoor game.../There where it is we do not need the wall." — However, as if to show the futility of reasoning, the poem gives its last word to the property defender: "He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'"

DON LILJA'S GOOD FENCE COMPRISES 480 eight-foot railroad ties spaced twelve feet apart and linked by triple sets of two-by-six boards. I estimate the cost of his project at $14,000 by the time he's done, excluding hardware and backhoe rental. Thirty-five years as a geography professor taught Lilja the value of straight lines, so the question at this point is whether he'll run his fence through the middle of Cove Pond. Precision will limit his costs, even if it means he has to fell sixty-foot trees, sluice out the pond, and plough roughshod through cattail marshes, entombing painted turtles and frogs.

Perhaps I overstate my case here, but I am the target of Don Lilja's ire. A few weeks back, shortly after the post-hole offensive, all of our snow melted. On a warm afternoon he caught my son and me gathering leaves where our properties run together. I must have stood a few feet over the boundary when Lilja and his grandson appeared.

"May I ask what you think you're doing?"

"I'm taking some leaves for my compost bin. I hope you don't mind." The grandson and my boy, Erik, looked each other up and down. I remember thinking that if I were to chuck a tennis ball into the bushes, they'd both chase after it. But the old man and I had business.

"As a matter of fact I do mind," he said. "I can't take responsibility for people fooling around on my property and then suing me." So *that* was it. Lilja himself had brought suit against a neighbor the previous year.

"I'm not going to sue you, Mr. Lilja," I said. His eyes narrowed. He set his mouth in a line.

"That's what you say now. But I've lived a lot longer than you have, and don't you forget it." Shifting tack, he asked, "You see that dog there?" I did—it was Lilja's collie lifting a leg on my *Echinacea*.

"Under the law it is your right to shoot that dog if it's bothering you. It's on your side of the property line; you can shoot it."

"Mr. Lilja, I'm not going to shoot your dog."

He scoffed, but I was almost

"He seemed a borderline ne'er-do-well, a vagabond family man glimpsed while vaulting fences at twilight. A trespasser."

enjoying myself. Given a trace more of wit, this man might be taken for one of Frost's hill farmers—monosyllabic guys who compensate for years of silence if you get them started. Don Lilja is no stand-in for Frost himself, yet our dialogue was shaping up as a Frostian moment. In a 1942 poem, "To a Young Wretch," the speaker infers the fate of a spruce tree chopped on his land. The neighbor kid who's always skulking around must have cut it for Christmas: "You link an arm in its arm and you lean/Across the light snow homeward smelling green." Subsequent stanzas turn on the narrator's effort to balance loss with gain. For Frost, the consolation of philosophy (this poem is subtitled *Boethian*) lies in acknowledging a neighbor's simple pleasure—a right that parallels legal ownership:

> It is your Christmases against my woods.
> But where, thus, opposing interests kill,
> They are to be thought of as opposing goods
> Oftener than as conflicting good and ill.

In "To a Young Wretch," Frost allows self-interest to shake hands with the commonweal.

Now, I wouldn't dream of taking an ax to my neighbor's woods, but I enjoy the thought of Don Lilja's reaction ("Bullshit!") if I were to quote him Frost's poem. In fact, on that warm winter day, he told me to consider myself warned. He didn't want to find me on his property again.

"But what about him?" I asked, palming the head of seven-year-old Erik (my own young wretch). "Where will he play? Should I drop him off at a shopping mall or send him inside to watch television?" The Lilja boy grimaced, a copy of my own.

"I am protecting the land for my grandson. This will be his some day."

"But still," I persisted, "what is the difference between these kids? I don't see it."

"You've been warned," he repeated, and taking his grandson's hand, he beat it.

I've been claiming Robert Frost for a partisan in my dispute with fence builders. In life, the man behind the poems suffered more than his share of private divisions, which partly explains his thirst for public contact. During the 1940s and fifties, prizes, speeches, television appearances—even a diplomatic mission to the Soviets—filled his calendar, while the poems he wrote grew hortatory. There is relief in turning from this image of Frost toward

"Even Thomas Jefferson believed that land titles ensure political rights. What Jefferson may have overlooked, unfortunately, is the inverse equation: people obsessed with individual rights often insist on sole entitlement—a loss for everyone else."

another, also from his later years, that I hope better captures the inner man. In a photograph dated 1958, we see Frost in an old cloth overcoat, clutching a walking stick and turning from the camera as he shuffles into a field of snow. A small dog follows in his tracks.

The final word on Frost's sympathies might as well come from the poem "Trespass," which appeared in the same volume as "To a Young Wretch":

> No, I had set no prohibiting sign,
> And yes, my land was hardly fenced.
> Nevertheless the land was mine:
> I was being trespassed on and against.

William F. Buckley once said that people who equate property with theft haven't owned any. Even Thomas Jefferson believed that land titles ensure political rights. What Jefferson may have overlooked, unfortunately, is the inverse equation: people obsessed with individual rights often insist on sole entitlement—a loss for everyone else. A capitalist himself, Robert Frost took part in several land-speculation schemes during his lifetime. Yet in "Trespass," shame forces him to acknowledge (if not to like) the "surly freedom" of an interloper. He tells us that the presence of the trespasser "[gave] me a strangely restless day," and he traces the walker's route on foot. Down by the speaker's brook, the trespasser may have gone searching for fossil trilobites, common in that region but entailing "little property right." Or, the landowner proposes, he busied himself in the woodlot. In any case, Frost's narrator concludes that the theft of some commodity is not his complaint. It is rather the stranger's "ignoring what was whose" that gives him pause.

Accordingly, the speaker's insight occurs in the final stanza when his transgressor appears, knocking at the back door to ask for a drink. Says Frost, it is "an errand he may have had to invent," but it is an acknowledgment that restores peace of mind. For the poem ends in a sociable gesture that is also a way of balancing possession rights with rights of use; it satisfies both the intellect and the heart. On the contrary, it is my own neighbor's *refusal* to have dealings with me that stings. The essential Frostian moment occurs as a meeting of minds. It arrives on an impulse to communicate, setting the poet on his feet and the walker on his path.

SINCE DON LILJA DOESN'T WANT TO talk to me, I'm asking everyone else I know these days, "Do fences make good neighbors?" Robert Frost decided not, as he would proclaim most famously while trespassing against a villager in "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening":

> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.

We live in xenophobic times. The Berlin Wall is succeeded by others on the Mexican border, at airport checkpoints, along the perimeters of upscale housing tracts, and in the imaginations of fearful people everywhere. Our libertarian freedoms are hollowed by a lack of open space where we could meaningfully enact them. When Frost's White House patron, John F. Kennedy, declared himself a Berliner, he spoke metaphorically. But we *are* all Berliners now.

ESSAY

Robert Schnelle

Voles in Their Prime

Susan Spransy

NOW THAT spring is almost here it may be told. Throughout the siege of a winter that brought epic snowfall, the inland Northwest's vole population has made idleness a family value. Like mammals of many kinds, voles would normally time their breeding with the return of sunlight, but this year, beginning in the dark days of January, evidence of animal passion has transformed the neighborhood where I live and taken on the shape of a portent. Grass-lined runways crisscross our footpath from the back door; burrows pock the snow-flattened weeds,

and owl pellets found beneath the big cottonwood are studded with tiny mandibles. Skittering, gray-brown shapes distract me while I'm shoveling the drive. Scavengers animate the compost heap.

Poor Fatso, the family cat, despairs of husbanding her once orderly game ranch. The voles have outbred her blood lust, it seems, and their uneaten corpses strew the decks and walkways. She used to consume all except the stomachs of her prey. As their population swelled, she began to leave the hindquarters, then all but the heads. Finally, as engorged as the Trojan horse, Fatso watches fresh generations of voles gallop past like so many buffalo. The squeals of rutting males must invade her dreams.

At least a dozen species of vole inhabit the Northwest, including rarities like the needle-eating red tree vole, which spends its entire lifespan in the branches of old-growth firs, and the feisty, swift-kicking water vole. But given the dryness of the mountain valley I live in, the voles we're seeing are most likely *Microtus pennsylvanicus*, a blunt-nosed, short-tailed, lemming-like creature with tiny round ears. Most people know it as the field mouse, but with its swift metabolism, *Microtus* is a wolf among pipsqueaks. In addition to the fungi and tubers it eats, it relishes seventy species of grass seed, especially cultivated varieties, and it loves to girdle fruit tree saplings with its chisel-like teeth. The meadow vole can be destructive, though hawks, snakes, and coyotes would be hard pressed without it. Anything that eats meat eats voles.

Still, when you reckon all its qualities, the vole's breed lust stands out. Meadow voles live one year at best—a few months on average—yet females can reproduce from the age of three weeks. Both sexes attract each other with scented oils they release by grooming. After they mate, gestation lasts twenty-one days and produces up to a dozen young; a mother vole may easily raise eight or ten litters if she's lucky, though one in captivity gave birth to seventeen. Theoretically, a female meadow vole can leave a million descendants.

So it is that nature provides more than just predators for rodent control: the crowded conditions of population peaks lead to stress, like what humans feel at rush hour. If this winter's voles follow precedent, then famine, disease, and even mental derangement will get them, eventually. Overpopulation also causes intraspecies aggression and vast refugee migrations, but while it has been shown that migrants enjoy the highest reproduction rates, these are the ones most conspicuous to predators—who even the score. Sources tell me that vole populations spike every few years and that these are followed by cycles of crash and recovery.

It's good for people that we can predict this. Voles are curiosities to those of us with town jobs, but the grain industry considers them a major pest. The dusting of crops with hydrocarbons is easily mis-timed, and bait shyness often renders "rodenticides" useless. Opposed though many of us are to agricultural poisons, it's daunting to imagine the plight of farmers in Scotland, who deal with a parallel threat in the mountain hare. This animal alternates between scarcity and abundances so extreme they constitute "plagues," but unlike the meadow vole, its growth spurts are

patternless. Peaks recorded during a forty-year span occurred in 1930, 1931, 1941, 1953, 1958, and 1971. Horrendous livestock die-offs and economic freefalls followed each of these years.

As for the meadow vole, researchers know more about *when* to expect its boom years than *why* they occur. They used to think that lemmings, hares, and other creatures like the vole existed in a state of balance, their supposedly even-keeled reproduction upset only because of human influence. This would have accounted for undeniable fluctuations like the one I'm seeing, but the theory was shelved when small mammals of the tundra, where few people live, showed the same behavior as their kin to the south. For now, population biologists find consensus on only a few points. First, while enemies cannot put brakes on vole expansion, they can delay a post-crash recovery: one O. P. Pearson found that predators devoured 88 percent of a low-cycle vole "crop." Second, voles are like anyone else—they depend on their food supply. If they overgraze an area they have to abandon it or starve. Finally, it's agreed that these variables cause changes within the animals themselves. Big, randy aggressors dominate, touching off orgiastic mating, mass dispersal, and another predatory bacchanalia.

For *Microtus* and genus *Homo* alike, babies are us. Not that recognition brings hope of change in human behavior, but Samuel Zeveloff, author of *Mammals of the Intermountain West*, puts the writing on the wall where it belongs: "Human populations exhibit some of the same dynamics at increasing densities as do small mammals." The gene's quest for immortality is the meal ticket of the unborn. And there seems to be no circumstance too squalid to keep our progeny from coming. All this lends to the drama taking place in my backyard, the sniffiness of a cautionary tale. But no matter. The interest lies in its details.

"...Samuel Zeveloff, author of Mammals of the Intermountain West, *puts the writing on the wall where it belongs: 'Human populations exhibit some of the same dynamics at increasing densities as do small mammals.'"*

Voles, voles, voles. If voices had odors, the squeak of this animal would remind you of cheese. It is a sharp and pungent sound, as high-pitched to the ear as the taste of salt on the tongue. Right now there's a magpie flaying a vole on a stump beyond the kitchen window, tossing its live meal in the air and catching it again in its bill. With binoculars I can see crows in the neighbor's hay field doing the same. A black lab that lives around here is bouncing along the front walk with a vole riding in her jaws. Yesterday, I lifted a drowned vole from the birdbath.

Death has no investment in the dignity of creatures. A vole may be impaled in the talons of a prairie falcon, or a languid tabby cat may harry it a while, leaving its victim grizzly and spazzing in a flowerbed. I scrape their remains from the tire treads of my car

with a stick. They get caught in the flooding creek and snag with other flotsam in shoreline thickets. Shrikes hang their carcasses on fence barbs.

Perhaps these cruelties explain the poignancy of voles in fables and folklore. The field mouse of Aesop's story receives a rare kindness when, having once pulled a thorn from a lion's paw, it is saved from drowning by the king of beasts. Mice in the Brothers Grimm are betrayed by other animals ("The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership") or by fate itself ("The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage"). When my son was small, he read a picture book called *Mousekin's Golden House*, in which the main character flees from an owl to the inside of a cozy jack-o'-lantern.

Such stories may allay human fears, but this year's vole outbreak puts fatality in our faces. Both voles and people live within rumor's reach of slaughter. We are bred for tooth and claw. Starvation and land mines take us. Microbes gnaw at our vitals. In rich countries we fade in oncology wards or stare past the eyes of our loved ones into the slow-moving fog of dementia. The only relief, it seems, is in getting born among the scarce. How many of its own kind, crumpled in death, does a whooping crane have to look at?

All this raises the stakes on our days. In meadow vole years, the average American lives to the ripe age of 547, allowing plenty of time to study music and cloud stacks, or the ankles of women in summer dresses. Perhaps our destiny is linked with the vole's in a positive sense, too. I have seen a vole expressing something like happiness. Today, in back of my house by the propane tank, I watched this vole feeding on stalks of grass. It held the blades between its forepaws, gnawing them through till they tumbled and let the seed heads come within its reach. The animal was so delicate I could have blown it over with a sneeze. When I placed a sunflower kernel nearby, it was undisturbed, but snatching it up, it gave it a quick spin and hustled away with the cache. A vole can eat endlessly and never gain on the future. Even so, as I watched the same doomed creature a few minutes later, grooming itself in a glade of chickory, blinking its dark eyes and basking for a spell, it seemed to enjoy a share of warmth in the world.

Robert Schnelle lives in Ellensburg, Washington. His essays have appeared previously in *Weber Studies*, the *Seattle Review*, and *Writing on the Edge*. His book *Valley Walking: Notes on the Land* was published by Washington State University Press in 1997.