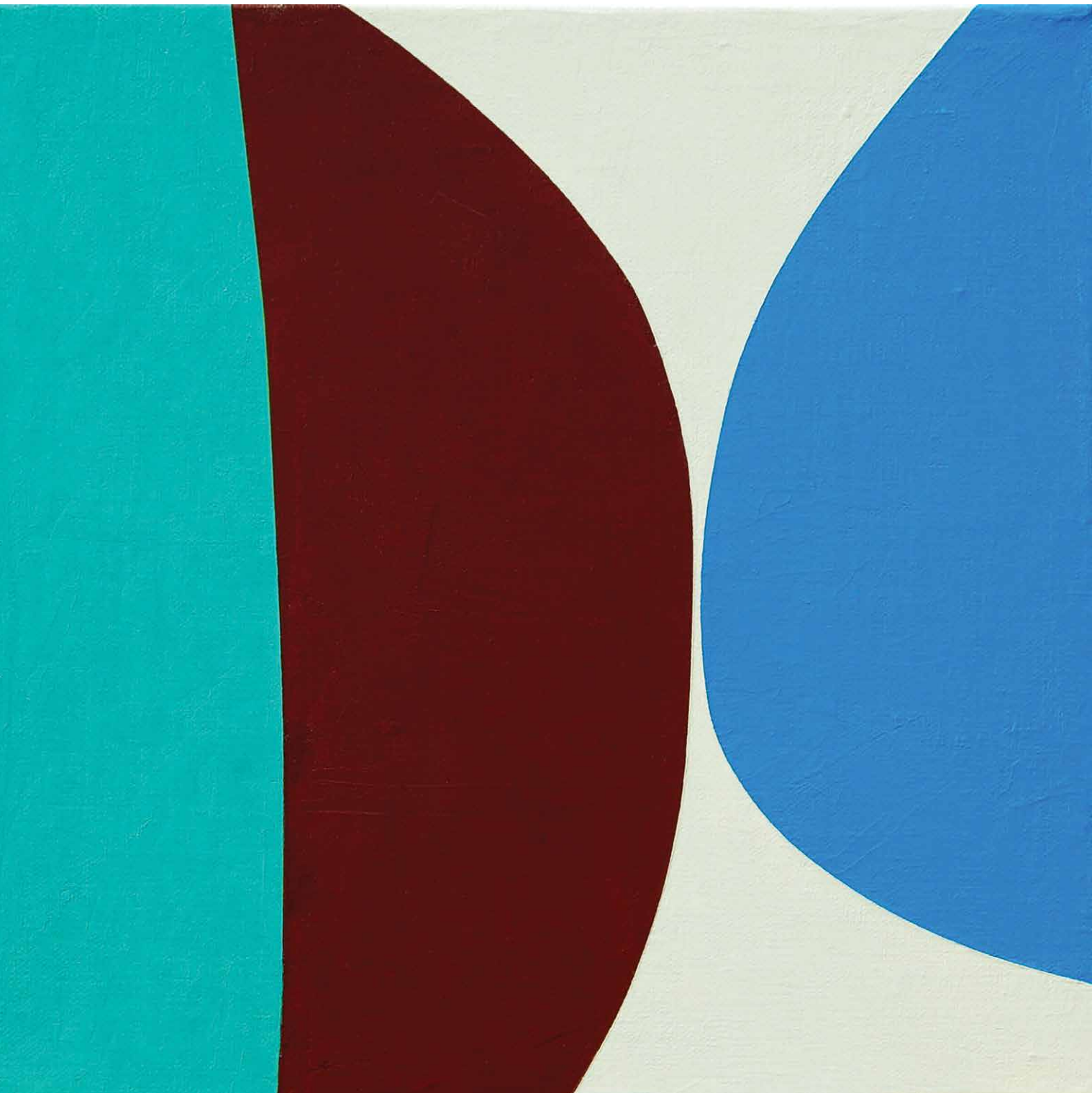


JILL KELLER PETERS

A Conversation, 2021
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12 x 1.5 in.



COURTESY ANDRA NORRIS GALLERY

DAN WHITE

An Interview with Jonathan Franzen

Jonathan Franzen is the author of six novels, most recently *Crossroads* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021) and *Purity* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), and five works of nonfiction, including *The Discomfort Zone* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), *Farther Away* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), and *The End of the End of the Earth* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). Among his honors are the National Book Award, the James Tait Black Prize, the Heartland Prize, the Welt Literature Prize, the Budapest Grand Prize, and the first Carlos Fuentes Medal, from the Guadalajara International Book Fair.

The first time I met Jonathan Franzen, he was standing on a rocky overlook near the Pacific Ocean. He was tagging along on an ocean-side hike led by nature writer Charles Hood at Wilder Ranch State Park. The side trip was part of the Catamaran Writing Conference. Franzen, an obsessive bird-watcher and a friend of Hood's, stood by with binoculars. "White-tailed kite, anyone?" he called out, but most of the other hikers could not hear him over the wind. I find it fitting that I met Franzen at a cliff face. His new book, *Crossroads* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), has characters on the edge of a precipice. Franzen has a way of making us care about flawed people, giving us hope that members of the Hildebrandt family will not let weaknesses take them down, while filling us with questions. Will pastor Russ Hildebrandt, the family patriarch, overcome his potentially failing marriage and career-wrecking crush on an attractive widowed parishioner? Will Perry, Russ's brilliant, tormented son, succumb to his belief that he is damned—a view he supports by dealing drugs to his fellow high school students? This winter, Franzen invited me to his Santa Cruz, California, home where we talked about the consuming process of bringing such characters to life. On a patio overlooking a forest preserve, he also talked about his abandonment of satire, why he got sick of New York, how aging and life in the Central Coast changed his outlook, and why he still loathes social media.

* * *

DAN WHITE: When we were walking on the cliffs this summer at the Catamaran Writing Conference's nature walk with Charles Hood at Wilder Ranch in Santa Cruz, it's the first time I properly met you. I was just thinking about how much your epicenter has shifted to Santa Cruz from New York. Because earlier in your writing career you were living in Manhattan, and then you began splitting your time between Manhattan and Boulder Creek [in Santa Cruz County]. But four years ago, you sold that apartment [in Manhattan] and now you're a full-time Santa Cruz person. I was just thinking what a dramatic shift that is. Because your social, intellectual nexus has shifted, also your sense of weather and seasons. You don't have to shove people in the subway anymore. I think of all the daily occurrences that can make their way into any work of art, and I just want to know how

relocating here permanently has affected your writing in your day-to-day life.

JONATHAN FRANZEN: Now that I'm a California resident and the statute of limitations protects me from the tax authorities, I can safely talk about how much I've written in California. I did write much of *The Corrections* in New York, but key chapters were written in Santa Cruz. I started out working in a carrel at McHenry Library, on the UCSC campus, and then I discovered that if you got there at ten minutes to nine and ran ahead of the people without homes, you could get one of the study rooms on the fourth floor. There was also a memorable month in a very cheap room at Jaye's Timberlane Lodge, in Ben Lomond, writing the Gary chapter of *The Corrections*. *Freedom* was mostly written here in Santa Cruz. *Purity* was entirely written here. *The Kraus Project*, two volumes of essays, the screenwriting work I did for the *Purity* show that didn't happen—that was all done out here. I've done most of my best writing in California.

And this is contrary to what I would've expected. I thought California was where you went to sit in a hot tub and drink your big red wine and kind of haze out. Once you moved to California, it was all over for you as an artist. And it's weirdly been precisely the opposite from the beginning.

I was completely stuck with *The Corrections* when I met Kathy [Chetkovich] and started coming to Santa Cruz to see her, in 1998. She and her cabin in Boulder Creek, the liberation of not being in New York, brought the happiness that got me going on that book. I've only been a full-time resident for six years, but it's not inaccurate to say I've been a California writer for most of my life now.

The thing I miss most about New York is the subway. You sit down, you open a book, and twenty-five minutes later you're at your destination. I miss that. *KPIG* is some consolation while I'm driving, but it's not the same. I'm not an audiobook guy. Even if I were, it would be weird to be listening to an audiobook for three minutes, driving to New Leaf [Community Market] or something.

But overall, at a certain point, I was just done with New York. When I first got there, in the nineties, I'd go to parties to see who I could meet. I might meet an editor and strike up a conversation. That could be useful! I might meet somebody who could be my girlfriend. I might find a new

friend. Twenty years later, it was the opposite. I'd go to party or an event, and everyone would want something from me, while I didn't need anything from anybody.

DW: Is there a difference between being an author in New York City and being a writer living out here in Santa Cruz?

JF: New York's a big pond. At every party, you can see who's walking in awash in endorphins and who is starved for attention, and there's definitely a hierarchy. Out here, the writing community feels more like a real community, with people at different levels of achievement sharing work with each other, being in writing groups together. It's just nicer.

DW: And you are involved in many local events here in Santa Cruz. You participated in a wonderful event recently when you appeared on stage with Charles Hood, who is a wonderfully talented but not super well-known nature writer from Southern California, and you interviewed him. You've given a lot of low-key talks. You did something at the local Porter Library that also included, like, an open mic thing.

In New York, when I was living there—I lived there for several years—it seemed to me that there was much more of a focus on being seen and “how will this help me.” And so perhaps moving here also freed you up to just take part in some enjoyable but below-the-radar literary events because you want to connect with our community.

JF: I wouldn't say I'm a big community guy—I come from a prickly Swedish-American family. But, yes, if there's an interesting event, I like to participate. The Porter Library [has] such a cool series. The readings happen often enough that a lot of writers get featured, and I love the open mic, because it is truly a crapshoot. It's moving to be with people who want to read their work and with people who'll listen attentively.

The Charles Hood book launch event was great. Charles is a wonder. A force of nature. He's an extraordinarily good writer, and that's just one of his six major talents. The event was also hosted by *Catamaran*, which is a huge part of the literary culture in this town, so the whole thing was a no-brainer. I couldn't see who was in the

audience, because the seats were dark and everyone was masked. I only recognized Ray Daniels, because Ray has a striking hairstyle. Afterward, I was surprised to learn how many good friends had shown up. There was a hunger for people to do something live again, and in that little trough between Delta and Omicron we were able to do it.

DW: There was a sense of joy in the event. And since then, I've pushed that Charles Hood book on so many people. It's just such a great book.

JF: On top of Hood's skills as a writer, he's totally on target about nature and conservation. I wish that book a large audience.

DW: I love how he was trying to push you to join him to look for shrews or something at three in the morning.

JF: In the rain.

DW: In the rain. And the fact that he'd have the faith in you that you'd consider it. Do you have a bit more anonymity here than in New York perhaps?

JF: I don't know. Probably not. I mean, it doesn't happen often, but every couple weeks someone I don't know will stop me and say, “Hey, I like your work.” It did happen more often in New York, but there are two million people in Manhattan.

DW: Now, you finished *Crossroads* in a time of COVID. I think it was this four-month period after it started, I believe. Right? And during that period of time, you said in the previous interview that the pandemic wasn't a terrible time for you personally, because I mean, you could go to bed early, you could wake up early. No social commitments of any kind so you could do your work.

And it was pretty good for you creatively. What I want to know now is just . . . this thing has just dragged on and on and on. It just keeps seeming to reboot in a different form. Now we've got Omicron. I just want to know how you're holding up, if it's starting to wear on you a bit, perhaps if your relationship to the plague has shifted somewhat.

JF: I'm the last person in the world who can complain about the pandemic. The toll on the country, the toll on people who are dealing with kids at home who should be in school, the people who were already working two jobs and are now are working two jobs with constant exposure—I get why so many people are frustrated and angry and impatient. Meanwhile Kathy and I don't have work-places. We don't have children. We're privileged to live on the West Side, where infection rates are lower. During Omicron, we've seen a couple of pairs of friends, and we can all afford to do home tests before we get together.

What applied during the lockdown still applies to some extent. We're definitely on an earlier schedule, and I love going up to my office on campus before the sun comes up. It just gets the day off to a better start.

DW: This is me jumping ahead because you talked about your office. You report to work there almost every day, I understand. You're up there.

JF: In some fashion. Yeah.

DW: I read this wonderful description, I think it was in the *London Review of Books*, by Julian Barnes. He was talking about Flaubert's work. He said, “He's famous for his meticulousness, his long preparations, his daily battle with words, his corrections, his bellowing out of the text to ensure that it had the right weight and sound.” I just want to know what goes on in that study every day. Is it a battle of words that never ends? Is it constant correction? How much of it is you writing out the new novels, and how much is sort of staging it out and planning and thinking about it?

JF: The novels are like icebergs—a large proportion of the work is invisible to the eye. The writing is the fun part and it's tragically infrequent. I did get to spend twenty-six months, minus maybe two months of interruptions, writing *Crossroads*. Before that, in some fashion or other, there were two and a half years of trying to figure it out. And the figuring out is awful.

Right now I'm trying to figure out a sequel to that book. I have nothing but problems, huge areas of darkness. Some days, I'll wake up with some clear thought, and I'll

get up and go to the office and write down that thought, which might lead to a few other thoughts. That takes about an hour. I wait another hour to see if there are any more thoughts, and almost always there aren't. And that's my workday, and it kind of sucks, because I've essentially not budged.

And this goes on for years. I can only do it for three months at a time before I have to do something else, because it's so crazy-making to struggle with the same problems day after day. It's hard to even describe what that work is. You could call it character development, but it's really a more complicated nexus of character, tone, and the shape of book. The goal is to determine, in a single sentence, what each character's problem is for the duration of the book.

It would seem to be simple, but it's not simple. In the past, I used to do a lot more false starts. I'd get an idea and I'd write five pages, or ten pages, or in some cases a hundred pages, and then realize that I'm forcing it. That this is not working—I don't like it. Or I don't like it *enough*. Nowadays, instead of forcing it, I do a lot of note-taking, which functions as a kind of self-analysis. I look into myself and try to find myself in relation to the project, try to investigate uninvestigated parts of myself and my history in relation to the project. But I'm doing it with symbolic objects—that nexus of stuff I mentioned.

DW: What gets you through that struggle? Because that sounds like an oppressive situation to be dealing with in the long term.

JF: Well, fortunately, it doesn't take all day. I do work seven days a week, but it's only a few hours in the morning and then I can go and do my email, go to the gym, play tennis, keep up with the house. It's mostly the promise of being in the happy state of writing that keeps me going. Once I can figure it all out, I'll be allowed to be in that happy state again.

DW: So that's the joyful part, when you're actually getting the sentences down?

JF: Joy is not the right word. My idea of happiness is partly Aristotelian—that it consists of doing what you were meant to do—but it's also partly that you can seldom speak, in

the moment, of being happy. Happiness is retrospective. In the twenty-six months of work on *Crossroads*, I was oppressed every day by the problems I hadn't solved.

When I'm figuring out a book, I'm not trying to answer every question, I'm just trying to set it up so that I know approximately where I'm going. The writing process is then the adventure of solving problem after problem, often in unexpected ways. It's not like I'm a happy guy when I'm in hour four of trying to make myself finally write one short paragraph for the day. That's not anybody's idea of a joyful state. I finally, through clenched teeth, I finally write one paragraph, so that I won't have done nothing. Which—ugh. Retrospectively, though, I can see that it was a great twenty-six months, because I knew I had a job. Every morning, when I went to work on the book, I knew who I was in the world and why I was here.

DW: And it must be very important to kind of declare those moments to yourself, so you have the fortitude to go on for the next time.

JF: Yeah. I have a lot of skills after forty years of being a novelist, and they just sit there unexercised, month after month. It's super frustrating. But when you finally get to exercise them and take a slack sentence and make it a sentence that pops, it's easy, I'm skilled at it. It's pleasurable to return in the morning to the paragraph I managed to squeeze out in rough form the day before and apply those skills to it, find what's really supposed to be in it, vary the sentence structure, eliminate every conceivable extra word, and have it emerge as, "Okay. That's basically done." I might make further adjustments to it later, but I've produced something that's going to be there tomorrow—that's always going to be there. The words themselves are the happy state.

DW: One thing I always appreciate about your work is you seem to have this instinctual sense of where the reader's attention is going to go and where the reader's attention might flag. There'll be a big question that you'll stage in a book. I think for *Crossroads*, the big question is "Is it even possible to be good? How to be good? Is it possibly good?"

And then you'll kind of tuck that question into these branching subplots. Will Clem get sent to Vietnam for

standing his principles? Will Russ prevail over temptation? Will Perry straighten himself out before something horrible happens?

There's always the fate of at least one character hanging in the air. You've got me nervous the whole time, so I can't stop reading. It feels organic, but I'm sure of course you've got to choreograph that very tightly to pull that off. How much of that do you have to figure out in advance before you can really get to writing, or how much do you sort of stage out in advance before the real composition happens?

JF: The overarching question is seldom useful. Those questions you asked, the subplot questions, are what I'm working on. If I have five main characters, and if I can figure out what the problem is for two or three of them, that's enough to start. In the case of *Crossroads*, I couldn't see further the first two chapters, but writing them gave me courage to persist. I could stop for two months and try to figure out what was up with Becky. I could stop again and figure out what was up with Marion.

The work of preparation, the hidden part of the iceberg, isn't about planning the whole thing out. It's about finding the right problem for each of the characters. You just summarized three of them in three sentences. Those three sentences took me about nine months of work to come up with.

DW: Which is hard, and I appreciate that. Another thing that is really striking to me is how Santa Cruz has figured into your work. *Purity* was partly set in Santa Cruz County. And maybe I'm wrong about this, but it just seemed to me that there are some Santa Cruz aspects in *Crossroads*. I know that in the last few years Santa Cruz has been transformed into "Silicon Beach" and it's changed a lot, it's not quite the same, but it seems to me that for years and years Santa Cruz culture seemed to be just mired in the same period you're writing about, the early seventies. For a while Santa Cruz seemed like an early-seventies theme park.

JF: I sensed that when I came here, and I therefore immediately felt at home, because I am a seventies guy. Which, again, I had the wrong idea of California, but it turned out that the parts of the seventies I liked so much were completely saturating Santa Cruz when I came here.

It's weird that it took me so long to write about out my favorite time, but it's why *Crossroads* turned into the book it did. It was only supposed to be the first section of the novel I was planning. Then, when I started writing, I realized, "Holy cow, I've never written fiction about this era. And boy do I have a lot to say." There may be some hidden connection between moving to Santa Cruz full-time and finally writing about that era.

DW: I figured as much because I've lived here in Santa Cruz for a while and I know that quasireligious social groups, folk music, kin groups that are almost like families, and this burning obsession with authenticity are all very Santa Cruz. Kresge College at UCSC was formed as a kin group. And what really got me was the Rick Ambrose part where he says, "Are you willing to leave passive complicity behind you? . . . Do you have the guts to risk the active witnessing of a real relationship?" How many times have I had that conversation in Santa Cruz? Over and over. So I just wondered, is it possible that that Santa Cruz stuff sort of wormed its way really in forcefully into this one?

JF: No. I came by that in my youth on my own.

DW: I'm not the first person who said this, but there's this real lack of judgment, lack of irony or making fun of the characters. Well, that also reminds me of the earnestness and naïveté of Santa Cruz. But I remember being just especially stunned by that moment in *Crossroads* when Becky, one of the Hildebrandt children, she had this awakening and you just let it stand—"God was pure goodness, and the goodness had been there all along." And you simply just embody what she's thinking and feeling, and there's no undercutting. You just lay it out there. And I just wanted to know how that reflects changes in you as a writer since, let's say, *The Corrections*, since your earlier work.

JF: I have now retired satire altogether. My first three novels were angry, satirical books, and Santa Cruz was part of why I let that go. Right around the year 2000, Kathy and I moved in together, I started spending more of my time in Santa Cruz, and I discovered birds. For the first time in my life, I relaxed. Or at least *relatively* relaxed, compared

to the previous twenty years. In effect, I woke up one day with a puzzled expression on my face and said, “Why was I so angry?”

But also, as I got deeper into a different kind of literature, when I found my way to writers like Alice Munro, I lost faith in my moral judgments. I came to feel that my judgments had gotten in the way of my characters having a complete life on the page—that I’d been trying to determine for the reader how they should be judged.

I’ve always had to love my characters to write them, but I think the nature of the love has deepened, particularly in this last book. This may be related to getting older. As you come closer to your own death, there can be a recognition that every other person is also living this very finite life, also approaching his or her own death, and it releases a kind of generalized compassion.

And that coincided with a formal change in the way I wanted to write fiction. I didn’t want a reader to be aware of the language, I wanted the language itself to disappear, the page to disappear. I wanted to try to quickly usher you into an experience where you’re not thinking about the author, not thinking about the page at all.

I’m not sure exactly why it is, but there’s a connection between this and a more transparent compassion for the characters. All I want to do now is inhabit them. And, while inhabiting them, render them in words on the page, in the hope that someone reading the words will reinhabit them.

DW: I do like the fact that happiness enters into it, that you’re kind of undercutting the stereotype of the miserable, oppressed writer who has to have turmoil to create.

JF: I’ve long been aware of my privilege, but in recent years, given the political conversation, especially around race in this country, I’ve become even more aware of it, and with that comes a responsibility not to complain and certainly not to feel sorry for myself.

DW: Now, we’ve talked a lot about the influence of Santa Cruz, which is great. The whole area has changed quite dramatically since you first started spending time here in ’98, and you’re now part of what they call the creative class of Santa Cruz. And this group is under a lot of financial pressure right now. There are lots of artists and writers

moving out. I just wanted to know if you could reflect on the changes in Santa Cruz, whether you’re troubled by those changes.

JF: This house was built, I think, in 1998, so it might be part of the change you’re describing, although new housing units of course are not what’s salient, the lack of housing is what’s salient. I saw something similar happen in New York. Up through the eighties, a lot of writers lived in Manhattan. I got a really cheap apartment there in 1994. But by the end of that decade, people were moving to Brooklyn because they couldn’t afford Manhattan prices. And this was okay, because Brooklyn’s part of New York City too. Cities remain vital to the extent that they attract young people, and cities remain culturally vital to the extent that they attract writers and artists.

I’m conscious that my own social community is by and large older. My younger friends are in their forties, in other words old enough to have worked out some livable situation here. But my friend Janet Fine, the wonderful artist of the East Side, lost her sweet house deal last year and had to move to a room above a garage. Janet is such a keystone of the Santa Cruz arts community. It’s terrible to think of her not being able to live here. But she’s old enough and flexible enough that she’s not going to leave.

I worry, though, about the vitality of Santa Cruz if people in their twenties can’t even think about settling here. Then we become something verging on a retirement community, with a university uneasily lodged in it, students paying \$1,200 a month for a shitty share. It’s not great. And, unfortunately, there’s a ton of demand. Even if you make a big push to develop affordable housing, it’s almost physically impossible to create enough housing quickly enough to satisfy the demand. Especially since, in the larger developments, only a portion of the units are set aside for people of modest incomes.

I’m not like, “Oh, Santa Cruz is such a treasure. It’s been in my life all my life, and I’m going to move heaven and earth to make sure it remains that place.” I’m not that person. Even if you are that person, there’s not that much you can do. At a certain point, you have to take the long view. Manhattan became a place I no longer recognized or wanted to live in in the space of my twenty-five years there, because the young people, young artists and writers

especially, had moved elsewhere. But this is the natural progression. I don’t know if there’s a way to plan your way out of it. Maybe Watsonville will become the happening place.

DW: It could be. It keeps getting pushed farther out.

JF: No place stays happening forever. Paris is a museum city. Rome is a museum city. London has become crazily unaffordable, even on the East End. We’re carried along by the stream of demographic shifts. You try to resist it as best you can, but I think, big picture, it’s just what happens. Old places calcify, and young people find new places.

DW: To shift focus for a little bit, I saw a memorable speech by you at UCSC a while ago and you were talking about hanging out online and updating social media. And this was when there weren’t a whole lot of people sort of pooh-poohing that, this was when it was just getting huge. And you said people could be engaged in civic discourse. They could read books. They could hang out with family and friends and create art instead of fiddling with their phones and adjusting social networking pages. And you I always think of your quote, “Your chance to remember and be a human being is right now.” Here we are in this COVID pandemic, where so much of the online world has really shifted online because of the pandemic. I was just wondering if your attitude toward the online realm has changed at all.

JF: No. I was an early critic and I remain a critic. I take a grim satisfaction in how much more apparent it’s become that these are super harmful platforms. What was funny about that speech was, it wasn’t a long speech, it’s like three pages, and I was putting in a word for actual engagement with other people, the adventure of real life, rather than retreat into the narcissistic renovation of your Facebook page. And I could see people all across the audience, the parents especially, bent over their phones, not listening to me.

DW: I mean, it might seem a little bit silly because every place with an internet hookup is potentially part of the noise, but there’s just so much noise about you online and Twitter, as you know. Do you feel a little bit more far

removed from that here, just because you’re far removed from kind of the media churn of New York City?

JF: I stopped reading about myself in October of 2001. I still hear about what’s written, secondhand, but I don’t engage with it. I figure it just comes with the territory. Selective quotation or outright dishonest paraphrasing is Twitter’s stock-in-trade. And, I’m sorry, but what percentage of the country is on Twitter? It’s actually a rather small percentage. I don’t think it’s even twenty-five. Fifteen percent of the country is in the hell of Twitter, and I think it’s its own punishment.

DW: I think so too. I was just wondering if when you’re working on new books, if you can feel kind of the influence of previous books that you’ve written kind of making their way in?

JF: I have a horror of repeating myself. I don’t want to write the same kind of book twice, which is why it takes so long to develop them. In the first and second and third attempts, I’m generally just doing something I’ve already done before. It takes a long time to get past these seemingly great ideas, which on closer examination closely resemble things I’ve already done before.

This applies even at the level of phrases. I now have a single searchable document with all five of my novels, which I can check to see if I’ve used a turn of phrase or an unusual word, because it’ll wake me up in the night. In the new thing I’m writing, somebody says, “Which—bit of an understatement.” It’s exactly how the character would sound, and it’s the right response to the line before. Then I woke up in the middle of the night and thought, “Shit, I’ve used that.” It sounded like something I’d done. As it turned out, I hadn’t.

DW: So, you’re free to use it.

JF: I also know my books well enough that I could remember situations where I *might* have used that line, and I checked those situations. Sure enough, the phrasing was different. To answer your question, it’s almost entirely negative how the previous books intrude. It all grows out of a deep resistance to repeating myself in any way.

DW: While you were answering that, I realized something that I completely neglected to ask about and that's your engagement with the natural world here in Santa Cruz. In the nature walk event with Charles Hood and the writers, what was so funny was you were basically like assistant bird spotter. And there you are on the cliff saying, "I see a white-tailed kite," and then you saw a golden eagle. And I just wanted to know how much of your work life do you kind of organize around nature excursions, around the bird-watching. I also want to know if you're still a compulsive lister, if you've gotten over that.

JF: I was very proud of spotting that very distant golden eagle and identifying it in bad light. Charles was leading a nature walk, so he had to be looking at the invasive plant species, small mammals, lizards. I appreciate those things, but I'm not very interested in them. I'm always only looking for birds when I'm outside, looking and listening for them. That has not changed.

The pattern used to be that I would work intensively on my writing for months and then reward myself with two weeks off to go birding somewhere. The pandemic has made that more difficult. I did get to Mexico in November. My life isn't organized around birds, but the organization of my life does have to include them.

In the first pandemic year, 2020, all I could manage was a couple of short car trips. Mostly I devoted myself to spending more time birding in Santa Cruz. I was listing, of course, trying to run up a much higher tally of species for a calendar year than I had before.

I exceeded my previous count by fifty species, which goes to show what you can do if you devote yourself to your local patch. I thought, "Maybe I can do even better in 2021!" But then January rolled around, and I had no appetite for repeating myself. I wanted to go somewhere else.

DW: As someone who's an outsider to the whole bird-watching thing, it almost seems from my perspective like a self-punishing thing to try to list and list and compare yourself to other bird-watchers. In a sense, do you think maybe when you're doing that, you're kind of offloading some of the pressure that has built up when you're composing, when you're dreaming of characters? Is it sort of a displacement of one obsession onto another? Am I overthinking it?

JF: Writing for me is very much an obsession. You're in an obsessive state, certainly, when you're deep in a novel. It's present twenty-four hours a day, even when you're sleeping. Just absolutely always in your head. There's a whole lot to keep in your head, really quite a large amount of data, and the only way to keep it in your head is to constantly refresh it, which is pretty much the definition of an obsessive state. Obviously, I have obsessive tendencies, or I couldn't do that. And typically obsession is paired with compulsion. Which, yeah, I'm a little more compulsive than the next person. I have some OCD-ish tendencies.

But I'm not competing with anyone when I'm bird listing. The list is just part of the game. I do it for the same reason that, when I'm playing tennis with a friend, we keep score. It's just a way of knowing how you're doing. And also, okay, if I'm down 6-5, it really helps to know that if I lose this game, I've lost the set. If it's December 30 and I've seen 174 species in Santa Cruz County in 2021, I know I need one more for a nice round 175.

And that will get me out the door. Once I'm outside, I'm enjoying it. I'm not thinking about numbers. I'm just happy to be out. But I might not have gone out if I hadn't been trying to get that last species for the year. To me, it's just part of the game. "Part of the game" is a good ending line, by the way.

Dan White is the author of *The Cactus Eaters: How I Lost My Mind and Almost Found Myself on the Pacific Crest Trail* (Harper Collins, 2009), a California Independent Booksellers Alliance bestseller, and *Under the Stars: How America Fell in Love with Camping* (Henry Holt, 2016), which Cheryl Strayed described as "the definitive book on camping in America." His writing has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Outside*, *Poets & Writers*, *Catamaran Literary Reader*, and *The Washington Post*. He has an MFA in nonfiction from Columbia University, where he was a Dean's Fellow and taught in the Undergraduate Writing Program. White was a Steinbeck Fellow at the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies at San José State University. A writing lecturer, White teaches a popular Ideas Generator writing course at the *Catamaran* headquarters in Santa Cruz, California.

JILL KELLER PETERS

Parallel Lives, 2019
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12 x 1.5 in.



COURTESY ANDRA NORRIS GALLERY