BOOK WORLD

POETRY

Elizabeth Lund

Perennial

Kelly Forsythe's startling debut, "Perennial" (Coffee House), asks two timely, important questions: What leads to mass school shootings? And how do survivors deal with the violence afterward? The book, which tells the story of the Columbine High School massacre of 1999, opens with this understated answer: "It started with two births/ as quiet as pinpricks/ two translucent ripples/ in the Colorado River." Those lines set the tone for the poems that follow, told from the perspective of students, the shooters and a young speaker, who attended a school thousands of miles away. Forsythe, who drew on historical documents, brilliantly uses details that are subtle but telling to convey the chaos and horror of the event. As the poem "Witness" explains: "The gun is pointed/ beneath the table/ & you said *race*/ & I heard *vein*/ & no one made any /sound at all. They were coming/ the whole time." Forsythe brings the same careful attention to the reactions of the students after the shooting, which killed 13 and injured more than 20 others before the gunmen killed themselves. "Perennial" adeptly captures the complexity of the subject and reminds readers how difficult it is to understand and overcome such events, even decades later.

The Carrying

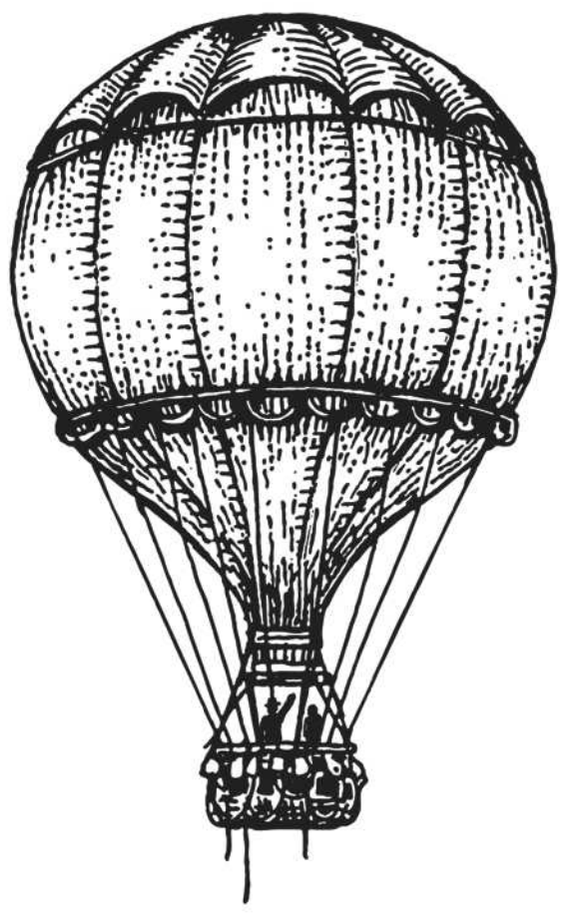
"The Carrying" (Milkweed) is Ada Limón's fifth and best book. In these exquisite poems, Limón recalls some of the experiences and influences that have shaped her perceptions and recent writing. Among them are the natural world and lifelong physical challenges, as well as the struggle to have a child and to understand her father, who has Alzheimer's. As the poem "Dead Stars" explains, "Out here, there's a bowing even the trees are doing./ Winter's icy hand at the back of all of us./ Black bark, slick yellow leaves, a kind of stillness that feel/ so mute it's almost in another year./ I am a hearth of spiders these days: a nest of trying." A desire for connection runs throughout the work, as does the constant tension created by the gap between how life could be and how it really is. Limón, who was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award and the National Book Award in 2015, is always a careful witness, accurately recording the moment rather than trying to transcend it. That leads to achingly graceful lines at times and to blunt insights at others, as when the speaker tackles social ills and inequities. Evocative dreams and pivotal memories help make this collection a powerful example of how to carry the things that define us without being broken by them.

If You Have to Go

To convey her overwhelming sense of loss about the dissolution of her marriage, Katie Ford presents a strange, almost fairy-tale realm in the collection "If You Have to Go" (Graywolf). At first, the grief feels profoundly physical — "I ask my body for another house" but "the body worsens under the extremity of the request." Yet as the narrative unfolds, in 39 sonnets, readers are led through a kingdom that includes a cold, distant lord, beasts of burden and multiple rooms for those who are stuck there. This landscape allows the speaker to slowly work through her feelings — from despondency ("I'd rather starve than eat alone the bread of heaven") to equanimity ("Yet, lighting candles — / it's how I went on"). The journey also serves as a quest of sorts as her shattered sense of self slowly begins to mend. A final section broadens these mediations and opens the door to "that which halts us/ to begin, once again, again."

bookworld@washpost.com

Elizabeth Lund reviews poetry every month for The Washington Post.



Author's latest novel reaches new heights

BOOK WORLD FROM C1

yan's novel. Freed from the daily responsibility and, he imagines, the moral culpability of running the family business, Titch has devoted himself to science. His latest project is a lighter-than-air contraption he calls "a Cloud-cutter," and, fortuitously, Wash is exactly the right weight to provide additional ballast to test the balloon's viability. A partnership, of sorts, is born.

Wash's wide-eyed adolescence gives way to hard-won wisdom to produce a narrative voice that's tinged with equal parts wonder and sorrow. In the early weeks of his apprenticeship, he's baffled by his new master's kindness. "What an odd man this was," Wash says. "He smiled, and the strangeness of that smile, its lack of malice, left me confused." He braces himself for some flash of violence or sexual abuse, but Titch remains solicitous and encouraging. He even praises the boy's artistic talent and introduces him to the study of nature.

But this is the early 19th century in one of the most brutal regions of the world: No matter how high Wash and Titch float, their relationship remains freighted with complications that they might ignore but can't possibly escape. And it's those brittle tensions between the privileged and the powerless that Edugyan explores so elegantly in "Washington Black."

When a crisis strikes Titch's family, Wash finds himself caught in an ugly conflict between the brothers who control his fate. Titch uses the Cloud-cutter to steal Wash away from the plantation, and the novel, too, takes flight — first toward "the great, impossible America" and then around the world, to places a black boy from Barbados could not have imagined, from the "great, echoing domes of snow" in the Arctic to the baked streets of Morocco. Pursued by a relentless slave-catcher, Wash and his protector grow together as friends and outlaws. But Wash never loses sight of the fact that he is free only so long as he remains bound to Titch, while Titch retains the option of casting off this hazard at any time.

What really motivates this curious white man — affection, obligation, contrition? For Titch, is Wash simply "something to be used to further his own crusade, his own sense of goodness"? Edugyan won't tolerate any easy answers to that conundrum as she draws us into the murky crosscurrents of racism, empathy, liberal guilt and self-righteousness. Fleeing around the world, Wash catches chilling indications of how conflicted Titch is. The institution that shattered Wash's life has fractured Titch's mind, too. "Washington Black" doesn't suggest that slave and master suffer equally, of course, but it raises provocative questions about the way privilege poisons even those who benefit from it.

There's a touch of Colson Whitehead's "Underground Railroad" here, both in the story's propulsive movement and its touches of surrealism. But in "Washington Black," the wonders are not so much fantastical and ahistorical as technological and natural. Titch introduces Wash to a whole spectrum of discoveries and inventions that are transforming human knowledge and commerce, from early forms of scuba diving to miraculous ways of recording images. "I had seen enough strangeness," the boy says, "to understand the world was unfathomable."

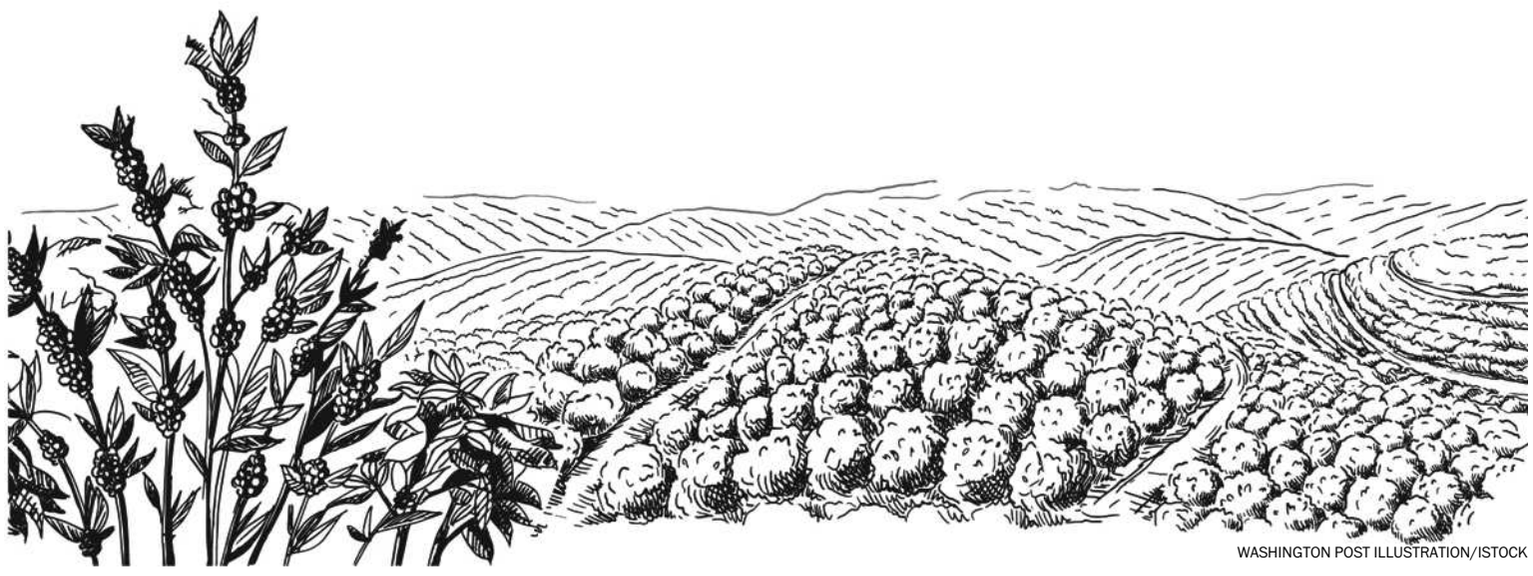
But most marvelous of all are the marine creatures that capture his imagination and his artistic eye. What is more unearthly than the bodies of jellyfish "in a furnace of colour" or the mercurial limbs of the octopus? As a brilliant black man in a ferocious white culture, Wash comes to see himself as one of these exotic marine animals, thriving only in the most precarious conditions, wondering if he could create a refuge for them or himself.

"There could be no belonging for a creature such as myself, anywhere," Wash says, a " black boy with a scientific turn of mind and a talent on canvas, running, always running, from the dimmest of shadows." But that's hardly the final word in this thoughtful and terrifically exciting adventure. Discover what the rest of the world already knows: Edugyan is a magical writer.

ron.charles@washpost.com

Ron Charles writes about books for The Washington Post and hosts TotallyHipVideoBookReview.com.

On Sept. 20 at 7 p.m., Esi Edugyan will be at Politics and Prose at Union Market, 1270 Fifth St. NE.



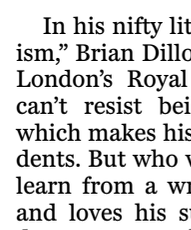
WASHINGTON POST ILLUSTRATION/ISTOCK

A new respect for the essay

BY SIBBIE O'SULLIVAN

In his nifty little book, "Essayism," Brian Dillon, a professor at London's Royal College of Art, can't resist being the teacher, which makes his readers the students. But who wouldn't want to learn from a writer who knows and loves his subject? So, children, stop squirming and pay attention, because anyone who reads Lester Bangs's manic essays about rock music as an antidote to disabling depression has something to tell us. Bangs is one of the many writers Dillon discusses in this examination of a form of writing that can embrace any subject, style, century or personal disposition yet easily escapes the constraints of each. The essay is a trying, slippery fellow.

It's this slipperiness that keeps us reading through a series of erudite chapters with headings such as "On Vulnerability," "On Talking to Yourself" and "On Melancholy." In these brief chapters about specific subjects and authors, Dillon conveys how expansive yet interior essays can be. There are also five chapters "On Consolation," which describe Dillon's life struggles and prove one of his main arguments: that the personal essay is the prime expressive mode for the modern self. Dillon is not shy about telling us how essays saved his life.



Brian Dillon

ESSAYISM
On Form, Feeling, and Nonfiction
By Brian Dillon.
176 pp. $15.95.

Nor is he shy about discussing his favorite literary style: modernist experimental and its exponents. Thus William Gass's "On Being Blue" is cited along with works by Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf. But other writers have their day, too: Elizabeth Hardwick, whose sly punctuation sends Dillon into raptures; Susan Sontag; the 17th-century masters Robert Burton and Sir Thomas Browne; and, of course, Bangs, who earns praise for his "sentimental swagger."

The overly long chapters on Cyril Connolly, a Brit whose book "The Unquiet Grave" was a hit in the 1940s, and the early German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel show Dillon in full professor mode. These examples might interest his students in London, but American readers may lose interest and wonder why Henry David Thoreau, Mary Karr, James Baldwin and Edward Hoagland have been overlooked. But this is a quibble, for even in chapters that task us, something useful — even startling — appears. I won't be looking up Schlegel anytime soon, but I now know that "text" comes from the Latin "textum," which means web. Slippery and sticky.

"Essayism" takes a form of prose writing that predates the Renaissance and makes it exciting through chapters short enough to read on your Metro trip home. Dillon's U.S. publisher, New York Review Books, has jazzed up the cover and added a subtitle: "On Form, Feeling, and Nonfiction." But "Essayism's" true subject is life and how words can make it worth living, and reading about.

Brian Dillon will be discussing his book at Politics and Prose on Sept. 30 at 3 p.m.

bookworld@washpost.com

Sibbie O'Sullivan, a former teacher in the Honors College at the University of Maryland, has recently completed a memoir on how the Beatles have influenced her life.

Literary Calendar

FRIDAY | 7 P.M. Jose Antonio Vargas will discuss "Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen" with **Jonathan Capehart** at Politics and Prose at the Wharf, 70 District Sq. SW. 202-364-1919.