

The Company We Keep

the public POETRY project

The Company We Keep

Ron Mohring

Half-floating, half-sinking, the crayfish wobbles in the white plastic dish I yanked from the cupboard and splashed full of tap water, wobbles intentionless, lifeless. Mindlessly I jiggle the dish, pluck a glob of wet dog hair from its little pointy legs. Nothing helps. For this we waded into the cold Susquehanna, netted ridiculously tiny minnows—all bug eyes and needle tails—and turned over rocks to catch a crayfish, two, then three, for the new aquarium. Local shale stacked into little cave hideouts. The minnows, or whatever they were, darted in unison like some nervous organism. The crayfish would snatch up their shrimp pellets with tiny pincered feet. Then the largest went missing. What fools we are to kidnap such benign and helpless creatures, cage them in our homes. It died. It flipped out the back of the aquarium, thumped to the carpeted floor. Its beady pushpin eyes surveyed the new terrain: hill of crumpled underwear, marooned ship of an overturned shoe. Ledges of piled books. The crayfish hauled its armored body like a slowly fizing spacesuit through the deep dark beneath our bed, through our secret dust and dog hair, tapped its primitive warty claw along the baseboard while we snored above like careless gods, oblivious, unrepentant. Now I poke its unresponsive shell—lolling in the shallow water, I almost believe it's coming back to life—and now, at last, too late, I think of all the trapped, forgotten fireflies, the starved, neglected toads; now I cringe for every "rescued" baby bird I gagged on forcefed worms, for the worms themselves, for the fermenting jars of tadpoles floating belly-up on sunny windowsills, the ants, the bugs, the butterflies; countless, the small ones we've extinguished, as if we could have been companions, as if we were other than human, could ever set aside our sorry need for dominion.

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