

Praise for Jo Ann Beard

‘Easily the most exciting new book I’ve read in the past year is Jo Ann Beard’s *Festival Days*. It is a knockout – a collection of nonfiction narratives that read like short stories, plus one short story that makes you wonder if it, too, is nonfiction. Masterly sentence by sentence, entirely original in method, the pieces are full of death and the threat of it, but their effect is the opposite of funereal. Beard’s wry voice and her clear-eyed compassion make her the best sort of company’ **Jonathan Franzen**, *Guardian*

“I love how you love things,” someone who loves her tells Jo Ann Beard. That love is one reason *Festival Days* is such a great book. Another is her flair for describing those things in vibrant and felicitous prose. Beard honours the beautiful, the sacred and the comic in life, and for life’s inescapable cruelties and woes she offers the wisdom of a sage’ **Sigrid Nunez**, author of *What Are You Going Through* and the National Book Award-winning *The Friend*

‘Jo Ann Beard’s work impresses me no end. Funny without being sitcomish, self-aware without being self-absorbed, scrupulous without being fussy, emotional without being sentimental, pointed without being cruel – I could go on and on with these distinctions, all in Beard’s favour, but instead I’ll just say that Jo Ann Beard is a fantastic writer, an Athena born fully formed out of her own painstaking head’ **Jeffrey Eugenides**, author of *The Virgin Suicides*

‘Beard’s power comes from phrasings and insights that aren’t just screaming for likes. Few writers are so wise and self-effacing and emotionally honest all in one breath ... she effects an intimacy that makes us want to sit on the rug and listen’ **Sara Lippmann**, *Washington Post*

‘[Beard’s] books are worth the wait. A master of sensory details, she also writes with humour, melancholy and a love of animals that never borders on saccharine ... In her work, even everyday moments gleam with significance’ **Michele Filgate**, *Los Angeles Times*

‘A master of creative nonfiction, Beard explores life’s most salient moments through facts that she sometimes fractures’
Amy Sutherland, *Boston Globe*

‘Intimate, intelligent, intense – and ultimately comforting ... Like a hot-water bottle for grief, these honest, beautiful essays and stories take on the death of a beloved animal, a friend’s illness, getting dumped by a partner and other tragedies few escape’ **People** (Book of the Week)

‘Charged with fine detail ... Beard is so good at what she does ... In Beard’s book, writing works like compound interest, each experience building on the last, which built on the one before’
Ellen Akins, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

‘I can’t think of a writer who puts words to our most difficult moments as adroitly as Beard – who so steadfastly refuses to cut away when things get tough’ **Dan Kois**, *Slate*

‘Beard’s syntax is immortalising ... An acute quality in Beard’s work makes the stories feel lived, even alive, as if they are still happening’ **Rachel DeWoskin**, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

‘Beard shows her dazzling skill at finding universal truths in singular situations. Beard is not just a master of the short form – she’s a master of phrase and sentence, too’ **Bethanne Patrick**, *Washington Post*

‘Beard renders her own life and the lives of others with characteristic precision ... With each piece, she presses the essay form into new, more intimate territory’ *Poets & Writers Magazine*

‘An absolute marvel ... as Beard demonstrates in her writing, life as we know it is full of bizarre, sad, beautiful, unbelievable, indescribable things – events that transform our real lives into surreal experiences’ **Chelsea Hodson**, *BOMB Magazine*

‘[Beard’s] topics range from the quotidian to the fantastic, but all are anchored by observant, beautifully written prose that’s sure to rank among the year’s best’ *Town & Country* (Must-Read Books of Winter 2021)

‘Imaginative and precise ... These sharp essays cement Beard’s reputation as a master of the form ... [she] can evoke many emotions in a single stroke’ *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

‘Allowing her work to exist beyond the labels of fiction or nonfiction, Beard’s metaphorical patterns evince the imaginative truths that underlie her writing’ **Catherine Hollis**, *BookPage* (starred review)

‘Beard’s keen eye for novelistic detail subtly transforms pure fact into art’ **Harvey Freedenberg**, *Shelf Awareness*

‘Beard is known as a nonfiction essayist, but her work often reads like suspenseful fiction’ *BookPage*

ALSO BY JO ANN BEARD

The Boys of My Youth

In Zanesville

Festival Days

Cheri

THE COLLECTED WORKS *of*
JO ANN BEARD



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'Last Night' and 'Maybe It Happened' in *O, The Oprah Magazine*; 'Werner,' 'Cheri,' 'The Tomb of Wrestling,' and 'What You Seek Is Seeking You' in *Tin House*; 'Close' in *Big, Big Wednesday*; 'Now' in *Agni*; 'Coyotes' first appeared in *Story*; 'Out There' and 'Waiting' appeared in *Iowa Woman*; 'Bonanza' appeared in *The Iowa Review*; 'Cousins' appeared in *Prairie Schooner*; and 'The Fourth State of Matter' appeared in *The New Yorker*.

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FESTIVAL DAYS

For Emma Sweeney

Author's Note to the 2021 Edition

I BECAME AN ESSAYIST BY DEFAULT. My first love was poetry, my second love was fiction, and my third and lasting love was the essay. It's like a third marriage – you know that this is where you're staying, where you're going to work out your issues, for better or for worse. And yet, because we're all only human, this very book has a couple of stories in it – 'The Tomb of Wrestling' and 'What You Seek Is Seeking You' – or anyway they were first published as stories. They are also essays, in their own secret ways, and the essays are also stories.

Several of the pieces here were published first by *Tin House*, and I am grateful to Cheston Knapp and the other *Tin House* folk, for their willingness to publish my efforts without undue fretting over genre. The *Tin House* magazine will be missed by me and by others, for just this quality of openness and flexibility.

My gratitude to Cheri Tremble's loved ones, for their willingness to tell me Cheri's story, and then to allow me the privilege of imagining my way into her final moments. Werner Hoeflich, similarly, shared his story with me in great precise and painterly detail, and then stepped back and let me imagine it for myself on the page. Thank you to these collaborators and friends.

One of these days
I'll look at your face and find
The sad detailed imprints
Of the festival days

Nand Chaturvedi, 'The Cruel Festival Time,'
translated by Katherine Russell Rich
and Vidhu Shekhar Chaturvedi

Last Night

SOMETHING HAPPENED TO HER WHILE she was eating, or right afterward. She began turning in circles and couldn't stop. In my kitchen, in my car, and then in an examining room at the vet's office. I sat on the floor with her while the vet stood leaning against the wall, watching us. I was crying, but he ignored that.

'You indicated once,' he said, looking through the file, 'that we should let you know when it might be time.'

It wasn't time.

'It looks like a brain abnormality, something that's grown or shifted. We might wait a day or so to see what happens. But if this doesn't stop . . .' He paused.

'Sheba, stop,' I said, and held her. She looked like Lady from *Lady and the Tramp*, only old; she was fifteen.

It was like putting your hand on a spinning top, but as soon as I let go, she began turning again. We used to call her Top Dog because she liked to sleep stretched out on our old black Lab, her head settled on his head, both of their eyes closed. Once, many years ago, the Lab had gotten carefully to his feet, made his way to the kitchen where my husband was cooking, and accepted a treat, all without disturbing the sleeping puppy

draped over his neck. The Lab lived to be fifteen too. The marriage, fourteen.

I took my hands away to button my jacket, and she turned blindly for a moment on the gleaming linoleum, then bumped into the single leg of the examining table.

‘It might be time,’ the vet said, putting his foot out to stop her. Except for those neon running shoes, he was completely nondescript, like an actor you aren’t sure why is in the movie until the very end, when he turns out to be the killer.

At home, it didn’t get any better or any worse, Sheba following herself, nose to tail, around and around in a circle while I tried to keep her steady. My neighbor came over for a few minutes and watched, her eyes round and nervous. ‘This doesn’t look hopeful,’ the neighbor finally said.

It was dark by then, and I was kneeling on my living-room floor in the lamplight, holding her and then letting her turn, holding her and then letting her turn. It was winter, but the neighbor was wearing flip-flops.

‘Aren’t your feet cold?’ I asked her.

‘Yes,’ she said, and went home.

We were used to being alone. Our house was small and dark, set into a hillside, but we had a stone fireplace and built-in bookshelves and a screened porch overlooking a blue lake, our own dock, and certain seabirds that didn’t seem like they belonged there, so we chased them away each morning, or, rather, one of us did while the other stood on a giant ornate piece of driftwood and drank coffee in her sunglasses, even though nobody needed sunglasses in Ithaca.

We had brought more or less nothing from our previous life – a few pictures, some ceramic bowls, a Turkish rug that we hardly noticed in our old, big Iowa house but that became, in the new house, a focal

LAST NIGHT

point, the last remnant of what used to be. Sheba began urinating on it sometime around midnight, a series of dark rings overlapping and intersecting one another. By one o'clock it was my turn to pee, and I ran to the bathroom and came back to find her spun into a corner and stuck there, bumping against the baseboard.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre.

'Sheba,' I said.

The falcon cannot hear the falconer.

'Sheba,' I said, holding her face in my hands. She looked back blindly and I saw suddenly that the vet was right, something had grown or shifted, blocking her in there all alone.

I'd always known I'd have to live without her someday; I just hadn't known it would be tomorrow. *Things fall apart.* Here in the safe silence of Ithaca, I had forgotten that.

So we stayed awake all of her last night, waiting for the vet's office to open, in the living room on the Turkish rug, in the kitchen next to her food bowl, and finally on the bed pushed into the corner, my body between her and the edge. At some point I couldn't help it and let my eyes close, and when I did, it felt like I was turning, too, our lives unraveling like a skein of yarn stretched from Ithaca back to Iowa. I see my husband patting his chest and holding out his arms, Sheba jumping into them. I see the Lab wearing her like a bonnet on his head. I see her running under the seabirds as they fly along the shore. Don't leave yet, I say to my husband, who leaves. 'Don't leave yet,' I say aloud in the darkness of the bedroom.

She used to sleep at the foot of the bed, and at first light, first twitch, she would crawl sleepily up to my pillow so that when I opened my eyes she was what I saw. The aging dog-actress face – still the dark eyes, still the long glamorous ears. Don't leave yet. If I let go of her, she moves in wider and wider circles, getting close to the edge. *Come back, little Sheba.* We're both close to the edge now, peering over it into the great metaphorical beyond.

FESTIVAL DAYS

And then dawn arrives, and then it's eight, and I begin to move forward, into it, without thinking. I carry her down to the water and let her stand on the shore, the birds wheeling and making their noises. In Iowa she ran into a cornfield once and didn't come out for a long time, and when she did, she seemed thoughtful. The Lab once went on a garbage run and afterward threw up what looked like a whole birthday cake, candles and all. I carry her back up the hill and the neighbor runs out of her house, half dressed for work, and opens the car door for me.

'Is it time?' she asks me.

'Not yet,' I tell her.

All the way across town, driving and holding her in the passenger seat with one hand, I think to myself, *Don't think*. All the way from Iowa to Ithaca, eight hundred miles, she stood in the back seat on the rolled-up rug, her chin on my shoulder, and watched the landscape scroll by. I feel her humming against my hand, trying to turn, and then we're turning, we're in the parking lot, we're here.

It's time.

THE BOYS OF MY YOUTH

For my siblings, Brad and Linda, and for Elizabeth White

Preface to the 1998 Edition

HERE'S ONE OF MY PRE-VERBAL MEMORIES: I'm very little and I'm behind bars, like a baby monkey in a cage. My parents have just put me to bed in a room with bright yellow walls. This is fine with me because in my crib there are various companions – the satin edge of my blue blanket, the chewable plastic circle that hangs down almost to mouth level on a piece of green cord, and a boy doll named Hal with blue eyes and lickable hands and feet made of vinyl. At this point in my life, I love Hal and the satin borders of blankets better than I love any of the humans I know. My mother puts Hal up next to my head as soon as I lie down, which is exactly where I don't want him. I smack him in the face.

'You don't want to hurt *Hal*,' my mother says sadly. 'I thought Hal was your *friend*.'

Hal and I have an agreement that he isn't supposed to come up by my pillow; if I want him I'll go down to his end of the crib. My mother snaps off the light and as she does so the night-light is illuminated, a new thing that I've never seen before. The door closes.

I can see the night-light through the bars of my crib. It is a garish depiction of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, although I don't know that then. Jesus is about my age but he looks mean, and

the mom and dad are wearing long coats and no shoes. All three of them are staring at me funny. I start crying without taking my eyes off them.

The door opens and when the light goes on the night-light goes off. I stop crying and sit down by Hal while my mother looks at me. She puts the blanket back over me and leaves. Light off, night-light back on. More crying. This time my father comes in and picks me up, walks me around in a circle, puts me back in the crib with Hal, and leaves. When the light goes off and Jesus comes back on I cry again. This time both of them come in to look at me. My mother is smoking a cigarette.

‘Don’t ask me,’ she tells my father.

About three more times and they give up. I am left to wail loudly, which I do for a while, until I happen to turn on my side, looking for the bottle of water they had tried to bribe me with. As soon as I turn over, the night-light miraculously disappears. The water is warm, just how I like it, and Hal’s face is resting against the soles of my feet. I let go of the bottle and wrap the satin border of the blue blanket around my thumb, put the thumb in my mouth, and close my eyes for the night.

I tried to check out that particular memory with my mother when I grew up. I asked her if she remembered a night when I cried and cried, and couldn’t be consoled, and they kept coming in and going back out and nothing they did could help me.

‘I don’t remember any that *weren’t* like that,’ she said, smoking the same cigarette she’d been smoking for thirty years.

So. Here’s a recent memory, from two nights ago. I was riding through upstate New York on a dark blue highway, no particular destination. It was cloudy, the air was springy and cool, the dashboard looked like the control panel of a spaceship. Piano music on the tape deck, a charming guy in the driver’s seat. I thought to myself, not for the first time in this life, *Everything is perfect; all those things that I always think are so bad really aren’t bad at all.* Then

PREFACE TO THE 1998 EDITION

I noticed that out my window the clouds had parted, the clear night sky was suddenly visible, and the moon – a garish yellow disk against a dark wall – seemed to be looking at me funny.

In the Current

THE FAMILY VACATION. HEAT, FLIES, sand, and dirt. My mother sweeps and complains, my father forever baits hooks and untangles lines. My younger brother has brought along his imaginary friend, Charcoal, and my older sister has brought along a real-life majorette by the name of Nan. My brother continually practices all-star wrestling moves on poor Charcoal. 'I got him in a figure-four leg lock!' he will call from the ground, propped up on one elbow, his legs twisted together. My sister and Nan wear leg makeup, white lipstick, and say things about me in French. A river runs in front of our cabin, the color of bourbon, foamy at the banks, full of water moccasins and doomed fish. I am ten. The only thing to do is sit on the dock and read, drink watered-down Pepsi, and squint. No swimming allowed.

One afternoon three teenagers get caught in the current while I watch. They come sweeping downstream, hollering and gurgling while I stand on the bank, forbidden to step into the water, and stare at them. They are waving their arms.

I am embarrassed because teenagers are yelling at me. Within five seconds men are throwing off their shoes and diving from the dock; my own dad gets hold of one girl and swims her back in.

Black hair plastered to her neck, she throws up on the mud about eight times before they carry her back to wherever she came from. One teenager is unconscious when they drag him out and a guy pushes on his chest until a low fountain of water springs up out of his mouth and nose. That kid eventually walks away on his own, but he's crying. The third teenager lands a ways down the bank and comes walking by fifteen minutes later, a grown-up on either side of him and a towel around his waist. His skin looks like Silly Putty.

'Oh man,' he says when he sees me. 'I saw her go by about ninety miles an hour!' He stops and points at me. I just stand there, embarrassed to be noticed by a teenager. I hope my shorts aren't bagging out again. I put one hand in my pocket and slouch sideways a little. 'Man, I thought she was gonna be the last thing I ever seen!' he says, shaking his head.

The girl teenager had had on a swimming suit top with a built-in bra. I cross my arms nonchalantly across my chest and smile at the teenage boy. He keeps walking and talking, the grown-ups supporting him and giving each other looks over the top of his head. His legs are shaking like crazy. 'I thought, Man oh man, that skinny little chick is gonna be the last thing *ever*,' he exclaims.

I look down. My shorts are bagging out.