



Systems of Vanishing.

Michael Hettich. University of Tampa Press: Tampa, Florida, 2014

“And so I understand at least for a moment / how something and nothing can sometimes be reversed” are the opening lines to Michael Hettich’s collection of poems *Systems of Vanishing*, winner of the Tampa Review Prize for Poetry. These lines are an indicator of the transformative nature of the poetry on these pages.

Hettich’s subjects are marriage, the passage of time, and the mutability of identity and experience. In the poem “Nectar,” birds peck apart a man dozing in a hammock; his wife comes out, retrieves his pieces and restores him:

“And she spent the rest of the afternoon searching
for all the parts of me up in the trees, putting me
back together while I slept, so I’d never notice.”

Two neighbors walk their dogs; one declares “he’s been trying to live backward lately” and “think upside down.” The poem ends with this speaker achieving his desire:

He smiles then and shakes his head,
turns around and starts walking backward, calling
Watch me in a man’s voice, then a boy’s and then a little child’s

and vanishing down the street, into the suburban darkness.

The book is divided into five sections. The theme of section one appears to be transformation, a sort of stepping into other lives, including the lives of pets or wild animals, or other ways of being, human and non-human. The poem “The Lesson” opens with the lines

We all know stories of people who’ve turned into things
like trees, who woke up as an insect or a bear,
a river or a whole field of flowers.

Another poem, “The Pets,” contains these italicized lines:

*Sometimes you let yourself lie there like an old coat
or someone else’s laundry, while who you are sets off,
as a sailor in a small dinghy, pulling a steady breeze. . .*

The poem “The Need” experiences morning as a “a different kind of animal, gray-furred / and snouted, which roots around in the undergrowth” while, in another poem titled “Birds from All the Days You’ve Lived,” “the wind drew its long hair across the bedroom floor, / but the bedroom was outside now, as the houses were splintered, and the windows / were out there in the field, where windows are nothing / but the wind. . . .”

Section two addresses place and time. It opens with the command to “Unravel your stories like old rope until they won’t hold / and your boat is set free to drift.” The poems in section two have a fairytale quality, images out of dreams, images out of wishes: “And if you tell me to breathe underwater / I will do that, until I can flicker and flame / like a photograph of sunlight, because this is the small tale, / inside the larger story. . . .”

Section three moves into the interior lives of people, expressed by such lines as “if we could sneak inside her as she dreams / . . . we might / look more closely up and down meandering / alleys, peer along the hallways and alcoves / of the buildings inside her.” In another poem, “Dust Train,” the speaker explores metaphors of identity: “A person put together like a bundle of sticks, tied tight with twine and leaned in a corner / because he or she looks beautiful there. . . a person was an empty train moving through the mountains / at night and waking a woman who listens to the wind in the trees.” And the metaphor continues to unfold: “But another / kind of person is the bike someone stole from the rack in front of the library, a bike / which was given in love, for Christmas, that’s being stripped now and spray- / painted gold.”

Section four tells tales of lives that, outwardly ordinary, are brimming inwardly with awareness of moments. Section five is about poems of memory: a house with all its windows open to the season; a friend coming undone, perhaps by old age; about the birth of a stillborn child, a poem full of loss and anguish.

Birds are a recurring motif, symbols and agents of the present moment and of transformation, as well as messengers into the past and future, including what has not happened and what may never happen. The natural world seems to be metaphor for the inner lives of the people in these poems, and, at the same time, it is the landscapes and animals the characters move among. This duality creates a flowing effect, as do the enjambed lines of many of the works. For example, the title poem “Systems of Vanishing,” ponders

[I]f we could imagine another human
essence than *self*, perhaps it could be

the music of leaves
changing color, letting go

. . . There was a field with trees, and the air beyond
my breath was so clear it was nothing, like time.

And I didn’t have to see
through it to see: The air was my eyes,

and the river winding through the grass
was brimming with secrets

I thought I might know

if I lay down and let its water flow
across me for a while.

The divide between subject and object, world and self are blurred in these poems. The lines wander through the house of life and the house of the self, including the self in relationship, and both are filled with birds singing and in flight, with weather, hillsides and rivers.

While reading the poems, I found that my breathing slowed and my body stilled. I felt as if I was exploring a landscape that altered constantly yet gently around me. The unexpectedness of many images and events was, for me, one of the chief pleasures of this book. As a reader, I was drawn steadily along, one observation, one supposition, one happening passing seamlessly into the next.

Hettich shows what it can be like to experience, with the beloved Other, the world and time as change and interchange. The poetry in *Systems of Vanishing* is beautiful, wonder-filled, poignant, complex and, ultimately, joyous.

--Melanie A. Rawls

The Late Matthew Brown.

Paul Ketzle. Apprentice House, Loyola University: Baltimore, Maryland. 2015.

Paul Ketzle covers a lot of bases in his novel. The main character, Matthew Brown, is a bureaucrat and anti-hero, who's risen to the position of associate director of the Department of Corrections in an unnamed southern state. He comes from a family steeped in politics and government in what is called in the novel "the New South."

Our anti-hero ironically has a daughter named Hero, spawned from a one-night fling that he can barely remember. This satirical tale begins when Hero arrives for a first time visit. Their father/daughter relationship has recently been established by DNA testing. His daughter aged twelve turns out to be precociously witty and critical of her new found parent. She becomes especially unnerved and derisive when she learns that Matthew is charged with the task of setting up the first execution of a prisoner in decades.

On top of all of these real and potential quandaries, this bureaucrat suddenly becomes a person of possible suspicion in an investigation, involving an ecological scandal. As the former director of the Bureau of Environmental Study, he can't avoid responsibility. After he discovers a file with papers authorizing the use of a poisonous chemical, he realizes that he signed without researching and recognizing the dangers.

Matters take another downturn when he and Hero are involved in a car accident. The author describes this disaster and the aftermath. ". . . full-on spinning. . . . Then we were off the ground, airborne, soaring. . . . I have no memory of hitting the ground." Both father and daughter end up in the emergency room.

While recovering from this latest ordeal, Matthew discovers that he has been declared dead. This he learns after his daughter receives a check, as a recently declared beneficiary of his life insurance policy. Matthew's quandaries keep piling up in both tragic and comic fashion.

For my taste one of the best aspects of this book is the relationship between the badgering twelve year old and the somewhat ineffectual character of Matthew Brown. I did laugh at some of the vignettes described by Mr. Ketzle.

Father, daughter and dad's friend, Janice, attend a Civil War reenactment of the Battle of Blossom Ferry, which turns farcical:

The quiet conversation soon became more intense and evolved into an argument, with pointing and shouting and arms thrown up in frustration. Finally one blue coat raised the butt of his rifle and smacked the lone Confederate in the face. . . . The remaining line of Southerners charged out of the undergrowth in response, no longer firing shots, but hurling rocks. . . . The line of spectators took a step back as the playacting transformed into actual violence. One family rushed off toward the cars. . . . Large out-of-shape middle-agers wrestl[ed] in the wet grass with energetic twenty-somethings.

We took cover behind a low hedge. . . .

"You know, this is a little bit more realistic than I'd expected," Hero observed.

On the other hand, I found some pages of dialogue risked being somewhat long-winded and expository. These sections cropped up frequently in the second half of the book, especially in discussions involving the gone-wrong ecological project called "Rain Bird." Also, conversations about the impact of dangerous chemicals used in "Rain Bird" for insecticides risk being overlong.

However, the repartee and relationship that grows between Matthew Brown and his young daughter, Hero, offer the reader moments of comic relief. The novel also has a funny incident near the end when the main character discovers that the old family manor house that he has been restoring is actually a former slave quarter building, wrapping the narrative up with a good dose of irony.

--Margaret Howard Trammell

What I Can Tell You.

Ruth Moon Kempher. Bright Hill Press: Treadwell, New York. 2013.

Ruth Moon Kempher writes in earthy detail that may remind a reader of the poems of Seamus Heaney, the works that dig deep into the aliveness of landscape. Her love of the richness of the world just beyond the window, the garden, and the sand dune comes through clearly in her

latest collection. Though her pieces at times seem to channel the Irish Nobel Prize Winner's themes, Kempher's work is truly her own.

This love for the vividly sensory is well-captured in the poem "Wayside Flowers, Well." In just a few lines the reader becomes immersed:

O, O, the Well flows
 lovely
 gives root-room
in treacherous slime
among well-stones, to
the tiny shining stars—
the celandine.

Similarly, within "In a Land of Small Rain" the pull of the sensory details plunges the reader deeply into the poet's world:

 . . . their roots
tangled with worms, thirst together
 knotted like seines.
It's a burly world as old, ripe sap
dries into beads thick as honey—traps
for gnats and spiders—the rain's
absence felt tangible as present sun.
Trickles of sawdust dry the palms—
A small wind stirs the pines
and rustles the palmettos.

Her wordplay makes a strong music here, such as her pairing of sounds ("burly world" and "traps / for gnats"). She captures her landscapes with both imagery and song.

But Kempher covers more ground than the beauties of the natural world; she also paints powerful characters. The multiple section piece "Three for My Dad, at 97" artfully reveals nuances of character within its careful lines:

[L]ives next door, beside the brown creek
in a trailer he's rebuilt until
it's stronger now, than
when it was new—
repaints the deck he added on back then
every April, so it gleams, fresh-done

The man's practical side blends well with his toughness as Kempher envisions him "like / Captain Queeg on this quarterdeck / contemplating some fool's / court martial."

When the poet combines her eye for natural images with capturing a specific character, her lines bloom in surprising directions. In "The Sidewalk Artist's Legacy" she masterfully makes this combination work:

Look for me seaside, in those polyps you'll remember
on crabshells, sharp-edged barnacle uprisings, veined
purple, or better, blood red, sometimes on rocks, under
coiled wet seaweed filaments—watch your foot.

What I Can Tell You tells plenty with plenty well brilliance. Her poems tell more than enough to give a reader a powerful glimpse of life through precise, earthy, generous handfuls of language.

--Michael Trammell

Salt and Iron.

Gregory Byrd. Snake Nation Press: Valdosta, Georgia. 2014.

Hard stories sing brightly. This is especially true of the narratives that grace the poems in Gregory Byrd's new collection *Salt and Iron*. Whether they're tales of a father and son hunting expedition, an itinerant minister ordered to stop preaching in a city market, or a daughter learning geometry while visiting Albania, the difficulties for these narrators and characters stand starkly on the page as the compelling stories speed the readers line by line.

The piece "Rain, Steam, and Speed: Steam" (part one of a three-part poem) particularly presents a tragic scene. A train engineer recalls a shocking night in intense detail:

. . . we were going downhill
on a seven percent grade when this lady stepped out
onto the tracks. . . .

The engineer hopes once he blows the locomotive's horn, the woman will come to her senses and jump out of the way. Instead, "she just turns and looks towards [him]. [He throws] the emergency / brake, all the wheels screaming Jesus almighty" and tragedy strikes. But the next parts of the poem offer different points-of-view to give the events fullness in a way that grants a sense of transcendence beyond the event's surface layer. In the second section subtitled "Rain" a coworker at the hospital's group therapy unit recalls the woman on the tracks as someone who had "some dark thing inside her, / a dark bundle of feathers." In the coda subtitled "Speed" the scene is filtered through the woman's eyes, and we see a new vision unfolding:

When I stepped
into the tracks, I stopped somehow and looked
into the nest cradled in my laced hands.
something was shrieking at me again, loud as God
and there was a bright shining locomotive
thundering on the tracks, heaving hard and the kind face

whose heart was big enough to save the world
calling “No! No!” I smiled and looked into his eyes
and for that moment, the bird inside me lifted.

The tension between characters in Byrd’s poems drives this book forward with powerful momentum, almost as if one were turning pages in a short story collection. However, the poet gives care to the music of each line, combining narrative tension with word-song that makes his book’s pieces resonate. In “Deer Hunting in the Everglades” friction between characters is clear:

As I walked behind my father,
I aimed my carbine at his head
and wondered if other boys
had done the same thing,
trembling and unable to squeeze the trigger.

The lines in “Claire de Lune” also focus on people clashing:

When we sold the house you cried late one night,
saying you couldn’t leave the rooms. . . .
I heard the little girl’s voice again,
the simple statement whose word, like love,
would make her mother appear.
I walked out, naked in the summer heat,
sat on the couch and thought hard, trying to tell her
it will be okay. . . .

These powerful poems grip the reader with complex characters and conflicts. But it’s the careful attention to each word that makes *Salt and Iron* so strong.

--Michael Trammell

The Book of Duels.

Michael Garriga. Milkweed Editions: Minneapolis, Minnesota. 2014.

Yes, each of these tales is about a standoff, a smack-down, a battle between entities, but these fights are strikingly different from one another. A multitude of characters—from *The Bible* to Louisiana swamps, from arid Spain to the fiery Gates of Hell—make their way into these squabbles, allowing for dizzying variety and surprises.

The highly original three-part structure (featuring two “duelists” and “a witness”) of each piece gives readers a great reason to savor this book, Michael Garriga’s first collection. But the real reason is this prose writer’s gift for language. Garriga’s lyrical sentences give every page one hundred dazzling sparks. Here are a few examples:

From “Slouching Toward the Land of Nod: Abel v. Cain”:

I hold a lonely vigil, watch over the hillside speckled by sheep, wary as ever of hound and hawk because even though the lion may once have lain with the lamb, as Mother always says, it now devours them as prey. . . .

From “*Judicium Dei* or Trial by Combat: Le Gris v. Carrouges”:

I raise my long sword over my head and watch its tip touch the pale sun and I see a hawk on the wind and archers in the stands . . . as I bring the steel down . . . [he] not knowing . . . his first wife took me as her own deep secret until the day she died.

From “On Moses’s Failed Insurrection: Unbada v. Cantrell”:

I am awake but cannot flesh out the haints of sleep, as though my life’s become a dream, a shade passing before closed eyes. I cannot conjure my name nor who I was, and if I can’t, then was I ever?

From “Catfight in a Cathouse: Carol v. LaRouche

Cora and Vivian toggle and tussled and upset the lit flambeau though I caught it, screaming, *Watch da flames*. . . . [A]ll this after I’ve returned from my pleasure at Anderson’s Annex where the boys belly to the hand-carved bar and snook schooner after schooner of beer under the one hundred electric bulbs blasting the dark back in a blaze. . . .”

Another way Garriga flashes his brilliance is how he’s gone far and away beyond what most would imagine as a classic duel. These stand-offs are not solely of men walking twenty paces, turning, and firing pistols. Yes, we have Hamilton versus Burr (what good book about duels wouldn’t?), but we also have whip-fights from the 1700s; Don Quixote versus the windmill; dueling banjos from *Deliverance*; a cockfight; custody battles over young children; and even the author versus the Devil.

The more personal tales near the end of the book are especially powerful. Garriga’s narrators reach deeply within themselves to go toe to toe with internal demons that haunt the past and present. These lyrical musings go straight for the gut: “*remember that four-day binge in which you drank only rye and woke up screaming from dehydration, and in the mirror by moonlight, you saw your skin puckered and wrinkled . . . but you just added water with your bourbon next day. . . .*”

Michael Garriga's *The Book of Duels* is a short story collection to enjoy sip by sip, enjoying every bit of bite and beauty in his prose, from his words to his sentences, from the book's voices to its conflicts—all a marvelous and ingenious mix.

--Michael Trammell

