

Alana Dagenhart's *Yellow 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 Muer-

tos (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.

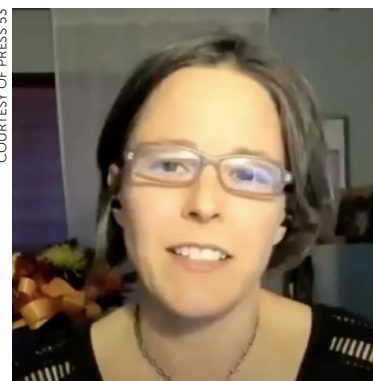
Dagenhart's reference to maps in "Blind" points to another recurring theme: cartography. Her poems create maps of the world and of bodies, but the speaker cannot always find the proper key to read them. In this section, she alludes to such recent global troubles as the pandemic, Ukraine, and the border 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



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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 sit-

ting 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:



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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. ■

ABOVE Cheryl Wilder reading from her new book for its online launch, hosted by Press 53, 23 Mar. 2021 ([Watch reading here.](#))

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

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

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

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