

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***A Place To Read***

by Michael Cohen  
Interactive Press, 2014  
243 pages  
\$24.00

Reviewed by Ryan Alessi

The act of reading is one thing, but to really love reading means sharing with others the gifts and flaws that admired writers have delivered to us across time and place. It is to interpret those writers' attempts "to describe what is indescribable," as E.B. White once put it, and remind us of what those writers reveal about the world and ourselves. That is the promise Michael Cohen makes to readers of his essays in *A Place to Read*.

Cohen, a retired literature professor, neatly ties together his personal essays with ribbons of pithy wisdom from writers he describes with familiarity and reverence, like beloved aunts and uncles he hasn't seen in years. When summarizing the effect Proust and Montaigne had on him in the frankly-named essay, "A Retiree Reads Proust and Montaigne," he explains, "both these writers provided me with what I was after: some self-indulgence and a good dose of the subjective."

It doesn't matter how many of the authors a reader has met before; Cohen will introduce you to them anew. In fact, *A Place to Read* is most fun when the reader tries to keep up with Cohen's literary associations. The author is in his element when linking Hamlet to the features of Moleskine notebooks by way of James Joyce and Oliver Wendell Holmes' writing processes as in the essay, "Notebooks." Or, in one of his strongest narratives, Cohen constructs a vision of Mexico starting with his 1965 spring break visit to a NASA tracking station in Guaymas as Gemini 3 circled the Earth. Then he somehow ends with discovering Frida Kahlo's ashes, while along the way conjuring Mary McCarthy, Alain de Botton and Susan Sontag as if they were Mexico's scenic lookouts, crammed megacities or rugged canyons.

In embracing this professorial voice, Cohen becomes a confident and unapologetic scholarly tour guide, showing the reader around the

seemingly random but intensely personal places of his life. To your left is the Barrancas del Cobre in Mexico. Straight ahead you'll see a roadside memorial outside Tucson. Here are the bookshelves being emptied as formerly treasured books are being sold off.

And often the places he shows us represent more than just backdrops or settings. Place bolsters the understanding of his life at particular stages and tethers him to specific states of mind. Place, then, is a metaphysical concept that streams through the essays. "I am located when I am in one of these places," he writes of his dual homes in Tucson, Arizona, and on the Blood River in western Kentucky.

In the title essay, Cohen invites readers to question the relationship between space and the act of absorbing what books offer us:

*When I think about the power of reading to transform place and the way real readers read anywhere, I can't help but have mixed feelings about the idea of 'reading rooms,' places designed specifically for reading.*

Cohen does stumble in the essay "Men in Uniform" when he uses outdated generalizations, presumably to amuse. Instead, they seem to jolt the reader out of the informative and thought-provoking place to read that Cohen has constructed.

Cohen begins that essay, "One of the many reasons I am glad to be male—right up there with never having to deal with menstruation and usually being able to get my carry-on out of the overhead compartment by myself—is the clothes."

Later in "Men in Uniform," Cohen describes the sentiments in Ilene Beckerman's *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, as "unthinkable except perhaps for gay men: straight men do not ordinarily associate their affective lives with their clothes or shoes."

But Cohen, as any good essayist, is inviting us into his mind, his experience, his particular shade of glasses through which this retired professor, amateur pilot, compulsive reader, happy golfer, proud father, eager traveler and shrewd observer views the world.

In doing so, Cohen spends as much effort prompting readers to think about life as he does showing how great literature can inform

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us about the joys of flying or comprehending death or about the construction pens and the nature of names. Cohen wrestles with existential questions that confound us all without straining for answers that he doesn't have:

... in fact the impatient skywatcher sees little of what the heavens offer. One cannot even begin to see dim objects until the eyes are dark-adapted, so the first twenty to thirty minutes under the stars have to be indirect gestures toward seeing.

At his best, Cohen treats the essays like indirect gestures toward understanding life. And that's worth finding a place to read.

### **Pasture Art**

by Marlin Barton

Hub City Press, 2015

155 pages

\$16.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Tanya Perkins

Southern writers—those who plant their tales south of the Mason-Dixon, who invoke the haunted, wretchedly complex pedigree of the place—follow tracks left by big shoes. O'Connor, Faulkner, Welty, Walker, Lee, all that gang. So how does a contemporary writer successfully trail such exalted company? One way is by doing what Marlin Barton does in his newest collection of short stories, *Pasture Art*, set in rural Alabama: focus on the basic mystery of human exchange and let the ghosts take care of themselves.

There is nothing exceedingly Southern-ish about these stories. I am reminded of what Anthony Ostroff once said of the locale of *Dubliners*: "Dublin as *place*, as setting in the physical sense, is not of major importance..." Then again, twenty-first-century readers don't need to have Southernisms—whatever they are, pecan pie and incessant *y'all*s,

maybe—shout from every line. Instead, what characterizes the best Southern writing is how it opens human nature at its most bruised and mysterious, maybe because of the tangled, tormented history of black, native, English and French, maybe because of the fecund landscape, the heat and humidity that sweat out secrets. Whatever the case, it is human exchange that keep us reading, and that's what is at the forefront of Barton's work.

The setting of *Pasture Art* is ostensibly Alabama's Black Belt, a swathe of fertile soil cutting through the south central part of the state. The real setting, setting as referential field to use Maggie Dunn's and Ann Morris's phrase from *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, is the stifling confine of family—mother-daughter, husband-wife, brother-brother, father-daughter (oddly, no sons)—bound on one side by faceless violence, and on the other by a bottomless desire for something just out of reach. Take, for example, the title story, "Pasture Art," which opens the collection. Leah, the teenaged protagonist, is trapped caring for her diabetic mother and housecleaning for her elderly farmer landlord, who fills his fields with fantastic sculptures made from hay bales, barrels, pipes and other detritus. His pastureland of imagination denotes everything beyond Leah's reach. In fact, it's not hard to extend the metaphor to all of Barton's conflicted protagonists, but escape is illusory until arson by an unnamed perpetrator suggests other possibilities. In Depression-era "Into Silence," another tale of toxic parent-child codependency, a transient Works Progress Administration photographer offers deaf, middle-aged Janey escape from her overbearing mother, but only after an act of violence, which, like the arson of "Pasture Art," ultimately proves ambiguous, both as crime and as redemptive gesture.

This is, perhaps, the defining characteristic of the violence that entwines itself like kudzu through the collection: vegetable-quiet, it is obscure, off camera, sometimes not even part of the now-time of plot. The culprits remain undisclosed, although Barton is good at offering tangible, if equivocal, clues. Still, the violence feels necessary somehow, as inescapable as the more overt and sudden violence of Southern Gothic classics like O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In

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the novella that concludes the collection, “Playing War,” the decades-old hunting death of a wife’s early lover is the pivot point around which a marriage spins itself out. Yet the truth of what happened is as inaccessible to the protagonist as to the reader: “She closes her eyes, shakes her head, and feels something drain out of herself, as if she’s received an injury meant for her long ago but can’t yet tell where on her body the wound has appeared.”

The collection is mostly cohesive, but two stories perplex. Given their antebellum settings, narratorial voices, supernatural allusions and nonsequential placement, “Braided Leather” and “Haints at Noon” feel somewhat out of place, notwithstanding the haunting images. As a single slave narrative told from two perspectives, the stories do acknowledge the legacy of racial violence in the deep South, and it might be argued that including them is one way of acknowledging slavery’s continuing and troubling hold.

“We create stories, but they help to create us,” Marlin Barton said in a 2005 interview with *Eclectica*. The best stories, like those in *Pasture Art*, spring, tangled and dripping, from the soil of human exchange, passions, violence and fear of the unknown. In them, we glimpse ourselves and keep reading, even though the sight, as Janey, the deaf protagonist of “Into Silence,” says, is like love, “beautiful but hard to bear.”

### ***Mad Honey Symposium***

by Sally Wen Mao

Alice James Books, 2014

128 pages

\$15.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Robert Campbell

Sally Wen Mao’s debut collection, published by Alice James Books, pairs playful sounds with deadly conceits, luscious imagery with a nagging sense of dread, like a confectionery owned and operated by a mad scientist. The potency of these poems hinges on the place

where sweetness meets danger, exemplified in the toxic flora and fauna that have evolved to attract and to poison. Mao smartly uses this mask in order to explore gender roles, sexuality, mothers and daughters, travelers, and the annals of history. The speakers in *Mad Honey Symposium* are possessed of an intoxicating music, bristling with rhythms, sound-driven, heavy with nectar.

The book opens with the sonnet “Valentine for a Flytrap,” a meditation on the venereal nature of the carnivorous plant’s handle. In this poem, Mao fuses sexuality (“I want to duel, dew-wet, in tongues”) into plant and insect-based imagery:

*Luxurious*  
spider bed, blooming from the ossuaries  
of peat moss, I love how you swindle  
the moths! This is why you were named  
for a goddess: not Boticelli’s Venus—  
nor any soft waif in the Uffizi. There’s voltage  
in your flowers...

Subtle, alliterative echoes and skillful slant rhymes charge these poems with electricity. The proposition of “Valentine for a Flytrap” is carried through the entire collection—themes of desire, craving, femaleness, poisons, and sexually-charged intoxicants. Mao’s speakers long to become true femme fatales, to eschew the guise of sweetness, as in:

If only my father could have seen me then—beating  
  
the shit out of thugs like the son he never had.  
  
It was so easy to deflect their bulk, to dart, shoot,  
  
set traps for their behemoth shapes, boulders  
  
that would crush me if not for my girl’s grace.

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Through the arc of the collection, the speakers' anxieties and fears dissolve, giving way to power and danger. The recurring "inventory of fear" in "Drop-kick Aria" moves from the concrete to the more abstract as the speaker gains ground.

Central to the collection are several poems titled "Mad Honey Soliloquy," which describe the contemporary and historical context of Turkey's "mad honey," a type of honey purported to cause increased sexual performance, but also possibly heart failure, delirium, and even death. In parts I – III, a modern couple ingest the honey and are hospitalized:

*He spoon-fed*

*me the sweetness. It felt ecstatic.*

*Like I was an infant, sucking*

*up sticky milk. Sick, as if we were wrecking  
some sanctified memory.*

In parts IV – VI, the speaker describes the ancient Greek commander Xenophon's encounters with the "mad honey"—

*Like that, my men snapped forward,  
purging everything. They purged the honey,  
the oleanders, the olives. They purged the suppers  
of all the nights they'd ever pined.  
They purged the junipers, the stars,  
the salt and seaweed.*

Thank goodness for the endnotes that provide context and source documents for these load-bearing poems; without them, parsing out details becomes a little tedious, especially compared to other poems in the collection that play fast and loose, poems like "Mad Honey Song," in which Mao really flexes her musical muscles:

*When I eat the honey, I think of your throat above my body, torqued*

*and throbbing violently. Your face among azaleas and dung. Whiskey.*

*Tumbrels carrying dung. Tumbrels carrying lips, endless fingers,  
slabs of fresh meat: venison, mutton, goat. Dung describes my lips  
on your lips...*

The "madness" of lines like these really revs the engine, driving home the idea of language-as-intoxicant, of the speaker as madwoman or queen bee, the reader as guest at the insane symposium, navigating the hive. Mao's diction crackles in poems like this, and the speaker's associative game is enjoyable in the context of her honey-delirium.

Most pleasing are the moments in which the tender poisoner seems to speak, as in "Monstera Deliciosa":

*I'm a monster because I poison the children.  
They dance around me and my fronds flutter  
with holes. They invite: Eat my fanged fruit.*

*Each scale will peel off easy, but if you eat it  
unripe, it will steal your voice...*

In the end, it is moments like this that cement the deal. Mao is incredibly skillful at whispering sweet everythings into the reader's ear, and her careful sounds sparkle against the darkness lurking beneath the surface.

Coming in at around one hundred pages, *Mad Honey Symposium* is lengthier than many poetry collections published in recent decades. Like a symposium, Mao's collection is a buzzing discussion with much breadth, the meeting place of the diverse voices that inhabit this hefty first book. Readers who enjoy poems packaged by smart conceits will have much to chew on; readers looking to get drunk on language will find even more to tempt them. For sure, these poems culminate in a symposium in the classical sense, a gathering where one can drink, converse, and become intoxicated.

***Nowhere All At Once***

by Grace Bauer

Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2014

84 pages

\$17.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Anne Delana Reeves

Somewhere. Nowhere. Everywhere. In *Nowhere All At Once*, poet Grace Bauer is *here* to remind readers that life is never a serene settling-into but a complicated journey of distractions, second-guessing, arrivals and departures. Bauer, a faculty member at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is the author of six books of poetry, including three chapbooks; in addition, she is the senior book prize reader for *Prairie Schooner*. Her poems dwell on the incidental moments in life that lead to discovery, but not always contentment. A Sunday lounging on the sofa reading or watching birds may be all we get sometimes. Aside from the late Bill Matthews, I can think of few poets so adept at observing the practicalities of life with such wit and wisdom; as Bauer writes, “The world looks different / when you are forced to face it.”

It is easy for the reader to get comfortable in Bauer’s conversational tone and commonplace images. However, her forthright and whip-smart diction can shift unexpectedly, leading the poems to acquire a more resonant and philosophical depth. Keeping the reader off balance works toward Bauer’s theme of life’s unexpected turns. For example, in the opening poem, “Nowhere All at Once,” Bauer’s speaker relaxes “contentedly” but is literally up in the air on a plane looking down at “*square, square, square,*” and realizing that *home* is “something / different each time, just as this / no and every place you are now...is where you always are.” The walking shoes and road atlas are close at hand as Bauer creates a sense of dreamy detachment and “displacement” while she travels through cities, malls, childhood, guilt, and prayers. Lots of prayers, tinged with skepticism, argument and belief. And Bauer is a believer, all heart, soul and humor in

“Unrepentant Prayer:” “Bless me, father, for I have sinned, / my last confession was ten poems ago.” Forget the ten Hail Mary’s and ten Our Father’s as penance. Life’s “inevitable fuck-ups,” Bauer claims, (her confessional chutzpah would leave any priest speechless), deserve not “contrition” but “unconditional love”. She ends the poem with a hand raising “Hallelujah. Glory be.” shout to heaven.

The ideas of absence and commitment appear, respectively, in the standout poems “The Bat” and the wonderfully titled “Our Waitress’s Marvelous Legs.” “I only wanted him out,” Bauer asserts in “The Bat,” one of her strongest poems. She is too kindhearted to want the bat dead or maimed, she just wants him out, like Shakespeare contemplating his damn spot. Ridding the bat from her house makes her feel “triumphant”. Still, when the bat limps back “dragging the wing I had mangled,” only to disappear for good, no string of garlic or cross can cure her feeling of “remorse.” “I can’t help / wondering where he’s gotten to,” she writes. And that’s the trouble. Absence is never absent, Bauer claims, but “curiously present.”

I’ve wanted a tattoo since I was thirteen, like the little red heart Janis Joplin had tattooed on her breast. After too many years to confess, I must admit that it is a commitment I haven’t been able to make. By contrast with me, the waitress Bauer encounters is “a walking illustration, adorned / to amaze.” Intrigued by her “motivation and stamina” and her suffering “to make herself a work of art,” Bauer examines the role of women’s individuality, aging, and the “contradiction” of the “body as both self and other.” While Bauer admits that her own penchant for wearing purple tights is not a “permanent commitment,” choosing to embrace a certain “personal statement on public display” is a bold decision.

The closing poem, “Small Elegy for it All,” beautifully reminds us of memory’s absolute power. Virginia Woolf, in her novel *Jacob’s Room*, views memory as permanent, shaped by and felt in the objects one holds dear, like a beloved book with certain pages turned down. Bauer also believes in “the *still present* / of memory,” not the memory of the dead but of the living, of what we leave behind in the twists and turns

that turn out to be life, “Dearly Beloved, what did we know / about just how dear it all was.” Epiphany comes in the realization and the acceptance that memory is:

*... a constant re/minder  
of absence, of what is  
no longer here, but always there.*

Sometimes, if we are lucky, the everyday moments Bauer explores grant us a clear vision of ourselves and the world around us. The opportunity for epiphany and the possibility of grace are always here.

**Coyote**

by Colin Winnette  
Les Figes Press, 2014  
86 pages  
\$17.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Sharon Mauldin Reynolds

It’s a familiar story, played out on milk cartons, talk shows and the Internet: A child has gone missing. Our hearts break for the parents, but eventually their story fades from the public eye. In *Coyote*, author Colin Winnette delves into the aftermath of such a tragedy and the gradual unraveling of the parents’ lives.

The story begins with a question: What has happened to the little girl? But this isn’t a whodunit, which typically reveals an answer. The “who” and “why” aren’t that important. It’s more about the transformation of the characters, particularly the mother, in the wake of catastrophe. The mother, who remains unnamed, is the narrator. The father is simply “her (the daughter’s) Dad.” This ambiguity is pervasive throughout the novella—from the details of the disappearance and the investigation to what the narrator does or does not reveal—and enhances the overall feeling of fear and dread.

Without their child, the parents are lost and drifting apart. She had kept them grounded. In their isolated cabin, the mother sits in a red chair by the window while her husband spends his days sitting on the porch or lying on his back in the bed. Neither ever seems to sleep. Winnette shows us a very real, believable grief. What could possibly be worse than not knowing what has happened to your child? And we get a clear picture of the little girl in the brief sections narrated by the husband, which answer the question, “what was your daughter like?” She appears to be willful and imaginative, calling herself “Delilah,” for example, and generally doing as she pleases.

But our sympathy for the mother wanes as the novella progresses. She is a quintessential unreliable narrator. Initially, she is uncertain of everything, and we soon realize that she is coming unhinged. She even voices suspicion that “being a mother might have deranged me.” At one point, she cuts off her hair, and then, while her husband sleeps, cuts his. She admits not knowing why she did this. Was it a ritual of grieving or a Delilah-like attempt to render the father helpless? The act itself, as well as the information that the little girl had referred to herself as “Delilah,” suggests it is the latter.

The father, while not particularly powerful, does appear as the stronger person in the duo. At least, he thinks more clearly. When the mother asks him what their daughter was like, “. . . he can say one-hundred percent true things that can’t be argued.” He talks about her “tiny hands,” her “thin brown hair,” and how she loved to put ketchup on everything.

When they begin appearing on talk shows, issuing appeals for the return of their daughter, he takes charge of logistics. But he soon becomes disgusted with the whole media circus and, at one point, walks off the set. When she makes a desperate attempt to gain more attention by barging into a television station, he is the one who takes her away and calms her down. But as we all know, Samson’s story did not end well.

It’s significant that the parents are unnamed and we don’t know the child’s real name. Like Amy Hempel’s characters, Winnette’s nameless, ageless characters embody more possibilities. The minimalist

style is also exemplified in the structure. Rather than chapters, there are short sections, set apart by plenty of white space. There's also very little dialogue, but because the sections are short the story moves along smoothly.

The structure of the novella is nonlinear, moving back and forth in time. Some readers may find this technique too confusing, but Winnette seems to be more concerned with creating a dark, bleak mood. He doesn't spare the reader with humor or lighthearted moments; rather he digs under the flesh, literally at times—like the coyotes that howl around the desolate landscape.

The coyote of the title roams throughout this novella. The husband kills one with a shovel at the beginning, and by the end it comes to resemble something like the black cat of Edgar Allen Poe's tale. A scavenger, the coyote is a symbol of death, its howling the stuff of nightmares. As the novella comes to its horrifying close, the narrator, listens to the howling of the coyotes and tells herself, "You just have to sit there and be afraid and let whatever it is wash over you." Which is pretty good advice for how to read this book.

### **Fanny Says**

by Nickole Brown

BOA Editions Ltd., 2015

138 pages

\$16.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Katie Riley

Nickole Brown is a popular poet in my hometown of Lexington, Kentucky, so I happily cracked open her newest collection of poems, *Fanny Says*. The volume celebrates the love between grandmothers and granddaughters, and specifically gives tribute to Brown's grandmother, Fanny. Brown traces Fanny's life through childhood, marriage, children, grandchildren, and loss of a husband. She divulges Fanny's death and struggles to accept it.

As the title of the collection suggests, these poems are what "Fanny says." Nearly every poem incorporates a Fanny sound bite. Fanny's voice roils up from the page, and the reader shares in the experience of having a raw, raucous, and loving grandmother. Brown captures Fanny's voice by transcribing Fanny's vernacular into the poems. Fanny is a tough woman, yet Southern with her "God bless her" responses. She didn't receive an education, but some "schooling." She grew up poor and doesn't tolerate dirt—"Child, you looking like some trash. / Give your grandma that dinge."

Readers are introduced to Fanny through the first poem "Fuck," Fanny's favorite cussword; we learn that in her mouth the "f-word is made so fat and slow it was a basset hound." As a noun, the cussword is a term of endearment just like "*darling, sugar pie, sweet beets.*" And the cussing shows that in spite of coming "up from poor soil, bad dirt, pure clay," Fanny is independent and a survivor, a woman Brown portrays as a "succulent, something used to precious little." Brown is clear on her opinion of Fanny's swearing; "Fuck is what she said, but what mattered was the tone—" Describing Fanny as a succulent is accurate; she's tough on the outside and soft on the inside, and able to remind Brown "*there wasn't a day when you weren't loved*".

As easy as it would be to eulogize Fanny unequivocally, Brown does not. While Brown loved her grandmother, she did not love everything she did or said. In the first section of "A Genealogy of the Word," Brown confesses that Fanny uses the n-word. Her shame at her grandmother's racist attitudes is clear: "...out of her mouth / it was visible, a skidmark, a shit / stain." This racial slur reveals a deep-seated and unreasonable distrust and fear of others, which connects with Fanny's need to keep a gun "in her roller bowl, a popcorn bowl / pink and plastic, chock full of granny / things... ." The juxtaposition of the gun with hair rollers, false eye lashes, and cold cream brings much needed humor to an otherwise uncomfortably honest poem.

Thanks to her skillful handling of personal details, Brown does not make it easy for readers to write off her grandmother despite her failings. In "Sweet Silver", Fanny's hair becomes a sculpture "teased to Jesus / and set with aerosol." Brown's description of her hair

color—"bright as abalone/ a back-lit gray kissed / with lavender, / a color that flashed / like the white underside of leaves"—evokes the natural radiant shades of gray in nature and captures the attention of the reader with its beauty. The reasons Fanny started to dye her hair become apparent. She had already given birth to a half dozen children and lost her smile to "empty room chambers and a set of false teeth." Instead of demonstrating commitment, her husband was having an affair with tennis instructor in a "little white skirt."

Brown also reveals the cruel relentlessness of society's beauty standards for women. As Brown follows Fanny to the kitchen in her later years to wash her hair, she hears her uncle sarcastically observe, "And how do you like those lowlights in her hair?" Fanny's health is so poor that even this activity leaves her "white-knuckled, she was shaking." In the end, readers take to Fanny because she is undeniably human: mistreated and resilient, cruel and fragile, like all of us.

***Systems of Vanishing***

by Michael Hettich

University of Tampa Press, 2014

106 pages

\$14.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Sherraine Pate Williams

As T.S. Eliot said in "East Coker," one of *The Four Quartets*, "In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession." Life is all about disappearances, as the title of Michael Hettich's newest book of poems, *Systems of Vanishing*, implies. Winner of the 2013 *Tampa Review Prize for Poetry*, the collection is concerned with all of those things we lose—photographs, dogs, parents, children, ourselves. But within these systems of loss, possibly because of them, Hettich manages to make us aware that losses are like ebbed waves that have left behind intricately beautiful deposits.

Hettich's poems weave together personal moments, placing pain and pleasure in relief. They do not give us the ironic musings of a consciousness turned in upon itself, smirking at the world's inevitable doom, but rather the mystic's paradox of life within death. Their language is never overly cerebral. Their speakers are flesh and blood and, like all of us, often think in quirky and imaginative ways, especially when trying to come to terms with the absurdity of loss.

*Systems of Vanishing* is dream-like in its imaginative possibilities, lucid even in its complexity. In quietly resonant language, "Empty Sky" begins with a seemingly standard meditation on the question of dreams and the viability of the soul:

*On the last healthy day of our lives we'll dream  
backward, she insisted, and unravel all our memories  
like a spun top growing smaller, back to the moment  
we were born, back to the moment we were*

*an inevitable potential, when our parents made love,  
back even farther, before they even touched,  
back when desire first awakened and the mystery  
trembled between them . . .*

Not at all strident or preachy, the collection does seem to be a subtle indictment of this culture's loss of hope and faith. Although the poems do not deal specifically in religious motifs, they are very spiritual. The final lines of "Empty Sky" startle and yet promote a new understanding of the notion of disappearance, according to which each experience can deny dissolution:

*This is why hair grows all over our bodies  
in all its tiny follicles, and why it fills with dust*

*or dusk when the weather is just right, and the windows  
glint in the sunset that was once filled with birds  
flying in small flocks just overhead  
back to their rookeries, beyond this empty sky.*



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In Hettich's universe, personal histories become significant in the context of our connections to the people we love, counteracting any vague or abstract notions like "the past." In "The Ancestors," past generations gather to ask the speaker, "You think you are alone in your moment?" and the question imparts a feeling that so much of what we bring to this life is bred into our bones, that our sense of personal history is in part a received history. In "The Prayer," Hettich takes on the process of aging and what it means to one's own sense of the world to lose a parent. In the long poem "We Were Nearly Children," the speaker fleshes out his feelings of guilt and love for a daughter who died at birth, carrying on a relationship with her through memory and loss:

*and when the first snow falls, she is that silence*

...

*we drink from sometimes when we're so thirsty*

*our words have dried up inside us, the words  
that might save something real and true*

*if we could only speak them, and so we lean down*

*and drink from that freezing river, and dunk  
our heads down under, and pull them out again*

*to sing to the world and each other...*

Love and connection are ultimately what this collection is about. Family ties make it cohere. At the end of "The Old Friend," Hettich surprises us in both a humorous and a profound way, revealing just who that old friend is, simply through the connection the speaker has to the old friend's wife, who it turns out is really his own.

I highly recommend *Systems of Vanishing* to anyone who craves to read poetry that is more than slick and superficial and yet is neither old-fashioned nor boring. If I could condense my sense of this

wonderful collection into a phrase, I would take it from Hettich's own closing poem, "Before the Day Grows Warm." In it his speaker, reading a poem, says, "*The highest good is like clear water.*" And just as this line implies, the vanishings in these poems left me with a greater clarity of this life's fragile beauty.

### **Limber**

by Angela Pelster

Sarabande Books, 2015

154 pages

\$15.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Cassidy Thompson

The title of Angela Pelster's essay collection, *Limber*, is an essay on its own. The book cover is dotted with a repeating graphic: a silhouette of one particular tree and its own vertical mirror image. *This is a book about trees*, we assume. The title seems to confirm this, but eventually we realize that the word *limber* itself is not directly related to trees, despite their arguably flexible nature. Instead, the title suggests arboreal terminology without actually using it. *Limber* contains the word *limb* and rhymes with *timber*, simultaneously referencing life (upward, outstretching growth) and death (posthumous use of wood for construction). Timber, or lumber (again one letter off from the title), comes from a tree's trunk, the very core of its being, while limbs are a tree's extroversion. Pelster named her book well.

The seventeen essays in *Limber* are a study in trees' ability to embody life and death concurrently, self and other. In the essay "Rot," in which Pelster explores the reciprocal relationship between growth and decay, she acknowledges the overuse of trees as literary symbols:

*I've lived in this house for two years now and watched the seasons  
force the maple into cycles of bloom and beauty and death and*

*nakedness, but who needs another tree metaphor about change and weathering the storms and remaining beautiful through it all? A tree is not a metaphor. A tree is a tree, and we are both only one strong wind away from falling.*

While she leaves the question slightly open—maybe we do need another tree metaphor—she turns the reading experience on its head. This essay appears two-thirds into the collection, by which point we are deeply engrossed in the work of literary tree examination, and now *trees are not metaphors?* But the declaration does not strip trees of their meaning; it elevates them further. She categorizes herself, and the *we* of humanity, with trees in their ephemerality, our susceptibility to destruction. Of all things—limbs and timber—one thing we are *not* is limber. She tells us: Trees are not the metaphor of these essays. This collection is a metaphor for trees.

In a piece near the end of the collection, a man learns how to grow trees together through a process called inosculation, after which Pelster names the essay. As a young man, the narrator takes a walk in the woods and sees something new:

*It was a sycamore, or, rather, two sycamores. They had sprouted independently, but so close to one another that they had fused and formed one trunk. The seam between them was grotesque, like the scar from an infected wound, and it dipped and bulged as if there were boils blooming beneath it. But it must have been this shape, or death. The larger might have strangled the smaller, but instead they grew and pushed and rubbed the bark off their trunks until they were raw and weeping, until they grew into something misshapen and singular.*

He learns how to manipulate trees into doing this, bending their limber trunks into artistic creations, which he turns into a tourist attraction. In a collection primarily concerned with emptiness, perhaps two trees fusing together is the opposite of a great hollow inside.

Through her own literary inosculation, Pelster constructs her collection from the timber of trees. In the process, she says, “This is what a tree is. And this is what a person is,” but she does not seem to be making a comparison. Both things are true at once. These essays are trees *and* they are people. We are dead *and* alive. We have hollow, questioning cores *and* we reach out. The tree’s empty heart is ours. Just as the doctor finds a tiny fir tree growing in a man’s chest in one essay titled “The Boys of Lake Karachay,” so we find ourselves growing within *Limber’s* grove of trees.