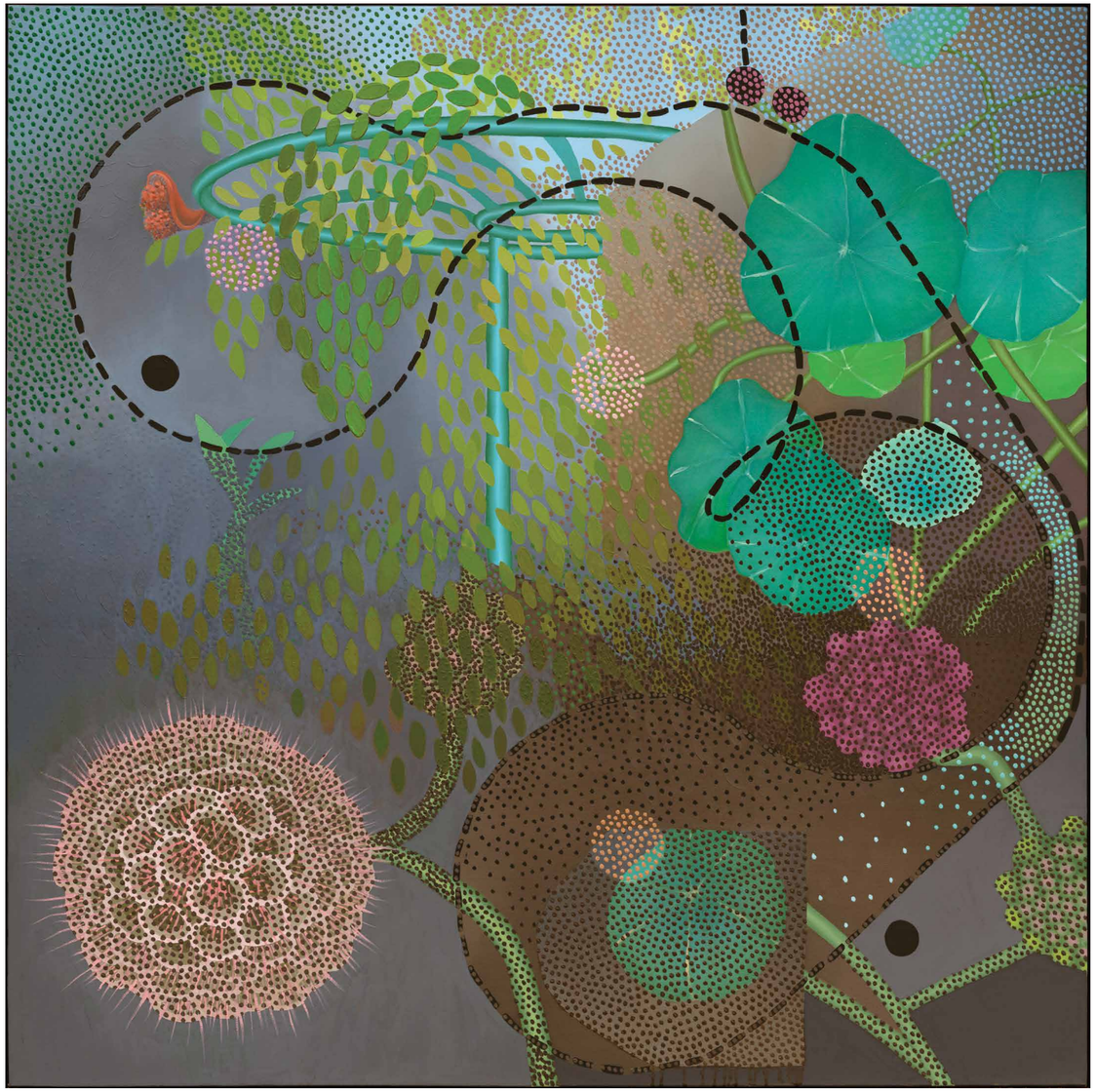
ELIZABETH TRACY

Constructing Paradise: Petrichor, 2016
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ELIZABETH MCKENZIE

Poor Deer and *Chouette*

A conversation with Claire Oshetsky

CLAIRE OSHETSKY: *Poor Deer* is a book about two little girls in a mill town in Maine, far to the north. One spring day, they go out exuberantly and play. A short time later, one mother finds her daughter hiding under a table in her house, and the other mother finds her daughter dead in a tool shed. It's not a mystery. It's a story, though, of how a community deals with a terrifying, tragic accident and who feels culpable.

It's narrated by the surviving girl. Her name is Margaret Murphy, and it sounds really sad and awful. Actually, it is a terrible thing to put in a book, but it was very important to me to write this story redemptively and to get this community and this little girl somewhere, maybe not a happy ending, but maybe a redemptive one where she can see her way through. I don't think it's a sad book. It's not a thing that will crush you, I promise. I probably should have mentioned that Margaret Murphy is an extremely imaginative girl, and one of the ways she gets through her grief and tries to understand what happened that day when her friend died is by telling herself stories. In the midst of the storytelling, she has created an avatar, or a conscience, or a devil, or a guardian angel. I'm not even sure which, but she calls this apparition Poor Deer. It acts as her conscience throughout the book.

So I will begin at the beginning:

> At dusk sixteen-year-old Margaret Murphy sits down at a narrow rickety desk in Room 127 at Little Ida's Motor Lodge, eleven miles east of Niagara Falls, and begins to write her confession.
>
> Poor Deer crouches in a corner and weeps.
>
> *Enough of your pretty lies*, Poor Deer says. *It's time to tell the truth.*
>
> Her voice is raspy and insistent, like the drilling of a tooth.
>
> All right, Margaret says. The truth.
>
> This is a story about two little girls on the day of the schoolyard flood.
>
> It begins like this: *Paint me a mill town nestled in the bend of a river called Penobscot—*

ELIZABETH MCKENZIE: Thank you so much, Claire. Before we start, I want to say a few things about your previous book, *Chouette*. Because that's how I first learned of

"I had almost killed my best friend, but she didn't die. I was four, and everything was fine."

you as a writer. I read it a few years ago before I knew you or even knew you lived in the area. I've been one of the fiction judges for the William Saroyan International Prize for Fiction since 2010. We've given that award to writers like Rivka Galchen, Kiese Laymon, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, and Hernan Diaz.

Every two years, we're presented with fifteen semifinalists to consider, and we have to narrow it down to three. I want to read part of what I wrote to my fellow judges about *Chouette*, which won the prize in 2022: "This novel stood out from the rest. It's a brilliant and original concept, perfectly executed, casting a crazy, unforgettable spell. It strikes me as an instant classic. I marveled at the voice, the language, the strangeness that never strained. I've never read anything like it."

Obviously I was very excited that you had a new book coming out. I wondered if I would like it as well as *Chouette*, and I do. I think I might even like it more. I was trying to figure out why the book affected me so profoundly, because once I finished, it was all I could think about for days. I think it took me to some really primal childhood feelings in a very convincing way. I was pondering where it belonged on the shelf, maybe between Flannery O'Connor and Henry Green. I guess I want to start by asking you, where did it come from?

CO: Scary question, trying to figure out where things come from sometimes, but actually, this one's a little easier than the last one. About May 2021, everything was done with *Chouette*. I finished all my edits, and I was like, "Well, oh, okay. What am I going to write next?" I did what people do. I think this is what they do. I thought about all the books I love, and how could I write a book like that? I thought of memories, and I came up with this memory that I maybe hadn't thought about for sixty years.

I had almost killed my best friend, but she didn't die. I was four, and everything was fine. We moved away very soon after that. So I didn't have to deal with her mother, who really didn't like that I'd almost killed her daughter. But I never thought about it again, and it was exactly what happens in this book. And it's in every review, so I'm going to go ahead and reveal that on page seventeen, this is set in the mid-twentieth century—and kids died this way, they died this way, not all the time, but kind of often—that my friend got stuck in a cooler.

I couldn't get the clasp open. We were playing a game. She had shown me how to do it, but I knew I didn't understand it. I'm sure I didn't know that she was going to die if I left her there, but I ran away. I was terrified. My mother knew something was wrong right away and asked, "What's wrong? What's wrong?" This is such a vivid memory. So not only did this memory come back to me, but it also informed me that four-year-olds remember. It gave me the confidence to write this, that this kid wouldn't just forget, grow up and forget this had ever happened.

My mom ran out the back, that's the way that we got to the other house, and the other mother had already found her kid. She was out in the backyard just yelling, yelling, yelling, and I remember her saying, "My child was blue in the face." My parents never talked about it. We moved away. We moved so far away, and I never had to think about it again. Then, this comes up sixty years later in my head, and I called my brother. I said, "Do you remember something like that?" and my brother, right away, said, "Oh. Yeah. That kid was blue in the face."

I called my sister, and she said, "Oh. Yeah. That kid was blue in the face." So everybody remembered it, but we had never talked about it. So that's where the idea came from. Actually, I found this person, this friend of mine, former friend, and I DMed her on a social media account. I said, "Do you remember me?" She said, "Oh yeah." So I had the opportunity to apologize to her. It was very good for us both, and her family had never talked about it either. You know? It's like we don't talk about stuff in midcentury America, last century. So that's where the story came from, and perhaps because it had this kernel of *what if*. Just a few minutes difference, not only would my friend have been dead, but two families would have been devastated.

Just the grace of her mother finding her in time, I had nothing to do with it. I didn't save that child. I didn't tell anyone until it was probably going to be too late. I ran away. I talk about this a lot, and it's probably therapeutic. I'd never really talked about it. So I wrote a book about it. I had an incentive to write a redemptive book, because I wanted to say, "Okay. What if that had happened? How would these families get over it?" That was very, very much like a direct plan I had, to write something that, oh, maybe it would turn out okay for the survivors of such a terrible tragedy.

EM: At the beginning, after the child's death in the book, Margaret hears this phrase, "Poor dear, poor dear," a lot. I love how you planted that through her ears, spelling it *poor deer*, spelling it the way she heard it and then evoking this creature that haunts her. There's some great intuitive logic to that. You tapped into a four-year-old's psyche very convincingly. Two of my favorite characters in the book are Maarten De Smedt and Miss Rudnicki—can you talk a little bit about them and their place in the story?

CO: This child, Margaret, is self-isolating. She's hiding a terrible secret. She doesn't make friends easily, but she's a very precocious child. She's got a wonderful imagination, and some of the adults in the community who are maybe misfits themselves can be there for her in a way her own mother can't be, after this incident. One of the people who is there for Margaret is an old Belgian named Maarten de Smedt, who happens to raise homing pigeons, which is a very old traditional Belgian sport. When I was young my father raised homing pigeons, as had his own father before him. I spent a lot of time with my dad, learning about this sport, where birds are shipped out to tremendous distances and then set free, and the first bird home wins the race. These birds have pedigrees going back many generations. They're beautiful and fierce. And through my father I met an Old Belgian by the name of Coonie Riesbeck. Mr. Riesbeck was revered in this community of pigeon fanciers and he was so excited to meet a kid like me, who loved these birds as much as he did. He spent a lot of time with me. Maarten de Smedt is based on this real person in my past, a person who took an interest in an unusual child and changed her life for the better.

Miss Rudnicki, the other person you asked about, this other kind of savior character, somebody that cares about this child, is her kindergarten teacher, who recognizes that she has a fine imagination and is probably really smart and gives her books to read, the first time that she's had any books outside just a couple in the house. So surely, that person, I haven't really thought about it, but come to think of it, she's kind of like my kindergarten teacher. So that's where my imagination comes from. It's all real. It really happened to me.

EM: Those characters stand out. Aunt Dolly's nice, but Florence, Margaret's mother, is cold. One feels bad for Margaret. It's such a relief when someone's nice to her.

CO: Yeah. I felt like it would be right to have the mother be sort of mixed up about her own culpability. She let her child out without supervision and didn't even know she was gone from the house, and what if she really did that thing? She gets upset when Margaret tries to tell the truth, and so they're divided. That seemed like, as fiction, to work. So I did want to introduce these characters that loved this girl, that gave her a reason to think that she was a good kid.

EM: There's this kind of ambiguous relationship between Florence and Agnes's mother, Ruby, and you mentioned earlier that Florence doesn't realize she's in love with her. I had this thought, I wondered if unconsciously, Margaret was aware of that and had resented the Bickfords in some way.

CO: Well, I didn't have that in my head, but I'm totally happy to have that idea out there. What I was thinking was when I was in college, my friends didn't know they were gay until they were seniors, like in their early twenties. Now, ten- and twelve- and thirteen-year-olds know they're gay, because they see it. They understand it, and

it's out in the open. I really imagined that in this small town in Maine, that two women falling in love with each other would not have the imagination or the experience to recognize their relationship as a romantic one or as a deep love, but that was a tragedy. I wanted to write it as sort of this other tragedy that comes about, that they're separated because of the death of one of the girls, that that really affected them, and even if you just think there's a friendship, that they're separated by that event.

EM: That was a surprise in the book. Another thing about this book that's great, you've got this ingenious frame around the childhood story of Margaret in which the adult Margaret is writing about it in the first person. Did the structure of the book come to you right away, or how did you arrive at that?

CO: Yeah. I thought it was psychologically valid that someone who was trying to make sense of, tell a story about a traumatic event in her past, would try to lead it in a better direction or tell it in a way that she could handle it. And so the way the book is written, there are many stops and starts when Margaret is trying to tell the truth, and she has this companion, Poor Deer, who's urging her to do so. But she doesn't want to tell the truth. She's wavering, and she's going toward a happier outcome every time she tries to say what happened to her friend.

Not only did that feel psychologically valid, but I found myself writing that way because I wanted to write a happy ending for this kid. I wanted her to get over it, or move on, or learn from it, or whatever. But you really can't. There's such a thing as senseless tragedy. You can't make sense of it. So in a way, I discovered that I was writing my own frustration. I made her try to tell the story in a happy-ending way, and she can't do it. Because I couldn't do it either. The voice of Poor Deer just felt like my editorial voice, saying, "No. You cannot make her have a happy ending. That would never happen in real life."

I feel it's bad books that have happy endings after somebody dies. I just watched this show on Netflix. It's . . . What's the name of it? *The Babysitter* part two, so it's a sequel to this cult horror story. I love bad movies, and there's this kid who feels responsible for the death of her parents in a car accident. So it's like my book. Right?

She's filled with grief and guilt, but all she needs is her new boyfriend to say, "Oh. That wasn't your fault." She's like, "Oh. Okay." I don't want to write that kind of book, and I kept hearing this voice and it incorporated itself in the book that I was writing that way, that I would write a scene, and think, "No. That's way too good. I can't end it that way. I have to write this other thing." So that iterative process that I had in my writing became almost the way the book wrote itself. I didn't really think about it ahead of time. It just sort of happened that way.

EM: Well, yeah. Those parts where you veer from reality into that alternate universe that Margaret wishes for really endear us to Margaret, make us feel for her all the more.

CO: I want to say one more thing about that, which is sort of there for me alone and maybe not anything that anyone else would notice. But I actually believe there's no path through this book to the end unless you believe something contradictory, that you have to believe two things at once to get to the ending. I don't think it's obvious when you're reading that you're going that way, but I really wanted to write it that way, that you have to make a leap of faith yourself. This character needs to make a leap of faith and believe in impossible things almost to be able to forgive herself.

So that's written into the story, that she actually learns things and takes advantage of what she learns in these parts that aren't true that she writes. I don't think it . . . So far, the feedback I get is that it's not annoying, that every once in a while, this Poor Deer interrupts, says, "You're not telling the truth here. You get back on track, please." Because it'll go there, where it takes a while for you to catch on that maybe this isn't exactly the truth, that she's fabricating again. Then, she gets interrupted. Every time something good started to happen, I said, "No. This isn't really happening."

EM: But there are wonderful moments. Near the end of the book, when Margaret is a teenager and she's hanging out with a mother and daughter who have fallen on hard times, she and the daughter go down to the river to look at frogs, and there's this beautiful moment when she feels happy and full of wonder. And then it fizzles away, so true to life. Magical, then suddenly, gone.

CO: Yeah. The part you're referring to is one of my favorite parts of the book, too. What I was thinking was, "Well, how do you get over things?" What I came up with for myself is we get to live in this beautiful world, and one of the things that saves this girl and brings her back to feeling like she has value is that the world she lives in is so beautiful. She really connects with nature, and with the trees, and with wild animals, and the sky. She's very observant, and she smells things. She feels things, and after a while, it overwhelms her. It's like, "You get to breathe another day. You are here. It's time for you to recognize that you're alive, and it's great." So that's one of her redemptive, or maybe her main way of moving forward.

EM: I've already mentioned a few of the great characters in this novel, but we can't forget poor Aunt Dolly and what happens to her, and horrible Herb Grubb, and terrible Sam Snickers . . .

CO: I have fun naming these guys, too. My favorite is Mr. Blunt, though.

In the end, it's all about storytelling and the power of narrative to shape our memories. So we have this thing that really happened, and then we have our way of explaining it that might evolve over years, where it becomes a completely different memory because of the stories. I actually stopped writing memoir because I wrote some things about real experiences and about my family. Then, I'd hear my family members talking about this event the way I'd written it, but it wasn't exactly the way they would've remembered it. So it's really powerful, the words we use, and one of the challenges I set for myself was to make this child have a limited number of books that are available to her, one of them being a compendium of fairy tales, what I call a compendium, even though it's not exactly the right word. I like the sound of it.

So she's always reading these Hans Christian Andersen tales. Her stories are really patterned, and the rhythm of the sentences are like those stories, which are very harsh. But they sort of have a happy ending. It's like, "Oh. Yeah. The little match girl dies, but she gets to go to heaven, so it's okay." That's her storytelling style, because that's all she knows. So that was fun, too, because I like those stories. I like the sound of them.

Actually, I think I write that way. It's really hard to tell how you write, but I think what fairy tales do is they compress, and I think I write that way, I don't use a lot of words. I just try to tell things. That's the best I could do to explain how to write.

Elizabeth McKenzie's novel *The Dog of the North* (Penguin Press, 2023) was a *New York Times* Editors' Choice and is a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in fiction. Her novel *The Portable Veblen* (Penguin Press, 2016) was longlisted for the National Book Award for Fiction, was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, and received the California Book Award. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Tin House*, and others. McKenzie is the managing editor of *Catamaran Literary Reader*.