

## ABOUT THEIR BUSINESS, TWO CONTRASTING POETS

a review by Jim Clark

Sam Barbee. *Apertures of Voluptuous Force*. Redhawk Publishing, 2022.

Michael Loderstedt. *Why We Fished*. Redhawk Publishing, 2023.

**JIM CLARK** is Professor Emeritus of English at Barton College in Wilson, NC, where he was the Elizabeth H. Jordan Professor of Southern Literature at Barton College from 2007 until 2019. He also served as Dean of the School of Humanities. His honors include the Randall Jarell Scholarship, the Harriette Simpson Arnow Short Story Award, and the Merrill Moore Writing Award. He was also the President of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association in 2015 and of the North Carolina Writers Conference in 2017.

**SAM BARBEE** grew up in Wilmington, NC, and studied creative writing at UNC Wilmington. His poems have been published in *The Best of the Asheville Poetry Review*, *Crucible*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology VII: North Carolina*, *St. Andrews Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and *NCLR*, among others. His previous collections include *The Rain that We Needed* (Press 53, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017).

Here are two books of poems that provide a nice contrast. The first, *Why We Fished*, is by Michael Loderstedt, a relative newcomer to the North Carolina poetry scene although, importantly for the subject matter of his book, he grew up on the North Carolina barrier island of Bogue Banks. This is his first book of poems. The second, *Apertures of Voluptuous Force*, is by Sam Barbee, an active and well-known poet who has served as President of the North Carolina Poetry Society and was a founder of the popular poetry initiative Poetry in Plain Sight. This is his fourth book of poems.

Loderstedt is a visual artist, as well as a poet, and *Why We Fished* contains twenty-five black-and-white photographs that complement his poems giving the book a documentary feel, a sort of illustrated poetic memoir. As a poet, Loderstedt's strengths are narrative and imagistic; the language is carefully crafted, but in the service of the vivid image and the poignant story. The language in Barbee's poems, on the other hand, calls attention to itself. Alliteration, rhyme, and allusion are but a few of the devices Barbee deploys to craft poems that often veer toward the surreal and the carnivalesque. These poets do share some thematic concerns, however, particularly ecological ones.

The title poem of **Michael Loderstedt's** *Why We Fished*, also the book's final poem, won

the *North Carolina Literary Review's* 2021 James Applewhite Poetry Prize and is a good example of his style.\* The poem begins with a vivid, detailed catalog of items in a boy's tacklebox which sits in a corner of his room:

Leaden sinkers, bankers, pyramids  
stamped with ones, twos, and threes  
fours for heavy gales. Jerk  
Jiggers, Mirrolures, Hopkins  
some wire leaders, snap  
swivels, waiting –  
ready to go. . . .

The first strophe ends with an image of "your pole leaned / in corner, two-pieced / to fit in back of car." These lines exemplify Loderstedt's conscious minimalist style with their omission of unnecessary words such as articles. Also, the poem's use of pronouns is interesting – the poem begins with a generic character, "every boy," but then the character becomes more specific with "your pole," before settling on the first-person



COURTESY OF REDHAWK PUBLISHING

plural "we," a common choice in memoirs of place to represent the collective voice of the

\* With his performance of this poem, Loderstedt also won honorable mention in *NCLR's* premiere Jaki Shelton Green Performance Poetry Prize contest in 2023. Watch it on our [YouTube](#) Channel.

townspeople, which begins each of the final four strophes.

The second strophe cleverly employs pop culture references, in the form of 1960s television comedies such as *Gilligan's Island* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, to evoke a sense of ambivalence toward smalltown life: "the kinfolk said / move away from there. / But we never did, instead / we fished." The third strophe begins with a celebration of the kinds of narratives small, intimate communities tend to generate: "We fished for the stories." What follows are three briefly summarized stories, all involving fishing, one featuring albacore, one a heron, and one a "doormat / flounder." This strophe ends with a wry acknowledgement of fishermen's penchant for exaggeration: "your / lies stretching out across / the sand and back / under the waves," with "lies" perhaps intentionally causing the reader to think of "lines," as in fishing lines.

The fourth strophe focuses on the domestic, beginning with an image of "our mothers" dredging fish in "cornmeal, egg wash" to fry for a meal, and everyone marked by "the smell you can / never truly wash away." The final lines of this strophe show Loderstedt at his best, fitting domestic imagery to nautical metaphors for excellent effect:

Your red hands, two mullets  
folded under a pillow  
each night, the bed moving  
slowly back and forth  
shells tumbling along.

**MICHAEL LODERSTEDT** is Professor Emeritus of Kent State University where he was the Interim Director of the School of Art. He earned his BFA in Printmaking from East Carolina University in 1981 and his MFA from Kent State University in 1985. His visual art is in the Cleveland Museum of Art, Progressive Insurance, and the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. His written work is published by *Muleskinner Journal*, *Bangalore Review* and *Musepaper*, and *NCLR*, which included his photography with his poetry.



COURTESY OF REDHAWK PUBLISHING

The final strophe begins with the fatalistic declaration, "We fished because we / had to," and continues with the explanatory "our lives grown / too big for our little / houses." Loderstedt's photographs provide several examples of this forlorn image – small, dingy weatherboard houses looking out onto an immensity of water. "[W]e fished to be away," the poem continues, emphasizing the claustrophobia a sailor might feel when too long confined in a small, domestic space, "to feel each bump / and guess, scratching / for something larger than / this place, this lot." The poem ends on the ambiguous word "lot," which could mean the small plot of land a house is built on, which works well with the domestic imagery of these "little houses," but which could also open out into the more expansive but still fatalistic meaning of one's "lot in life," as in one's assigned role, or duty.

Other poems in this collection do an excellent job of exploring and developing the themes laid out in "Why We Fished." "Things I Know about My Father," "The

Pirate's Sister," "Seen & Heard," "The Eye," "Calling My Stepfather, One Year after Mom Died," and "The Colander" explore the domestic and familial, while "Divining Rod," "The Crown," "Spanish," "Bluefish Run," "Night Sailing," "13 Ways to Eat an Oyster," and "Memory of Whales" develop aspects of fishing, sailing, and the nautical life. All in all, *Why We Fished* is an impressive first book of poems, and an unusual and successful synthesis of poetry and photography.

Turning now to **Sam Barbee's** collection *Apertures of Voluptuous Force*, let's look at an almost-title poem – "The Apogee of Voluptuous Force." The poem begins with what appears to be a rather broad claim – "Our society of faux-apologists –" appears to be because the words comprise only a phrase, rather than a statement. A list then follows the dash: "Evangelists, Quacks and Duck Hunters, Politicians," presumably representative examples of these "faux-apologists." Various elements of this poem seem to argue for a satirical reading – a surrealistic satire of contemporary politics, perhaps, or at least of contemporary culture. Indeed, we do find popular evangelists increasingly involved in politics in one way or another. "Quacks?" Well, conspiracy theorists abound. "Duck Hunters?" Yes, they, too, reigned over their own political dynasty fairly recently. "Politicians?" That's the easy one. These "would-be" and

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE Photographs by Michael Loderstedt, featured in his collection, *Why We Fished*

"has-been" characters quickly become so much "noise and nostalgia," each with their own agenda, "Boosted / and braced, proud in the vanguard / of rhetorical shock, living to provoke / our touchy mishmash of culture." This is impressive writing, from the nice parallelism of "would-be" and "has been," to the verbal music supplied by the alliteration of "noise and nostalgia," and "Boosted / and braced," to the larger allusion to *Macbeth's* "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" operating in the background.

The poem's second stanza begins with an allusion to modern art, comparing the surreal carnivalesque of contemporary American culture to Picasso's cubism:

Like a cascade of Picassos –  
voluptuous force framed by brushstrokes,  
cube by cube, pulsing pigment  
onto slanted faces gleaming with divine  
perspiration – the caffeine of America.

This grotesque, hyped-up critique of American culture bears considerable resemblance to the similar critique in the second section of Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*, which begins, "The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace." Barbee continues his effective use of alliteration with "cube by cube, pulsing pigment" and "diversions parched / and fetishes parsed word by word." The poem's ending phrase – "glycerin / to lubricate the feast" – suggests, powerfully but revoltingly, the necessity of a purging of these unhealthy cultural elements to reestablish "hygiene." It's a tour de force, with the powerful language counterpoised with the powerful imagery.

The poem "Good Men and Glory" is a good example of Barbee's ecological concerns, focusing on the devastating process of fracking. Barbee again employs alliteration, along with slant rhyme and other devices, to vividly evoke the sights and sounds of extractive industry:

Thrust into bedrock,  
the H-piles wring a robotic pulse,  
punch sandstone stratum, stroke by  
stroke, droning with fracking  
what remains of the knoll,  
chiming with the strain in the knell.

The imagery, as well as the energy, evoked in the poem's opening is reminiscent of the paintings of the early twentieth-century Futurist

painters, with their gleaming machines and powerful, intricate mechanisms.

The second stanza presents a wasteland "stumped by destruction, / stunned red earth banks scraped open, / roots, stripped out into slopes," and "the rabbit and the weasel, / the wren and the rat" are warned "to // flee this crime scene" with "no / relevant witness stepping forward." The only agents operating in this nightmarish scene are mechanical, "Diesel and dump trucks the only / harbingers to blame," who only defer to "benchmarks, and their // bastard map pinned over a subterranean / atlas." The last line of the fifth stanza ironically presents the industrial fracking site in religious terms as "some gleaming city, erect on a hill." The final stanza shows the natural elements – "velvet moss and / blinding blue granite facades" – surrendering to "the hammer's peal" and "our simple ecology sealed in the fist." The inexorable industrial devastation visited upon defenseless nature in this poem, and the energetic, creative language in which it is rendered, is reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins's early poem of ecological devastation "Binsey Poplars," with its *cri de coeur*, "O if we but knew what we do / When we delve or hew – / Hack and rack the growing green!"

*Apertures of Voluptuous Force* shows a talented, sophisticated poet at the height of his powers, but also still dutifully honing his craft. These two very different poets, Michael Loderstedt and Sam Barbee, exemplify the variety and the capaciousness of the North Carolina poetry scene. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALICE OSBORN