



## POETRY

# Uniting the Spare and the Spooky

Poet James Longenbach's new book of poetry 'looks about,' with clarity.

By Kathleen McGarvey

*Earthling*, the newest book of poetry by James Longenbach, the Joseph H. Gilmore Professor of English, had its roots in a poem he wrote called "Pastoral."

"I heard something in it that sounded fresh to me," he says, a different tone than in his previous poetry collection, *The Iron Key* (W. W. Norton, 2010). "It seemed to be talking about ordinary

**TO LISTEN TO JAMES LONGENBACH** read "The Dishwasher" and "Huntington Meadow," search for "Longenbach" at [Rochester.edu/newscenter](http://Rochester.edu/newscenter).

things, but in a way that made them seem at the same time kind of spectral or otherworldly. There was also the capacity for wry humor in that tone—and all of that seemed exciting to me."

Written first, "Pastoral" ultimately became the final poem of *Earthling* (W. W. Norton, 2017), the poet and literary critic's fifth poetry collection. The tone drove the book's development, and the collection's overarching narrative isn't one of events, "but of feeling or spiritual development," he says.

*Publishers Weekly* calls *Earthling*—which is one of five finalists for this year's National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry—"a

moving case for love's power to sustain us." The book moves constantly between the mundane and the mystical as it contemplates mortality, giving voice to a range of emotions that knowledge of life's finiteness can create.

The shifting viewpoints are exemplified perhaps nowhere more dramatically than in "The Crocodile," a poem that playfully considers the perspective of that creature. But the whimsy also offers Longenbach an opportunity to reflect on his own mother's death—an experience that, despite his efforts, had found no home in his poetry before.

"I don't remember quite how it happened. I just got the idea of using this fanciful trope of the speaking crocodile as a way to get at the reality of this confrontation with mortality," he says. The lines in the poem's fourth section are plain and terse:

*When my mother died,  
I was right beside her.  
She'd been unconscious for a day.  
My sister and my father were there, too.*

"It's hard to get more flatly clear and straightforward in language than that," he says, and hopes that what is evoked is also "spooky and revelatory." He brings together the flatness of his



**Poet's Plans:** A poetry collection takes shape gradually, Longenbach says, as patterns emerge. Jettisoning poems that don't fit the structure, though painful, is good: "It suggests the developing book has integrity, that it's speaking back to you and demanding things of you."


language with the conceit of the crocodile as he ends the section:

*Then, immediately, the color left her face,  
She was no longer in her body,  
And she sank beneath the lagoon.*

"All I'm ever trying to do is to be scrupulously and absolutely clear about what I'm saying," Longenbach says. "It's become a discipline to me that has taken my poems to their strangest places, because trying to be very clear about things is a difficult, dangerous, and unsettling practice."

The title *Earthling* came to him when he discovered that it was one of the oldest words in the language, an Old English term for a person who plows or tills the earth.

"I'd assumed it was 1950s sci-fi speak: 'Take me to your leader,'" Longenbach says. "I thought it was entrancing that 'earthling' was our name for a person intimate with the soil. And it seemed like the perfect emblem for the tone that was distinguishing these poems as they accumulated—the little earthling coming out of his hole in the ground to look about.

"It's the vulnerability of it, yet the substantial inevitability and necessity of it, too." 

## The Dishwasher

For many years I saved my money, bought a car, a used Chevette.  
*Lean on me*, said the radio, *when you're not strong*.

I'd known that song since I was young but every time I heard it  
I wanted to hear it again.

I drove to the supermarket, then drove home.

I looked in the refrigerator, under the bed.

As if I were standing in the kitchen, unloading the dishwasher,  
holding the phone,

I heard my mother's voice.

I heard it plainly, as if she were standing in the room.

I know it's early, she said,

But I'm planning ahead for Christmas.

So I'd like to remember: What kind of coffee do you like?

Regular, or decaf, or both at certain times?

I want to be prepared, in case you'd like a cup when you're here.

## Huntington Meadow

Though I come from a long line of people intimate  
With the bodies of horses,

Today, for the first time, I touched a horse.

I placed my hand on its left flank, just behind the shoulder.

The horse was standing beside me, eating grass.

I'm speaking here of things that come to feel essential

Though they happen at one moment in time.

You've never done it, then you've done it before, you're good at it.

You can't imagine your body without it.

Tanqueray up with an olive,

Nobody home, the brine

Still unexpected at the bottom of the glass.

When I touched the horse, I didn't move my hand.

The hide more skin than hair,

The muscle beneath it visceral, relaxed,

More like a lover's than a dog's.

Then, after I took my hand away, I immediately put it back.

The horse seemed all the while

Perfectly happy, ripping up grass at the roots.

That was the only sound, the sound

You hear when you're gardening, weeding the lawn,

Somebody right there beside you, also weeding,

Though because you lack nothing

You're also completely alone.

*Poems are reprinted with permission from Earthling  
by James Longenbach; W. W. Norton, 2017.*