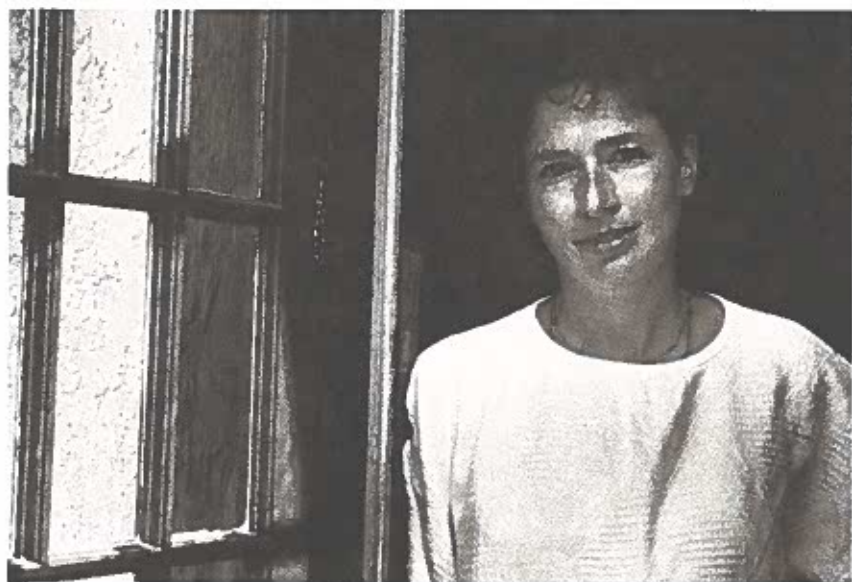




JO VANARKEL
fiction



JO VANARKELE

Jo VanArkel lives in Springfield, Missouri, with her husband and two sons, and describes herself as "a native Ozarker." She received her B.A. from Texas Christian University in 1979, an M.A. in literature from TCU in 1981, and an M.F.A. in fiction writing from the University of Oregon in 1982.

VanArkel's fiction has appeared in *Northwest Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Sou'wester*, and other literary magazines. She is an Associate Professor of English at Drury College, and edits the *Jordan Creek Anthology*, a literary journal that features the work of Missouri and Midwestern writers. Presently, she is completing a new volume of short stories.

"When I'm not mothering, writing, or teaching," she says, "I run."

SWIMMING AT FLAT BRIDGE, 1963

Mother and Aunt Mel were already tight-lipped because we'd been swimming at Flat Bridge three hours with no sign of the men or even their flat-bottomed river boat. They got tight-lipped when the men went on weekend fishing trips by themselves.

It was like they knew those men were having fun without them, probably whizzing off the side of the boat and cursing and looking out for women sunning themselves on the river banks, and Mother and Aunt Mel didn't like it one bit. Only Aunt Wildeen didn't seem to care. She was the youngest, and she had been sunning herself on the banks of the river by Flat Bridge all afternoon, while a few of the Poindexter boys stole glances at her as they paddled by in their underwear. She did look good in a bathing suit. She had on a two-piecer print of yellow flowers and bottoms that came to just below her belly button. Her blond hair was tied up in a red scarf. She was married to Uncle Benny, my dad's youngest brother.

They'd only been married three months. She was from Chicago, and she always kept her hair done up and painted her toenails and wore lipstick so red it was all I could see on her face when she talked to me. She had never been outside of Chicago until she married Benny, and they moved back home. She called herself "Pioneer Wildeen" and said her friends from high school would never believe she could move this far south. She typed letters and mailed them off and got letters back from places like Milwaukee and Toledo. I watched her type once when I was over at their house to bring Uncle Benny my dad's monkey wrench so Benny could work on his bathroom pipes. She typed a whole page in about a minute.

Her name before she got married was Wildeen Wilde. I remember that because I read it on the invitation, and because at the party after the wedding my Uncle Benny, who was already drunk before he even stepped up to the altar, took my daddy by the lapels and danced around the room with him saying, "I married a Wilde woman!"

I was in the wedding. I threw flower petals on the floor just before Wildeen marched down the aisle in her wedding dress. I was thirteen, and it was the first time I'd ever worn a long dress, and it wasn't bad except for the girdle and nylons, and the lace on my slip which made me break out in a rash.

For some reason Aunt Wildeen liked me from the first time she met me. Uncle Benny had brought Wildeen over for dinner to meet Daddy, and when Benny said, "Oh yeah, and this is Esther," Wildeen came straight over to me and shook my hand.

"You're tall for your age," she said to me.

I nodded and let go of her hand.

"Your hair's too short and could use a perm," she said. She studied my face. "You've got good bone structure though. You'll always be pretty 'cause you've got good bone structure."

Benny thumped me on the head as he walked into the family room where the ball game was going on the TV. "We call her Mudface, for short," he said and he laughed.

"You will always be Esther to me," said Wildeen. She said the words as if she'd just heard them in some movie and had been waiting for the right moment to use them herself. I liked it though. I liked being included in her drama.

I looked at my mother, who was standing nearby. She had a smile on, but it was one of those that didn't show any of her teeth. "Would you like something to drink?" she said to Wildeen. "Iced tea? Lemonade?"

"I'll have whatever the boys are drinking," Wildeen said. And she went straight into the family room, sat down in Daddy's big chair by the TV and said, "Who's playing?"

Aunt Wildeen was Catholic. A priest did their wedding. All through the ceremony the priest and Wildeen and Benny crossed themselves and knelt and said things in Latin. I'd never seen a priest up close before. This one had a fleshy neck that spilled over his collar and one side of his face was covered with tiny red webs. Daddy said they were capillaries, and later at the party while the priest was drinking champagne, I heard him tell someone that years ago he'd been hit in the face with a golf club.

Wildeen's parents didn't come to the wedding because Benny wasn't Catholic even though he promised the priest he would raise his kids Catholic and go through the classes to convert. A few Wilde cousins showed up for the reception though and stole six cases of champagne. I watched one of them named Rudy carry a case out to his trunk and place it next to two other cases. He saw me standing nearby and said, "It's for the honeymoon, kid. We're taking it over to the motel where Wildeen and Buddy are staying to surprise them."

"His name is Benny," I said.

"Oh. Right." He took a crumpled dollar out of his pocket and gave it to me. Then he lit a cigarette, climbed into his Impala and rolled down the window. "You Catholic?" he said to me, blowing smoke from his mouth and nose.

"No," I said.

He nodded, still looking at me. "I've gone out with girls who weren't Catholic," he said, like he was trying to tell me that there was still hope. He smoked on his cigarette a bit more and stared at his dashboard. Then finally he said. "Well, gotta run." He started the car, and before he drove off he flicked his half-smoked cigarette out the window.

I wiped the butt off on the hem of my dress and finished it. I'd been smoking for a year, in the field behind my house. I hadn't told anybody. It takes a lot of practice to look right smoking, and I wasn't very good at it yet, because cigarettes were hard to come by. I usually had to steal them from my dad or from Aunt Mel when she left her purse open on our kitchen counter and she and Mother were out back clipping fresh flowers or something. On this particular night though, I didn't even hide but stood out in the parking lot in my long pink dress, smoking and hoping someone would catch me, pulling at my girdle which was starting to itch and wondering since I'd just learned in last year's gym class the facts of life if Wildeen and Benny had ever done it before or if this night would be their first time.

Aunt Wildeen had that effect upon people. She made people think about physical things. So my mother and Aunt Mel got thin-lipped around her, and Benny was always grabbing her by the hips, and even my dad—who never listened to women talk because he said he didn't like the high-pitched sound of their voices—even Dad would smile and watch her lips move as she was speaking. And now, at the river, while crawdads skittered around on the rocks and dragonflies, locked together into twos and threes, lighted on people's wet heads, the Poindexter boys kept swimming past Wildeen and craning their necks like a bunch of hungry turtles.

"Ess," my mother yelled at me from the bank. I was standing in river water up to the top of my thighs, the water swirling about me cold and brown from the mud I'd stirred up with my tennis shoes. I didn't especially like swimming, but the sun was too hot for just sitting on the rocks of the banks. I couldn't just lie there motionless, minute after minute like Wildeen did. "Esther!" my mother said again.

"What is it?" I answered, without turning back to look at her.

"Don't let Philip go down the river so far! He's heading for the drop-off. Mel says he's going to drown."

"I can swim," Philip yelled. He was chucking stones at a log on the far bank, trying to hit a row of turtles sunning themselves, but so far he hadn't come within ten feet.

"No you can't," said Aunt Mel.

Philip was my ten year old cousin, Aunt Mel's only son. I hated him. He liked to pull the legs of of June bugs and pinched hard enough to make blue marks on my arms and was always reaching for my bra strap to snap it when I wasn't looking. His dad kept Philip's hair cut in a tight crewcut, and he had one of those hard boy faces. I had to sit next to him on the hot ride down to the river. I nearly always got car sick and I thought if I did this time, I'd be sure and throw up on Philip since he had been sitting next to me, farting and laughing the whole trip.

"Philip," Aunt Mel kept saying, "if you pass gas one more time, I'll slap your face."

I kept wishing she would. Please, oh, please, I'd think. Slap his face. But she never would.

If he was drowning, he wouldn't have let me save him anyway. So, while I waded slowly in the direction of where Philip was swimming, I stayed just far enough away that I wouldn't get there in time.

The Poindexter boys were horsing around on Paralysis Rock. Paralysis Rock was a big clump of rocks, if you want to be particular. They jutted over the river and formed a kind of diving platform, but the water was too shallow to go head first so a person had to half jump, with his knees tucked up under his chin, and let his rear end hit the bottom first.

The Poindexters had a family plot right next to ours in the church cemetery. In fact, they had the oldest family plot in the church yard—at least that's as far as I could tell from reading all the headstones on Decoration Day while Mother and Aunt Mel placed wreaths and cried over the headstones of Granny and Granpa and Uncle Short and the twins, baby brothers to Mother and Aunt Mel who died at six months of age, one within a day of the other. Besides the twins' grave (it had a single headstone, as they were buried together, arm in arm from what Mother tells me when I can get her to talk about it), the oldest Poindexter headstone was my favorite because there was a picture on it of the occupant, Harris Poindexter. His face, somehow transferred to porcelain and embedded in the stone, looked not much older than mine and he had this shocked

expression, hair half standing up, eyebrows raised, mouth open . . . like dying had caught him off guard. The gravestone had some dates I can't remember and the words . . . "died too young." And whenever I stood in front of his gravestone I got a creepy feeling all the way down to the heels of my feet that Harris Poindexter was looking back at me. And the way his face looked, something about his eyebrows and his open mouth, made me feel like I owed him an answer to some question I just missed hearing.

I noticed now that all of the boys on the rock had that same kind of look about them, thick dark hair, thick eyebrows that always seemed half raised, except for one that the boys called DeWayne who had sandy-colored hair and eyes so close together it looked like someone had squeezed his head together as a baby and it had never popped back out.

Mother didn't care much for the Poindexter boys. Anyone who would swim in his underwear for the whole wide world to see and with ladies present was no better than an animal. She always called them "Those Poindexter Boys."

"Ess," she said as we were unloading towels and blankets and the picnic baskets with strawberry soda pops and sandwiches already gummy from the heat, "don't go near those Poindexter boys." She used her low "you know what I mean" voice. The way she looked at me then, with a woman to woman look, made me wonder if by swimming in their thin underwear those Poindexter boys set sperm loose in the murky river water. I'd learned about sperm in gym class too. Mrs. Lee, my leathery gym teacher, had warned us in her high-pitched voice that "sperm can swim upstream in even the swiftest of currents, so determined it is to reach its destination!"

Mother didn't warn me about looking at those Poindexter boys though. Mother and Aunt Mel were lying on their stomachs with their faces away from the river and separated from Wildeen by about ten feet. They were propped up on their elbows talking about someone and paying no attention to me. So I waded thigh-high in the water and pretended to study the river bottom for crawdads and watched closely as the Poindexters pushed and shoved one another on Paralysis Rock, the thin skin of their underwear clinging to them and showing the hint of something pink bouncing around just beneath the surface.

DeWayne was wearing boxers and was just about to be shoved over the edge of the rocks to where I might get a good enough view of something to report back to my friend Debra Jean, who took gym class with me and

had once said she saw a flasher standing in a second story window of the public library (he had the shade drawn down to about his waist and was tapping at the window as she walked by on the sidewalk below so as to get her attention, but she said it was dark and she hardly saw anything at all), when all of a sudden someone came up behind me and shoved me under the water. I thought it was Philip, the little creep, so before I even came up for a breath, I grabbed his feet and yanked as hard as I could so that he came down in one loud splash, and it was only after I saw the yellow flowered bathing suit that I realized it wasn't Philip at all, but Wildeen. I stood up in the water right then and pushed the hair back out of my face and reached for her arm, saying before she even came up out of the water, "I'm sorry Aunt Wildeen. I thought it was Philip," because I figured she'd be mad at me for getting her hair wet, since most women once they get older don't like to get their hair wet when they are swimming, so they're always doing side strokes, even with their bathing caps on, the way Mother and Aunt Mel do, but when Wildeen came up sputtering and tugging here and there at her suit she was laughing so hard she could barely catch her breath.

"I saw you," she said in her loud voice like she didn't care who heard us, and she didn't, I knew that. "I saw you trying to look up those boys' shorts," she said, still laughing.

"I was looking for crawdads," I said just as loud. I could feel my face getting hot, and I wasn't sure if it was from being in the sun and water for three hours or from being mad at getting caught and having to lie about it.

Wildeen pulled the wet red scarf from her pony tail and bent over, throwing her hair out ahead of her. Even wet her hair was blond and wavy. She twisted her hair up into a tight rope and wound her red scarf around it again. As she lifted her head to look at me I could see short curls springing up like thin copper wires all over her head where her hair refused to be held in place.

"Well, you won't find any crawdads up there," she said, waving her hand in the direction of the Poindexter Boys. "But," then she winked at me, "you might find something else that bites!" She laughed again, and I could feel my face getting hotter. Wildeen said, "Come on," and she swam off in the direction of the drop-off.

I looked back at Mother and Aunt Mel. They had their heads down now so it looked like they were sleeping. Like I said, I didn't care for swimming much, and didn't like to get my hair wet because it made my cheek bones look bigger, and it emphasized my pointy chin. But when I

saw Wildeen down by the drop-off, waving at me, I just dove in and swam straight for her and when I came up out of the water she was still laughing. "You're the funniest looking swimmer I've ever seen," she said. And I thought of my pointy chin and big cheekbones and how dumb I must've looked. But instead of getting out of the water and going to sit on a towel, I laughed too.

I turned my back on everyone else, on Mother and Aunt Mel and the Poindexter Boys and Philip, and laughed as loud as I could. And that's when I understood why Mother and Aunt Mel didn't like Wildeen and why Benny was so crazy about her.

Wildeen dropped back in the water and began backstroking up the current. I was swatting dragon flies away from my shoulders and the hairs on my back stood up as the hot sun dried the water off my back. That's when Aunt Mel screamed.

It was an awful scream, not real loud, but wavering like the last sound of someone being strangled before their air passage is closed off completely.

"Oh, God!" she said. "Philip!" she ran down to the river's edge. "Esther! Where's Philip?"

Mother was off her towel too. I turned around to the log where the turtles had been sunning. There were only two left, and I watched as one slid into the water and swam further downstream.

Aunt Mel started into the water, her arms waving about and her crying out, "Philip! Baby!"

Wildeen was standing in the water now. She yelled to Mother to keep Mel out of the water. She'd muddy it up to where we couldn't see. And I remembered hearing Benny brag about how Wildeen had taken life saving classes at the Y in Chicago and how as part of her test she had to jump in the deep water with all her clothes and keep her head above water for nearly twenty minutes.

"Where'd you last see him?" Wildeen said to me.

At first I couldn't even answer. I couldn't even remember. But Wildeen yelled at me. "Where'd you last see him!"

"At the edge of the drop-off," I said, pointing. "He was by that tree, throwing rocks at the turtles."

She swam in that direction, then stood up, and moving slowly, hunched over, she swept her arms through the muddy water. "Get some help," she said to me. "Get those boys."

I turned in the direction of Paralysis Rock. I could see the boys just beyond the bluff and yelled at them. But they didn't hear over the sound of the river and their own horsing around. A few years back a four year old girl had drowned in the river. Down by Eddyville. She floated eight miles and then got caught up under the bridge. Daddy was in on that search and I remembered him telling Mother about how when they found the girl, the searchers were pulling the body along the river by its feet, and he said it was awful the way they let her head bounce against the rocks. But then when the reporters got there, the searchers were real careful with how they handled the body.

I yelled again, this time so loud it made my ears ring. And DeWayne, the one with the close eyes, came to the edge of the rock. "My cousin—we lost him. I think he's drowning somewhere," I said.

DeWayne said something to the other boys, and they all jumped off the rock together, and I pointed them in the direction of Wildeen, and they thrashed and splashed their way over to her.

She yelled at them, just like she yelled at Aunt Mel. To keep back and not thrash around. She told them to form a line and walk forward waving their arms—like this, she said, and she showed them. Once they got to the drop-off, they'd try diving. And they did just what she said and everyone got real quiet so that the only sound was the water rushing around us and Aunt Mel whimpering on the shore.

I started thinking about how it would change everybody's life, with Philip drowning. Aunt Mel would never get over it, and I was starting to feel sorry about the whole mess, when Philip walked out of the woods down near the log where I last saw him, the little creep.

"What's going on?" he said.

"Philip!" Aunt Mel wailed. She ran across the shore and threw her arms around him. Then she stood back and slapped his face.

"Ow!" Philip said.

"Don't ever do that again," she said. And she started hitting him again. She kept hitting him and hitting him until he ran from her, and even then she chased after him waving her arms to try and hit him some more.

"I just had to pee!" Philip kept saying.

"I thought you were dead! Do you realize that, young man?" she wailed. And Mother was chasing after Mel saying, "It's all right. Everything's all right!"

Philip ran for the station wagon, jumped in and locked all the doors before Aunt Mel could reach him and hit him again.

The Poindexter Boys were laughing. DeWayne looked right at me and winked.

I could hear Aunt Mel yelling at Philip to unlock the doors and him saying through the rolled-up windows, "Not until you promise to stop hitting me!"

I looked at Wildeen then. She was standing in the water, watching Aunt Mel and Philip and Mother, not smiling or frowning or anything. Just watching. And I wondered what she was thinking. Something in the way she was standing told me that one way or another, with Benny or without, Wildeen wasn't going to be around for much longer.

"Esther!" Mother yelled. "Get your things. We're leaving. The boys can just hitchhike home, for all I care."

She was gathering up the towels as she spoke, shaking the rocks from them.

But I pretended not to hear, and dove into the water swimming toward Wildeen and the edge of the drop-off.