WHAT SURVIVES OF US

a review by Anna McFadyen

Alana Dagenhart. *Yellow Leaves: Poems*. Redhawk Publications, 2022.

Cheryl Wilder. *Anything That Happens: Poems*. Press 53, 2021.

reviewed for NCLR since 2018, as well as for EcoTheo Review. She previously served as a chief coeditor of The Colton Review. She earned her MA in English Literature from NC State University and her BA from Meredith College, where she received the Norma Rose and Marion Fiske Welch scholarships in English and in Creative Writing. Her graduate research focused on English Romantic poetry in the context of natural history, and she continues to explore connections among art, literature, and the natural world in her work. In 2020, she was a semifinalist in the James Applewhite Poetry Prize contest.

Raleigh native ANNA MCFADYEN has

ALANA DAGENHART is a poet, artist, and teacher residing in North Carolina. She is the author of a chapbook, *Blood* (Finishing Line Press, 2016), and her poems have appeared in several literary magazines, including *Pinesong*, *Kakalak*, and *Tar River Poetry*. In her creative work and literary studies, Dagenhart focuses on global citizenry, Latin American poetics, and the intersections among science, art, and poetry. In their debut poetry collections, Alana Dagenhart and Cheryl Wilder survey death, tragedy, and family bonds with unwavering frankness. As the dust of memory continually stirs and resettles, both writers pick through the debris fields that litter individual human histories. In the aftermath of grief, their poems' speakers discover what is left of themselves, what remains of forebears within their own bodies and spirits, and how their personal decisions have impacted others. Dagenhart's Yellow Leaves and Wilder's Anything That Happens share many specific similarities, whether describing tragic car accidents, the loss of parents to esophageal cancer, unexpected joys of pregnancy, burdens of motherhood, deep love for sons, or the complex stages of sorrow. However, in the act of "Continuing," to borrow Dagenhart's term, these books' personas rearrange the shards of their identities with vastly different degrees of hope and anguish.

Because both poets use snapshots and recurring flashbacks to shape their narrators' dispositions, these collections bring to mind Kathryn Stripling Byer's declaration, "I walk among photographs / wondering who it is these people think / I am."¹ Dagenhart, whose poetry is

openly autobiographical, writes as if turning yellowed leaves in a family album, capturing portraits of her parents, children, ancestors, and cherished places, page by page. Her book's cover features a childhood photograph of herself on the knee of her father, whose remembrance fuels much of this nostalgic collection. Yet her voice is never oversentimental. Her graphic descriptions of the dying process are as unvarnished as Wilder's depictions of the car wreck that drives her collection's narrative. Wilder's poems read like a series of crime scene photos, by comparison. Unbearable flashbacks recur throughout her book, gradually revealing the tragic outcome and building suspense up to the final page. In several poems, Dagenhart and Wilder create a heightened sense of drama by arranging

sense of drama by arranging words spatially. For example, Dagenhart uses line breaks in "My Father was Nineteen" to describe a woman barreling toward a seven-year-old boy on his bicycle. The driver

blew her horn, the scared child swerved into her path.

In the moment it takes to shift one's eyes to the next line, Dagenhart leaves readers unsure of the direction the boy will swerve – in front of or away from the car – and the lines swerve on the page, too. After surviving critical miles in an ambulance, "The boy lived / ten days," we are told. Between these two spare lines, the hope of life dangles again, and the final shift feels devastating.

In this manner, both poets use staggered line indentations to mirror their poems' motions. Wilder uses this technique in three connected poems to imitate different types of "slipping" that change the narrator's life. In "Slipped I," the back-and-forth positioning of line breaks mimics the drunken dancing of the narrator and her friend. It then mirrors the tossing of keys back and forth between them, as they decide who will drive. By the end of the poem, this motion turns into the swerve of their car, which wrecks both friends' lives:

I swayed my shoulders

and you shimmied your feet to the pop harmony until the rain-slick curve

took the car

took the wheel and we slipped

until laughter was slapped from our bodies.

"Slipped II" creates further visual disorientation as the speaker flutters into consciousness at the steering wheel, only to see her friend slipping in and out of life, next to her. Even the lamppost they hit flickers "on / and off" across the page. In "Slipped III," which relates the wreck's aftermath, the speaker says, "I lost the last moment / of a person that was me." She slips into a life of guilty grief and is arrested for her crime.



Before the Crash (acrylic & mixed media on canvas) by Alana Dagenhart

Dagenhart uses this technique in "I Dream My Father," as well, to create disoriented motion. In a dream, the speaker believes her father is alive again:

I am so excited I bolt from sleep

to see him. I run into the room, and he has moved into the next room and when I round the corner

he is gone

through another door

to the next room,

and each time I advance, he's escaped me, gone ahead

Readers must chase the father's ghost with her around the page, through a maze-like house. Although these collections differ in tone and theme, such as their explorations of happy or unhappy families, each poet's craft achieves a similar sense of animation, and both personas' grief moves toward the possibility of closure.

artist, ¹ From "In the Photograph Gallery" by Kathryn Stripling Byer, rolina. *Catching Light* (Louisiana State UP, 2002).

CHERYL WILDER is the author of a chapbook, *What Binds Us* (Finishing Line Press, 2017), and her work appears in *Prime Number Magazine*, *Verse Daily*, and other publications. She lives near the Haw River in North Carolina. She gives talks and workshops on art and writing, chairs the Burlington Writers Club student writing contest, and owns a web development company. She earned her BFA from UNC Wilmington and her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She has served as writer-in-residence at *SistaWRITE* and held a residency at Sundress Academy for the Arts. She is also a founder and editor of *Waterwheel Review*.

NORTH CAROLINA WRITERS: Submit your books to the annual North Carolina book awards, given by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association and affiliates. Find eligibility and submission guidelines <u>here</u>. Due annually by July 15.

Alana Dagenhart's Yellow

108

Leaves explores a close and loving relationship with her deceased father. The collection's poems relate not only the pain she feels in his loss, but also the evergreen nature of their shared memories. Her descriptions of literary trips, natural wonders, and her own body reveal a sense of her father's continued presence. She believes she has inherited his instincts and even the rhythm of his heart, as she grapples with the darkness of bereavement. In "Blind," Dagenhart's metaphor for this phenomenon uses imagery of Table Rock (an area of Linville Gorge, NC) in springtime:

Monarchs crown her head fluttering braids to Mexico –

they don't even know to where none will survive the trip south with no map only genetic memory flying dark: black on edges of wings.

Naturalists have observed that Monarch butterflies give birth to more than one generation along their continental migration, dying so that their offspring may keep flying to where they are meant to go, to a place they have never seen. Dagenhart uses this wild miracle to embrace the beauty of the father-child relationship, which exceeds the grave, invisibly piloting offspring along their journey. She says the "rhythms" she feels in her heart "are just your / heart, Dad, winged / retinas in mine," still guiding her. Moreover, during celebrations of Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead), in some regions of Mexico, Monarch butterflies are welcomed back each fall as the souls of departed relatives. Thus, Dagenhart's beautifully complex allusion reflects her interest in Latin American cultures, which she expresses throughout Yellow Leaves.

In a Shakespearean or Vergilian turn, Dagenhart's speaker often feels as if she is seeing or conversing with her dead father and other ancestors, such as "Grandfather Clyde," whether in her waking imagination or in dreams. She even encounters the ghost of one of her literary forebears, Thomas Wolfe. In this way, her poems drift confusedly in and out of reality, hovering between death and life, past and present. Dagenhart's reference to maps in "Blind" points to another recurring theme: cartography. Her poems create maps of the world and of bodies, but the speaker cannot always find the proper key to read them. In this section, she alludes to such recent global troubles as the pandemic, Ukraine, and the border crisis. She memorializes our collective disorientation and mourning, as we have sought a map to locate our former sense of safety and normalcy. Her poem "Pandemic" even expresses relief that her father died of cancer before Covid-19's advent, "a crisis avoided / a near miss somehow," despite her grief. Dagenhart often writes about her love of the Appalachian

Mountains, but she, like Byer, is also a traveler and a wanderer in her collection. Dagenhart soars away from home across the maps she imagines, whether on pre-pandemic trips or in her dreams. She writes about places as remote as Santiago, Chile, a city so beautiful she "could not believe it to be true."

At home or abroad, Dagenhart's poetic language is full of rich, elemental imagery, hopeful realism, and joy in nature's beauty. The cairns she erects to loved ones in *Yellow Leaves*, whether to family or beloved Carolina poets like Byer and Robert Morgan, seem to turn the "untruth" of Philip Larkin's line "What will survive of us is love" into a maxim of deep sincerity.²

Cheryl Wilder's collection **Anything That Happens** tells the story of an irrevocable choice. The Haw River poet opens with her young persona's sense of invincibility: "Until I was twenty, I believed anything / wouldn't happen to me." The worst does happen, however, when her drunk driving leaves a friend wavering between a coma and death. In "Autopilot," the speaker laments, "I don't know how to grieve / for a tragedy I have



caused." Later, in "For What It's Worth," she finally admits,

there is no end to the price of crashing. A car into a pole. A friend's skull into a windshield. My longing to reach for a hand . . . What is left

but a future where I am not worth saving

In the long aftermath of this event, she feels an isolating and inescapable guilt.

Wilder's speaker admits full responsibility for the accident, saying, "[W]ho am I / if not my actions?" Nevertheless, she is unable to forgive herself and sees little possibility of redemption for her mistake. Standing before a judge in "He Called Me the Devil," she thinks, "[P] enance began / after I opened my eyes in the car / when the devil realized she could breathe." Declaring, "I don't want to be absolved," in "No Contest," she never allows herself to walk away from the scene of the crime emotionally. The poem "Bailed Out" finds her ruminating on the impossible "what if," calling it "a crossroad so difficult to leave / I built a roadside bench." As a permanent spectator to tragedy, the narrator suffers flashbacks for years, illustrated in the poem "No Contest." She says, "Then a mirage takes shape // and I'm on the same road, beside the same car, / asking the same question: What have I done?" Wilder's collection reverberates with this "howl" of regret. In "Note to Self," we learn that she has had to live "decades since // the jaws of life pried [her] open," still sitting at this crossroad. However, the collection's persona encounters a different turning point in "Speak of Crossroads," where the birth of her son gives her the love and belonging she has craved. She states, "[O]ur baby / would carry my heart / in his tiny clenched fist," and she strives to give him a good life. She finds partial grace in motherhood but still worries that "karma"

might take away her son. This woman fears the impartial scythe of chance, as well - that the worst can happen to anyone, any day, as the collection's title implies. These fears are reminiscent of "Sunflowers," by North Carolina poet Patricia Hooper, describing the death of a toddler who slipped over a cliff: "His father / had turned away only for a moment / and then looked back – the sunny path was empty."³ Whether describing chance or the persona's past crime, Wilder's poems contain the same sinister dread found in "Whoever You Are: A Letter" by Lisel Mueller: "Someone who does not know you / somewhere is cleaning his rifle, / carefully weighing the bullets / that will put you out of his life."⁴ Anything that Happens reads like one long act of "looking back" too late never seeing the cliff or the gunman. Although the automobile

accident is the focus of Wilder's collection, her book's persona struggles with a different kind of wreckage during her lifetime:



the effects of an absent father, an abusive partner, and an emotionally unavailable mother, who later has cancer. Poems in the book's second half explore how illness brings the daughter closer to her mother, as a caretaker, and how she copes with bereavement. In "Resemblance," Wilder writes, "I see her everywhere / in me more than ever / after a lifetime / of focusing on Dad." The speaker eventually becomes as haunted by her mother's death as by the wreck. As time passes, she works

toward a psychological clearing, regarding all these tragedies, but she is not entirely successful. In "Emotional House," the speaker announces, "I reclaim this house / where doors divide grief in the bedroom // from guilt simmering in the kitchen – even trauma has to eat." She eventually finds the possibility of "salvation" in "Home Safe," as Wilder ends the collection on a note of tentative hope.

³ In Patricia Hooper's *Wild Persistence* (U of Tampa Press, 2019).

ABOVE Wilder signing preorders at Scuppernong Books, Greensboro, NC, 8 March 2021

⁴ In Lisel Mueller's *Alive Together* (Louisiana State Press, 1996).

ABOVE Cheryl Wilder reading from her new book for its online launch, hosted by Press 53, 23 Mar. 2021 (<u>Watch reading here.</u>)

² From "An Arundel Tomb" by Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988).