than you are as an adult. And in drawing them, it’s a little bit of wish fulfillment. I want to draw these characters the way they think they are.”

In the preview for Paper Girls #1, it’s Halloween, and a pre-dawn glow washes the town in blue. Nothing’s out of the ordinary but a comet, slashing pink through the sky. Pedaling through the suburbs, a girl is stopped by a group of teenage guys, masked for a night of no good. They close in menacingly—their ringleader has a claw, à la Nightmare on Elm Street—when who comes to the rescue but a trio of girls? “Cool costume,” one of them taunts. They wear leg warmers, Doc Martens, and steely expressions, but there’s not a cape in sight.

Lonesome No Longer
A Nashville folk trio with Harvard roots

Swee’talking the crowd, the musicians of the contemporary folk trio Wisewater bought time, tuning up for their next song. Fiddle ready, Kate Lee turned to Forrest O’Connor ‘10, who was intently focused on his mandolin; Jim Shirey ’11 stood by, on guitar. “Forrest, do you have the story about—”

“Forrest, tell us the story about the creeks we saw in Alabama!”

During their performance in late April at Club Passim (the historic venue that once hosted Joan Baez and Bob Dylan), the group seemed winningly unacclimated to canned concert banter—earnest about their craft, easy with each other—as their set swung from an aching ballad to a blaz- ing, breakneck cover of “Johnny B. Goode.” In the past few years, Wisewater’s members have made their living by playing gigs around the country—at local breweries, coffee houses, clubs, and music festivals, but also at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry and Station Inn. Surprisingly in the age of Spotify, half their income comes from in-person CD sales of their five-song EP, titled, fittingly, The Demonstration.

“All the Pacific Northwest crowds are really great,” O’Connor reports. “The Midwest is…tough. The Northeast can be pretty hit or miss. We’ve really liked playing in the South a lot—it’s been great, really receptive.” But in their home city of Nashville—country music’s company town—where O’Connor and Lee first connected in 2013, it’s hard to be heard, he says: “Everybody and their mother is playing.”

Uniting the couple of O’Connor and Lee with the duo of O’Connor and Shirey, Wisewater can also trace its roots to Cambridge: the two men befriended each other on Shirey’s first day of freshman year. Two long-haired undergrads sharing a deep love of American roots music, they wrote songs and performed together at campus events and open mics, sometimes sneaking into Holden Chapel at night to jam. (“Oh, you boys were so bad, sneaking into the chapel,” Lee ribbed, when they told the story at Club Passim. “It’s a great dynamic,” Shirey says of the group, “because nobody has to be the third wheel for very long.”)

Growing up, O’Connor was exposed early to Americana stars from Dolly Parton to mandolinist Chris Thile, who collaborated with his father, the virtuosic violinist and fiddler Mark O’Connor. He started teaching himself the mandolin at age 13, and at 23 pursued singing through a regimen of vocal exercises gleaned from books—seeking partly, he says, to differentiate his career from his father’s. O’Connor, his bandmates agree, is naturally “intense,” a trait that dovetails with his entrepreneurial streak: after graduation he co-founded Concert Window, an online platform that enables bands to livestream their shows, and considered attending Harvard Business School. Much of the managerial work involved with promoting Wisewater comes naturally to him, and he often drives the group’s recording and video projects.

Shirey, in contrast, loved writing and performing music—he sang in church choirs growing up, and joined the Kuumba Singers at Harvard—but pursued teaching after college. He was about to start a master’s in education when he got the call asking if he would join Wisewater, in August 2014. Though he asked for 48 hours to decide, “I thought about it for about six minutes and called back and said I’d do it.” He bought a one-way ticket to Nashville, and the trio rehearsed for four days (in what a friend later described as “a musical cage match”) before hitting the road in Lee’s Dodge Caravan. Though all of them play instruments, sing, and compose, each has a strong sense of what they bring to its sound: Lee’s supple voice, Shirey’s songwriting, O’Connor’s intricate mandolin and Greek bouzouki. At some point, each entertained the idea of pursuing a solo career, but that’s a lonely life, and Wisewater’s music feels fuller than the sum of its parts. Some of their songs, like “Old Black Creek,” have what bluegrass pio-
Empathy and Imagination
What animals can teach us
by NELL PORTER BROWN

Only the Animals, by Ceridwen Dovey ’03, is a beautifully wrought, disconcerting collection of stories told by the souls of dead animals. A cat is picked off by a sniper on the Western Front; a blue mussel drowns in Pearl Harbor; a courageous tortoise is launched into Soviet-era space; and a self-mutilating parrot is abandoned in Beirut amid the 2006 Israeli air strikes. Yet Dovey lightens and layers these tales with humor, imagination, and an ingenious literary construct. Most of the animals are connected to writers—Colette, Jack Kerouac, and Gustave Flaubert, among others—who have featured animals in their own fiction, and can emulate their literary voices. (The Kerouacian mussel saying good-bye to a friend: “We didn’t understand but we let him go, hurting, as the flames of a hot red morning played upon the masts of fishing smacks and danced in the blue wavelets beneath the barnacled docks.”) Thus, what Dovey says began as “an experiment” in retelling historic incidents of mass suffering through voiceless, vulnerable beings “to shock readers into radical empathy” became, instead, “this weird mix of short story, literary biography, and essay—with lots of details that are true to life—and then also a sort of love-letter tribute to these authors who fascinate me.”

Published last year in Australia (Dovey lives in Sydney), Only the Animals elicited a helpful blurb from J.M. Coetzee, along with several awards; it was due out in the United Kingdom in August and Farrar, Straus and Giroux will release the American edition on September 15.

Some of the book’s themes—conflict, abuse of power, and the amorphous origins of cruelty, inspiration, and empathy—also surface in Dovey’s very different debut novel, Blood Kin (2007). Set in a nameless country during a military coup, the slim, edgy book mines the complexities of collusion, with an undercurrent of danger and eroticism, through the first-person accounts of the ex-president’s barber, cook, and portraitist, all of whom are imprisoned at a remote country estate.

No doubt Dovey draws from her childhood in apartheid-era South Africa. There was, she says, “a sense of being complicit [in the system] at some level because your