

A Collection of Creative Writing Inspired by Bushkill Creek

Eng 351 Environmental Writing, Spring 2016

Prof Alix Ohlin

The Bushkill & the Arch

by William Gordon

It was a little like watching the entire world take a breath around him. Not that James knew anything about that. He came from a small town in New Hampshire, where he grew up watching the leaves on the trees turn from green to a burnt red and then fall off so the snow could rest on the branches. But that was a while ago. Now he was working as an engineer in Bethlehem, where, until 1998, steel was more valuable than air. Remnants of that time still loom over the city, as steel stacks erode under the rain and the surrounding communities begin to reestablish themselves with new names, new signatures.

Karl Stirner was one of the people that gave Easton a new signature. He sculpted it into something new, with projects like this arts trail. But James didn't know anything about that either, really. When he walked his dog under the red arch on the Karl Stirner Arts Trail alongside Bushkill Creek, he thought about what was for dinner that night or work the next day. He was indifferent toward the arch. Every day, James worked to design structures so people could drive over rivers or foundations for buildings that people could live in. Every piece of material had value and a purpose. The red arch just sat on the trail, untitled and forgettable.

James' dog, Franny, made a face after they passed under the arch. Her leash tightened as she jerked forward and started growling. At first he thought it was the woman coming toward them walking her dog on the trail, but then he realized Franny was facing a fisherman in the creek. She was a golden retriever, but she had muscle. Franny jerked forward, and James lost his grip. He was kind of spacing out to begin with, thinking about the now defunct silk mills along the stream. The stream was power for them, before it was sentenced to meandering between the trail and the road.

Franny ran down the small the hill toward the creek, somehow avoiding all the little roots and shrubs growing alongside the water. The fisherman, who was facing away from Franny when she started growling at him, turned around and looked startled to see a dog running in his direction, her leash dragging on the ground, followed by a frantic engineer in his mid-thirties.

"Shit, shit, shit," James muttered under his breath as he narrowly avoided tripping on roots that always seemed to be right where he was about to place his next

step. He was a bit out of practice at running over the forest floor since his Vermont childhood. It seemed like a skill he'd never use again, anyway.

Franny was already in the water. James looked up to see her stop right before the fisherman. With a splash, she pulled a fish out of the water with her teeth and trotted back to shore to proudly drop it at James' feet. The fisherman started laughing. He was an older man. James looked back innocently.

"That's okay, it's just tough to know your dog is a better fisher than me," the fisherman laughed.

James smiled as he threw the fish back into the water.

"Yeah, it's just in her nature I guess. She got off her leash. Sorry about that."

"Hey, no worries. Anyway, enjoy your day. It's beautiful out."

James looked around, as if for the first time. The sun was shining and the stream flowed along, the grass on the trail looked perfectly manicured, and even the sounds of the cars along the road blended with the water flowing and the quiet whip of the other fishermen's lines moving back and hitting the water.

"Yeah, I guess it is," James said.

"You know, if it wasn't for this trail right here I probably would have moved out of Easton a long time ago," the fisherman said. "My wife loves walking on this trail and I love fishing. I used to work at Bethlehem Steel before it shut down, and after that we were gonna move out. But then we decided to stick around—mostly because we didn't really have anywhere to go at first. Then this trail was created a while back and it's really given us another reason to stay."

James nodded, slightly confused. "Because of the trail?"

"Yeah, well, you know. Who wants to live in a place where there's nowhere to just relax and do nothing? We finally decided to just go with our dreams and open up a restaurant. I still can't believe it worked out that way."

"Mmm," James agreed. "Well, have a good day."

As he was walking back up the hill, gripping his dog's leash tightly, he noticed a Budweiser can on the ground. It looked disgusting, juxtaposed against the rest of the perfectly natural ground. He hoped there wasn't one of those plastic things that hold six packs together around. James remembered he read somewhere that birds can accidentally stick their neck through those and strangled themselves.

He looked up and saw the woman that was walking her dog before sitting on a bench, petting her dog and admiring the arch. He then turned to look at the arch, too. The red contrasted well against the natural background. James began walking back up the hill and remembered what it was like, as a kid, when he hiked to the top of a mountain—the part of the trail where the trees cleared and he could see life for miles.

He could see the pure necessity of it, like watching the whole world breathe around him.

Suspended Sentiment

By Bethany Rack

The Bushkill Creek was by no means a perfect patch of nature. Weeds grew high on the banks and you could spot a piece of litter in between every other stone. The remnants of the industry that had once controlled the creek could still be seen. It was a wild strip of land that ran between two developed neighborhoods. To the north was College Hill, home to Lafayette College. The hill was a geological feature that was thousands of years old, now slowly was eroding away. To the south was the historic district, home to the heart of Easton and most of the industry that kept the small city's economy afloat. The old mill that once occupied Third Street had been converted to fit the needs of the College. The dam that remained was not very tall but made for a scenic point on the creek.

Each day, Olive walked along the path that ran parallel to the Bushkill Creek after school. She walked alone while many other kids got rides home from their parents or walked in groups through the center of town. Olive preferred her time alone with the water. The creek was her favorite place in Easton. It was by no means beautiful, but it was wild, as wild as a creek could be in a constructed society. Easton had long been a slave to industry, plaguing its rivers with dams, canals, and other technology that impeded its rivers' flow. Olive loved the creek's ability to take back what it could from society. The asphalt that lined the vegetation was crumbling and eroding away. With time, nature would take back everything it gave.

Olive was always careful to stay far away from the water's edge by the dam. Her long brown hair that hid her face swayed in the wind and dampened in the mist from the falls. Signs warned of people drowning if they were to swim or boat over the wall's crest. This, of course, did not stop people from gravitating towards the water's edge. College-aged kids would come and hang out here and leave their trash behind. The older residents of Easton could also be found fishing just above the dam in the trout stocked waters. Olive always wondered what these people were doing here at 2 PM on a Wednesday- did they not have jobs to go to or people to care for at home?

Olive had grown accustomed to spending most of her time alone. Her father was Professor Knowles, a well-known and liked architect at the college who was incredibly dedicated to his work. Her father's dedication to his work, however, did not mirror his dedication to his family. Her mother spent most of her time troubled by her own thoughts, staying home and occupying her days in an unknown manner. The house was always a mess and dinner was rarely homemade. Olive could not remember the last time she heard her parents speak to one another;

that house was cold even on a warm spring day. When Olive was younger, her mother would take the walk along the creek to school with her. Since the loss of her little brother, Olive traveled alone. She didn't mind, however, she liked the flow of the creek; the way the water connected one side of the earth to the other. She thought it was a novel concept.

One of the last weekends in May just before the school was out for the summer it had been raining for five straight days. The ground was saturated with water and the banks of the Bushkill were swollen with debris that had floated downstream. Water flowed over the dam as if it was not even in the way. The cloudy water collapsed over the edge to create a spectacular cloud of foam.

As Olive took her usual route home, she could feel that something was not right. The rain had finally subsided. The sun was out and the water in the creek had reached its highest peak. All of a sudden, Olive could feel the earth pulling her downstream. As she looked towards the creek, the water was collapsing as a "V" into the earth. 100-year-old bricks were flying through the air and disappearing into the foam. The water kept flowing and the hole in the creek kept getting bigger. Water tumbled over the side of where the dam once stood, blissfully flowing freely for the first time in a century.

It did not take very long for the entire dam to crumble. It had only been six or seven feet high to begin with. The water that had once been held back by the dam had flowed downstream and was lost to the Delaware. The stream was now below its normal water height- exposing the twisted roots of trees that had nourished their leaves by pulling water up from the Bushkill. Algae that had carpeted the still pond behind the dam was now exposed and looked like a soggy rug in a basement that had been flooded.

The stocked trout were flopping around on the algae carpets; Olive hoped they would flop in the right direction and would eventually end up back in the water. The flow of the water was now a trickle of what it had been before. Feeling daring, Olive stepped through the brush and onto the banks of the Bushkill. The ground sank under her feet like sand on the beach; her converse sneakers caked with mud from the saturated sediment.

She remembered the laughs she had shared with her mother on this path before the baby died. They had searched for frogs behind the perennial grasses and pulled back flat stones looking for salamanders. Those memories were full of color; now the light seemed to shine a little less bright behind her eyes.

Olive looked upstream and could see the remnants of where the Bushkill had once flowed gently over the dam. Now, the water moved more swiftly and would soon carve a new path into the landscape, meandering as it once did over a century ago. The creek bed looked like a valley in which was completely made up of dark wet dirt. Vegetation in the bed looked as if it had just traveled through the Shammy Shine Carwash 200 yards north, soggy and ridden with bedhead.

Olive's heart sank when she realized that her favorite place in Easton had completely been washed away. Any hopes of restoring it were lost when she realized that the dam looked like a truck had run through it. The bricks that have given out under the extreme pressure were splattered all over the banks.

Aware of her helplessness in the situation, Olive turned around and headed in the direction of home. Her completely ruined converse sneakers were still on her feet but she left part of her soul in that creek bed.

Nostalgia by a Forgotten Creek by Jeannine Wagenbach

It was the year 2516. The Earth's fresh water streams, rivers and lakes have completely dried out with the five hundred year drought. The drought of five centuries was linked to the horrifying effects of climate change. From New York to California, the once bountiful and green nation became a barren wasteland. Nineteen-year-old Anna had only ever known the endless red sand and menacing looking cacti that formed the harsh desert.

Bright green forests and small little creeks was the stuff of dreams. Children's picture books and history textbooks that were taught in school documented the once great forests and cool blue streams of old, highlighting the epic beauty of mountain ranges. Anna wanted nothing more than to go back in time to see the places she had only ever dreamed of. Little did she know that she would soon discover the last surviving creek in all of the United States.

Ever since she was a little girl, Anna's love for history has known no bounds. Hours upon hours were spent pouring over old history books that her grandfather had handed down. While she has grown up in Mississippi her whole life, her family comes from a place called Easton Pennsylvania.

Easton, a once bustling town, was abandoned when the drought dried up their water source. Her grandfather, nostalgic for home, often told stories times spent on the Delaware River and wandering through downtown with friends. Anna craved to be close to her grandfather since his passing the previous winter. She longed to see the abandoned city that whenever mentioned, caused a sparkle to appear in her grandfather's eyes.

Anxious to begin her journey, Anna set out for Pennsylvania from her home in Mississippi. After her grueling drive through the desert, she could see the Delaware River had dried up, revealing the jagged rock bottom, littered with what looked like decaying soda bottles that had been left behind by the residents long gone. Finally, Anna had reached the city.

The city was dead quiet; all form of life that had once been there had completely dissipated. Anna found herself at the bottom of College Hill when she first heard the most unfamiliar sound. From behind a building labeled "The Spot" she could hear a gentle roaring sound. The closer she got, the louder the noise became. Sitting beneath the abandoned highway, she found the tiniest creek. Shocked, she wondered how this could have possibly been forgotten.

Anna was paralyzed. What she could only assume was a creek because of its small size, had managed to sustain a small ecosystem filled with green. Instead of the endless deserts that she was used to, this small patch of green was something straight out of her dreams. She could see some fish swimming about in the water, without a care in the world, completely unaffected by the destruction the human race has had on the natural world.

Hesitantly, she followed the creek further down. After walking beneath the underpass, she came across a sign designating the beginning of an art trail. There, at the beginning of the trail, stood a faded red arch. The cement at the base of the arch had almost completely worn away, leaving behind a mess of cement barely holding the arch up. She could image that the arch in its heyday had been a brilliant red, but now it was a dull faded orange with paint chips missing.

Beyond the broken-down entranceway, rotting, neglected trees covered the pathway. Carefully, Anna climbed over the more than a dozen trees that the elements had knocked down. Despite the destructive appearance of her surroundings, she couldn't believe her eyes. Her senses were overwhelmed with the sounds of nature and how green the trees still standing were. Her books that described the way nature used to look did not do it justice in reality. She wondered if her grandfather had ever been to this spot. She knew if he could see it now he would love that a little piece of his beloved home has remained untouched.

Panic broke through her shock. Did other people know about this place? What would happen when civilization found it if they hadn't already? It would be destroyed, mostly likely turned into a tourist location where some group of people who "claimed" it could profit off it. She couldn't let that happen. What she had her on her hands was magical, completely unexplainable.

This little plot of pure nature had been able to survive so far without any human intervention. Wistfully, she hoped that there were other places in which creeks and trees had been able to survive. Maybe, over time, her barren home could return to what once was. Maybe, she thought.

Welling Up

By Miranda Wilcha

Had it been any drier before Hurricane Connie hit their town, Diane's saddle shoes would have been coated in a layer of dusty dirt. Pleased with the much needed rain, she kept herself watered as well with a glass of milk while she looked out the window at the stream.

Its flow was healthier now, keeping a steady pace but not quite flooded. It was jolly, just like all the popular music of that summer. "Rock Around the Clock", "Mr. Sandman", and plenty of other melodies graced the airways – comforting everyone with happy, swift beats. The stream bubbled along then, nearly in sync with the music of the summer of 1955.

Diane's family lived in a cabin along the Bushkill Creek, a stream that once powered a booming textile industry. Both of her grandmothers had worked at the silk mills and shirtwaist factories. There was a long tradition of living out of the modest home, saving the scraps and making do with the little money they had. The Galloways were hard-working people. Diane knew that, she respected that. But as industry began to fade from the Bushkill and the town at large, she knew the music didn't quite match the mood of Easton.

"Turn that radio off, Diane, you think we can leave it on all hours?" her mother shouted from the tiny kitchen.

Diane flicked the switch. She'd heard her own name on the radio – another storm was coming, this one titled Hurricane Diane. No one took much notice, as there were other things on their minds. Plus, they needed the few inches of rain from the last storm regardless.

Nancy Galloway, Diane's mother, had just been laid off from the factory. The family was hurting and so was the town. Finishing up high school, Diane wanted more for herself. She dreamt of other places. The lights of New York were frequently on her mind, helping her escape into the glamor of the city and away from leftover casserole dinners that helped the Galloways save money.

Diane wasn't quite like the other girls at Easton Area High School. She knew that marriage, motherhood, and the factory were expected to be her future, but she was filled with melancholy imagining never living off the banks of the Bushkill. It was home, it was safe. But to her, it was no longer special. Often times, she visited the

stream alone and would be able to see her reflection in the virtually stagnant water: mousy brown hair, pale complexion, gangly limbs, but fiercely green eyes.

She let the screen door slam as she walked out of the house to visit the Bushkill again. Pushing away the brambles, Diane noticed that this time she couldn't see her reflection at all.

The waters were moving too swiftly towards the Delaware River, off to bigger waterways and hoping to reach the Atlantic. The Bushkill had not seen motion like this since the days all the dams were used for the mills.

"When they ask me to come back to work, I'll let the factory know you're looking for a job," Diane's mother told her that night, optimistically. They both smiled, neither catching the other's bluff. Diane turned out the lights, hearing the stream outside her window rip and roar louder than she'd ever heard it before.

The storm was brewing, however, and hit the town with winds and water greater than the radio claimed the day before. Hurricane Diane ravaged the town, snapping the free bridge between Easton and Phillipsburg in half. Dark brown waters flooded the town and pushed their way against the flow of the Bushkill. The water welled up along the banks, rising against the Galloways' wishes and engulfing the first floor of their home with a thick layer of mud and water. The direction of the stream was reversed as Hurricane Diane's flood waters moved incessantly inland, leaving the town worse off than the failing industries could have done alone.

The Galloway cottage was ruined and ripped down. Money problems continually worsened. But for Diane, the storm of her own name showed her the power that women can have – the same house that Diane wished to leave for bigger, better things was ripped down by Hurricane Diane.

The flow of the Bushkill moved more quickly from then on. It pushed and pulled its innards to the Delaware, to bigger waterways.

Diane pulled her suitcase out of the back closet and began to clean out the silt that had settled inside.