

## Ideas, art, and the future of nature.

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a lovely, spare execution, as in this passage of Pyle's journey through the Columbia Gorge: "There, in a clearing off Oak Lake Road, we found what we'd come for: a two-banded checkered-skipper, spreading its wings in a nettle patch. Its clean, ivory-on-charcoal speckled pattern stood out sharply at rest, unlike its buzzy gray blur in flight." Everything happens in this book, and nothing happens at all, like the long, beautiful monotony of everyday life.

*Mariposa Road* is, in the quietest way, a book about Pyle's personal life. He writes about his tooth trouble, how he came to a lifelong study of butterflies, and most notably, about his wife Thea's ongoing battle with cancer. This latter story deserves more attention, and might have helped drive the narrative, but Pyle chooses to lift the veil only a little. Thea is one of the more compelling people in the book, and when she joins Pyle in Florida, his prose takes on a brighter and crisper energy so that you come to realize

this: these two are still deeply in love. She finds a rare blue-colored green tree frog, prompting Pyle to exclaim, "She always spots the best stuff." It's too bad Thea could not have accompanied Pyle for the entire year.

The book is long and includes an appendix but not an index, which would be helpful to readers using it as a resource. Though Pyle explains his reasons for not including photographs of the butterflies he encounters, readers would benefit from such a visual feast. Still, this book belongs in our hands and on our shelves in the company of other artful records of our place. Perhaps in a hundred years we'll still be reading *Mariposa Road* for a glimpse of what we've lost, or better, of how far we've come in recovering our wild places. For now, read this book not to penetrate deeply, but to skip lightly from place to place down North America's highways and backwoods roads in search of those beautiful fliers. You'll arrive. You'll look to see. You'll see and be off again, the country rolling by in a kaleidoscope of winged colors and fragments and shards of light.

—Kurt Caswell

## The Wilding

BY BENJAMIN PERCY  
*Graywolf Press, 2010. \$23, 272 pages.*

IN BENJAMIN PERCY'S menacing debut novel, central Oregon becomes a proving ground for men tested to their limits. Scheming businessmen in Bend, Oregon, have earmarked nearby Echo Canyon in the Ochocos Mountains for development, planning to raise vacationland from pristine wilderness. But before the paving and clearcutting begins, Justin Caves and his curious, "[d]elicate" son, Graham, agree to accompany the family's ornery patriarch,

Paul, on one final hunting and camping trip. "This little guy could use some roughness about him," Paul says of Graham, hoping a visit to Echo Canyon will toughen up his grandson, a boy who "prefers books to BB guns."

Paul is a grumpy codger, with a voice "like a distant shout of thunder," and self-absorbed to the point of recklessness. Paul believes Justin has gone soft over the years and doesn't want the same to happen to his grandson. So Paul bullies his family toward "the pitted, unscalable walls of the canyon," pushing them headlong toward a whopping series of wilderness obstacles. And let's count these obstacles, because they are numerous. A rattler appears inside the tent. At night alarming sounds come from the forest. And there have been rumors about grizzlies migrating southward into Oregon. The hunters stumble upon one bad omen after another, including a crazed yokel who despises outsiders.

Percy piles on the threats. It's as though he's stacking a cord of wood atop his characters' shoulders to see whether or not they'll buckle. At times this dark territory can feel forced, but through these pressures Percy ushers his men toward an inevitable crossroads where they must face deep-seated fears. Along the way he does a remarkable job showing the bonds, battles, and emotional fallout between fathers and sons.

Just as Percy demonstrates how men manage danger, he's equally adept at revealing the odd ways men also create it.

Left behind at home is Justin's wife, Linda, who is bored in her marriage and desperate for something—or someone—new. Enter Brian, the novel's most fascinating character. A former Marine, Brian returned from Iraq



with PTSD and a "hole in his skull" from a roadside bomb. When Linda casually flirts with him, an unnerving fire ignites inside Brian. Uncomfortable in the civilized world, Brian weaves a hair suit from animal furs and slinks around, stalking Linda like a predator hunting its prey. These are the book's strangest sections, the most precarious and thrilling, because Percy's rendering of their psychological dance is masterful.

Percy switches viewpoints often, giving his characters their own episodic chapters. He bookmarks the story with a prologue and an epilogue, bundling loose ties into a neat little bow, but skipping the messy business of repairing a marriage. Still, Percy's main concern isn't domestic; it's elemental, the stuff of men versus mountains.

—Don Waters

## In the Empire of Ice

BY GRETEL EHRLICH  
*National Geographic Books, 2010. \$28, 320 pages.*

GRETEL EHRLICH'S newest work, *In the Empire of Ice: Encounters in a Changing Landscape*, is about two things: genocide—abuse of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic; and terricide—abuse of the planet for progress and profit. Climate change is melting the world out from

under the ice-adapted people who have lived with genius and elegance at the top of the world for ten thousand years without overdepleting a single resource.

This isn't Ehrlich's first encounter with ice. *This Cold Heaven* chronicles seven seasons spent with subsistence hunters in Greenland, and *The Future of Ice* charts a six-month journey following winter from

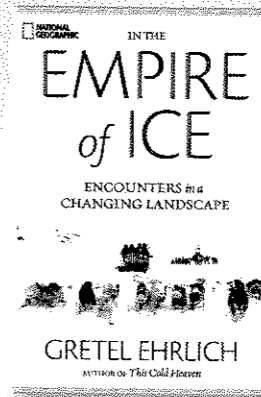
Tierra Del Fuego to the top of the Spitsbergen archipelago, and back to her one-room cabin in Wyoming.

*In the Empire of Ice* takes her on a year-long circumpolar trek, funded by the National Geographic Expeditions Council. Her narrative, a mix of scientific fact, informal diary, interview, lyrical description of place, and anger-and-despair-tinged disquisition, begins in the village of Wales along the Bering Strait in Alaska. "You're here about global warming?" says matter-of-fact snowmobile driver Ronnie upon dropping Erlich and her guide, Joe, off at their temporary lodgings. "We've got it."

Ronnie and others, from hunters to political activists and shamans, tell stories of melting ice, soggy permafrost, weird weather, dragonflies and mosquitoes where there once were none. They talk about hotter summers, eroding coastline, and less access to polar bear, walrus, whale, seal, and other animals that have traditionally provided Arctic peoples with everything they needed to survive—food, clothing, shelter, tools, and transportation.

Along with those stories are tales of cultural fallout from a way of life changing so fast, said one Greenlander, "we are in a panic." Poverty, pollution, rising crime, depression, poor nutrition, erosion of indigenous concepts of space, time, community, and human connection to the animal/spirit world, are just some of the secondary impacts of climate change that Ehrlich records.

From the Bering Strait, Ehrlich travels to Siberia, where she roams the tundra with Komi reindeer herders, then on to Nunavut in Arctic Canada, and finally to Greenland, where she revisits her old friends from previous journeys. The story is the same all across the Arctic. The Empire of Ice is melting.



**BIRD WATCHING**  
Architectural Press, 2010. \$24.95. A new book of photographs for birdwatchers. Paul McCartney's new book of photographs actually include any birds anyway. In search of a "natural" experience, Paul placed fake birds in his photographs, not to lead us to ask ourselves what we are looking for in nature, but to show us how far we are willing to go for an ideal experience of the interaction between nature and art, and the result is fascinating.

