Here we have the most recent volumes by long-time stalwarts of the North Carolina poetry scene. Something Wonderful by Paul Jones and The Beasts that Vanish by Al Maginnes. Both are heftier collections than your typical slim volume of poetry, coming in right around one hundred pages each. Perhaps that’s because these poets have been around long enough to have some things to say. And perhaps because they have been around a while, it’s not surprising that poems of mortality, aging, and death are a signal feature of both books. Indeed, the first poem in The Beasts that Vanish is “The Skeleton Parade,” in which the skeletons arise “crock-kneed from the rust of their military garbs,” a nice echo of Thomas Hardy’s “Channel Firing,” and more than appropriate for the troubled times in which we find ourselves. We are later warned, “those who have left youth behind / stay away knowing soon enough they will // join that procession.” “The Conver
tions of the Body” is a meditation on body and soul by one who avers “the church of flesh was all / I would believe in” and concludes with “our bodies and the lives they inhabit / vanishing into the shapeless / vowels of our final breath.” “What We Are Coming To” imagines a kind of purgatorial afterlife where we must try and undo all the damage we have, wittingly or unwittingly, done in our lives, only to learn it’s all for naught as “nothing you do will change / any wrong or kindness you’ve done.” The poem ends with lines that could almost provide a credo for the whole collection: “The life you lived is all / you can leave behind. / Now eternity can begin.” Jones’s “At Seventy” begins pointedly and unforgiv
ingly — “Days like this, I know I’m going to die” — but then in the next line makes a turn characteris
tic of this poet: “I also know / I’m not dead yet.” The speaker lies “in grass beneath the bewil
dering blue,” admiring nature and taking “the slow way,” creating a mood similar to James Wright’s famous poem “Lying in a Hammock at William Duff’s Famous Bine Island, Minnesota.” The poem concludes with the speaker opting to “just lie here on this green bed – / fire behind me and ashesh ahead.” “My Precious Death” also begins pointedly: “I haven’t been giving it enough / thought these days.” There was a time, the speaker recalls, when “every cough, every ache / flashed like a damn police car / demanding that I pull over.” This poem belongs to a genre of poems that per
sonify Death — Emily Dickinson’s famous “Because I could not stop for Death,” where Death is described as a kindly suitor, or John Crowe Ransom’s “Piazza Piece,” which fashions Death as “a gentleman in a dustcoat.” In this case, the speaker glimpses Death in the mirror as “the skull – / faced cop behind me,” with one hand “touching the brim of his dark and silver hat / and the other, yes I saw it, on his gun.” In “Seventy-Three,” an audacious Paul Jones rewrite of Shakespeare’s beloved Sonnet-73 (“That time of year thou mayst in me behold”), the speaker finds himself “in twi
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From this, one might get the idea that all the poems in these two collections are dour, mor
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68 NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY REVIEW Fall 2022 Writers Who Teach, Teachers Who Write N C L R ONLINE

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Hannah Arendt, Men in Dark Times (Harcourt Brace, 1968) 105.
Dylan Thomas. If one has already included a poem titled "Against Bird Poems," one might as well go wholly hog and write a poem against poets, and so we have "I Too Dislike Them," appropriating its title from the famous beginning line of Marianne Moore’s poem, "I Poet." "I, too, dislike it. . ." The poem begins, "Aspiring poets are jerks / Who confuse quirks / With sound work." It’s up to the reader to decide if the speaker says this earnestly, or with tongue in cheek. From there, in a series of terse tetracts we get a survey of what several famous historical figures have said about poets: Nietzsche, who felt that poets were purposely obtuse to hide their vacuousness; Plato, who judged "They cast contempt upon the music editor, and elsewhere. Many have read his thoughtful record reviews of my taste runs / Counter to my students." They prefer, he says, typically "poetic" scenes of waterfalls, green fields, and daffodils, "While I try to explain the blossoming joys of decay, / Of alleys through poor neighborhoods, the acne / Of rust on a car left abondoned on the highway." When Maginnes learns that Stern "had spent years in community colleges," he begins, "Nixon, Watergate, / Glam rock, / the 1960s, the speaker / "Nixon, Watergate, / Of fire ever truly bought / Fire can purify and lead one toward salvation, the earth, / With its "ten thousand things" in the Buddhist tradition, is too much for it, and us.

An admission: on February 22, 2022, I was re-reading Maginnes’s poem "Stern," keenly aware that I needed to hunker down and get to work on this review. I made a few notes, and then, satisfied with my productivity, logged on to Facebook, where I promptly saw a post by my friend David Rigsbey celebrating poet Gerald Stern’s ninetieth-seventh birthday. I think I first became familiar with the poet, in terms of the lineage of his strong, supple, resonant poetic voice. Two names always come up – Richard Hugo and Philip Levine – and sometimes one or two others. From now on I may also include Gerald Stern. "Stern" begins with the speaker (pretty clearly Al Maginnes) remembering the first time he ever heard Stern read – the poem "The Dancing," on a Bill Moyers’ TV show. Stern’s poem vividly evokes the family spontaneously dancing in celebration of the end of World War II, "the father using hand and armpit / To guide the baby / To stand the first time," as well as images of the "sail / All the wheels" that led to his characterization of him as "the deli owner who rings up your Reuben, / The armchair boxing critic, or / The lawyer drafting the Talmudic passages / Make it possible to leave your estate to your fat dog / And not the grandkids who never visit or call."

Tonight, somewhere north of me, I hope Stern is writing a poem, the speaker muses, and then ends the poem with a memory of Stern giving a poetry reading, which he left "grateful for the angels of poetry the ones who come / On half-sprained wings / To feed us the scraps or / To bless all that rusts and ages, / To whom we come when we are wild enough to dance."

To end, I’ll paraphrase Neil Young, which both Jones and Maginnes would probably approve of: Paul Jones and Al Maginnes, long may they run.