TREE MUSEUM

LOU FLORENCE

STREET ROAD
ARTISTS SPACE

Thus We Depart

It started in early spring when days were still chill and it seemed too soon to see them: toads…not hopping but flattened. Smashed by a passing car — a convergent moment when a driver, choosing the alleyway in the early morning dark, and a newly emergent toad from my neighbor's backyard pond meet. The driver never felt the soft body splay under the wheel. I, walking to and fro to work, noticed the toad…nothing more. There it lay. For days. Then another day, another toad freshly squashed. I took out my phone, not knowing exactly why, and took a picture. As Spring grew fuller and warmer there appeared the snakes. Two within weeks — also dead along the same alley which, as was now apparent, saw enough traffic to stop the living business of a growing number of small beings. I took photos of the snakes — both offering their pearlescent bellies to the sky. I contemplated painting. Then, by coincidence (as the world seems to provide) someone sent me a photo of a roadkilled bluejay — it's body so precisely flattened and intact it looked like a print. I knew then I would start painting these and the many other roadkilled beings I soon encountered. Suddenly it seemed every highway, every street, every alley, every gutter, had remains of animals killed by cars. Friends sent more photos. When driving (yes, I recognize the irony) I now stopped when I saw some obscure blur of fur or feather on the road. It felt like a duty, an obligation I had silently accepted — my humble (pathetic) attempt to acknowledge, apologize, alert, point to, call out what was all around us. Death. No, not death (death is inevitable, part of everyone's living contract…I have no beef with death) — it was the happenstance killing of singular beings overlaid with the seeming unspoken consensus to ignore, thus rendering invisible and therefore granting an oblique absolution.

Rejecting invisibility, I began this project to record and grapple with my encounters. I have discovered connections, made friends, learned about research (road ecology!), activism, and movements that care about the deadly impact of roads on wildlife — our Near Dwellers. I do pause when I hear/use the term "roadkill"…yes, the road is part of it. But it is, in actuality, the car on the road that kills and within every car is a driver — so I/we, those of us who drive or ride in cars or take trains or airplanes (birdstrikes is a whole other but related topic) are complicit in the killing. Many of us have felt the sudden shocking thud of a soft body against the hard body of our moving car. A sick, sorry feeling pervades (one hopes!). We pray the impact has rendered death complete and not an injury to be slowly suffered.

As I delve into this world of roadkill I am learning of the staggering numbers of the dead. I assume these numbers are less than the true total — who knows how many animals crawl, limp, slither away to slowly die? How many get quickly carried off by other animals? (Note: roadkill attracts animals who feed on carrion who then often become secondary

victims of the road.) How many are too small to even register, get swept away by wind and rain, dessicate to dust in the hot sun? This abundance of roadkill is not confined to our thousands upon thousands of miles of highways but is close to home — be it a small town alleyway like mine, a suburban neighborhood, the rural back road, or the labyrinthine urban streets. Animals, non-human beings, our kin, are being killed by us, human-beings, on a daily basis in sickening numbers.

I have been led, unwittingly, willingly, and gratefully, into a larger, wider conversation with others that raise questions about our place as human-beings in the world and our response, responsibility and our response-ability toward our non-human kin. It has led to a keen awareness (in a literally visceral sense) of the hubris in our assumed sovereignty, superiority, domination, and disregard for our common/shared world. This series has opened a world of why's for me. And each answer leads to more why's and how's and how-not-to's. This body of work cannot and does not presume to offer answers or solutions. It does offer attention, recognition, grieving, apology, and memorial. I can hear them simply say: "Thus we depart".

Reading List

A selection of these books and articles are available for reading at Street Road throughout the Near Dwellers project as well as at Bothkinds in Vancouver, Autumn 2025, in conjunction with Near Dwellers as Friends, and Near Dwellers as Indwellers.

Displaying Death and Animating Life: Human-Animal Relations in Art, Science, and Everyday Life. Ch. 7: Requiem for Roadkill: Death, Denial, and Mourning on American Roads. Jane Desmond, University of Chicago Press, 2016

How do you protect wildlife from sprawl? A fast-growing Utah exurb gets serious about migration corridors, Ben Goldfarb, High Country News, August 1, 2024

New Law to Make Roads Safer for Wildlife Crossing, California Law, NBC: Bay Area, 2022

Bipartisan Infrastructure Package Provides Critical Funding to Reduce Wildlife-Vehicle Collisions Center for Large Landscape Conservation, Wildlands Network, Endangered Species Coalition, International Fund for Animal Welfare, Humane Society Legislative Fund, ARC Solutions. Center for Large Landscape Conservation, 2021

Something Rotten: A Fresh Look at Roadkill, Heather Montgomery, Bloomsbury Children's Books, 2018

The toll of the automobile: Wildlife and roads in Sweden. (Doctoral Thesis), Andreas Seiler, Uppsala, 2003

Reflections on Roadkill Between Mobility Studies and Animal Studies: Altermobilities, Matthew Calarco, Springer, 2023

Crossings: How Road Ecology is Shaping the Future of the Planet, Ben Goldfarb, W.W. Norton & Co., 2023

A Road Runs Through It: Reviving Wild Places, Part Two: essays regarding roadkill, Thomas Reed Petersen, Bower House, 2006

Apologia, Barry Lopez, University of Georgia Press, 1998

Wildlife-Vehicle Collision Reduction Study: Report to Congress, Performed by Western Transportation Institute, Montana State University. Authored by M.P. Huijser, P. McGowen, J. Fuller, A. Hardy, A. Kociolek, A.P. Clevenger, D. Smith and R. Ament. Federal Highway Administration, August 2008