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Molly Beth Griffin is a graduate of Grinnell College and [Hamline University's MFA Program in Writing for Children and Young Adults](#). She is the author of two picture books, [Loon Baby](#), and [Rhoda's Rock Hunt](#), as well as the award winning young-adult novel [Silhouette of a Sparrow](#). She was the recipient of the Milkweed Prize for Children's Literature and the 2014 McKnight Artist Fellowship. She teaches at [The Loft Literary Center](#), critiques manuscripts, and hosts a monthly Picture Book Salon. She lives in South Minneapolis with her partner and their two children.

Claudia McGehee is the author and illustrator of several children's picture books that celebrate the natural world. She uses scratchboard and various print-making methods to create sturdy images of the denizens living in prairies, woodlands and water-ways that inspire her. She lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

Sanctuary

TEXT BY MOLLY BETH GRIFFIN

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAUDIA MCGEHEE



PHOTO COURTESY OF CLAUDIA MCGEHEE

We fly north,
 just as our ancestors did,
 from the warm wintering lands
 to the nesting grounds of the arctic.
 We have deep memories of this migration,
 memories that are centuries old:
 knowledge of the route,
 and of the dangers,
 and of the few safe places
 along the way.

Follow the flock,
 ride the thermals,
 glide on crosswinds,
 stay together.

Other flocks join us
 until we are many.
 We all push on,
 following the flyway,
 guided by the sun
 and the stars
 and the magnetic pull of the earth,
 watching for familiar landmarks
 that steer us along our ancient path.

It is such a long trip.
 We are not yet halfway there,
 but already our bellies rumble,
 our wings ache.
Where,
where is our sanctuary?

At last:
 the prairie, the fields, the river,
 the land that stretches out flat, flat, flat
 to the flat horizon.
 It is safe here.
 Here is where we can stop to rest
 and eat our fill.
Here,
here is our sanctuary.

We circle before settling in,
 surveying an area that is both familiar
 and new.
 We have watched
 the prairie shrink,
 and the wetlands disappear,
 and the water level sink lower.
 We must work harder now
 because more power lines crisscross our sky,
 and more fences zigzag through our fields
 waiting to ensnare us.
 The food is getting scarce,
 and the safe places that are left
 are more crowded
 than ever before.

But there is still a river for sleeping,
 and fields with food to eat.
 This place is changed
 and yet unchanged.
 And so before we move on
 we still stop here a while,
 grateful for the rest.
This,
this is our sanctuary.

At sunset, we swoop down on the icy river
 already crowded with birds
 standing one-legged
 on shallow, submerged sandbars.
 We join them,
 huddling together to stay warm.

Darkness descends,
 and with it, the bitter cold.
 We purr to each other,
 gathered close for warmth and comfort.
 The air fills with our low droning sound,
 a deep thrumming that means
all is well.

Fat and rested, we can carry on:
follow the flock,
ride the thermals,
glide on crosswinds,
stay together.

*We are leaving,
leaving our sanctuary,
hoping it will still be here
when we return.*



STUDY FOR "SANCTUARY," (POTATO PRINT) 4" X 8," CLAUDIA
MCGEHEE, 2013

Notes on Inspiration: How “Sanctuary” Came Together

MOLLY BETH GRIFFIN

CLAUDIA McGEHEE

On the Platte River in Nebraska

Each spring and fall, Nebraska’s Platte River is a way-station for migrating birds. During the peak of the sandhill crane Migration, this area hosts about thirty thousand of these magnificent birds per mile.

Although Sandhill Cranes have proven to be very adaptable to the changing landscape (feeding mainly off of fallen grain in agricultural fields instead of their centuries-old diet of bugs and frogs from the prairies and wetlands), the fact remains that their “sanctuary” lands are becoming less and less hospitable to them. Conservationists work tirelessly to preserve pieces of these ancient flyways to help the cranes continue their age-old migration patterns. The cranes rely on one another to complete each journey safely, but unknowingly they also now rely on their human advocates.

I’m grateful to the guides at [Rowe Sanctuary](#) in Kearney, Nebraska for offering me their expertise and infecting me with their enthusiasm for these creatures and their twice-yearly migratory feat. I bless them for working to protect these amazing birds and for sharing their beauty with the public. We all must follow their example—we must each embark on a migration of the heart that begins with curiosity, respect, and awe, and ends with action.

A Snowy Day and a Bowl of Potatoes

The illustration began very spontaneously on a winter’s day; it was very impromptu. It was a snow day for our daughter, which meant the studio was closed for usual business. I saw it as an artsy opportunity to spend some time with Lucy, to make some potato prints with her. I had just read Molly Beth’s manuscript, and I’d been researching sandhill cranes a bit, and loved their gangly forms.

There is some technique to this. I used a combination of paring knife and x-acto blades to whittle the potato (a great big baker used here!) I carved around an initial sketch, excavating around the outline. It’s best to use real printer’s ink and brayers (a hand-tool used historically in printing and printmaking to spread ink) to smooth the ink onto the surface.

I did several quick studies. I made several prints of groupings—all about 4” by 8” or so. I created a couple of poses in flight, rendered in potato—a delightful medium!

I would advise anyone wanting to use this method to find your smoothest-toothed watercolor paper for the actual print-making. The potato’s starchy make-up creates interesting surface textures. One potato, two potatoes, three cranes, four...

—Adapted with permission from Claudia McGehee’s blog, [“Illustration for All Seasons”](#)