

## CLARITY, CONSOLATION, AND THE END TO DEFINITION

a review by David E. Poston

Deborah Pope. *Wild Liar* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2023)

Katherine Soniat. *Polishing the Glass Storm: A Sequence* (Louisiana State University Press, 2023)

**DAVID E. POSTON** lives in Gastonia, NC. He is the author of two poetry chapbooks and the full-length collection *Slow of Study* (Main Street Rag, 2015). His poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Broad River Review*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Pedestal*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *NCLR*, and others. He has taught at UNC Charlotte, at Charlotte's Young Writers' Workshop and for thirty years in North Carolina public schools. He leads workshops on writing as grief therapy, most recently at Novant Health Hospice, and is an editor at *Kakalak*.

**DEBORAH POPE** is the author of four previous poetry collections, beginning with 1992's *Fanatic Heart*, which was re-issued in 2022 by Carnegie Mellon University Press as part of its Classic Contemporary Series. In 2018, she was awarded the Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry. Her work has appeared in *EPOCH*, *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Threepenny Review*, and many others. She is a Duke University Professor Emerita of English whose scholarly interests include twentieth century American poetry, women's poetry, and feminist theory.

Katherine Soniat and Deborah Pope are accomplished, award-winning North Carolina poets and teachers who have published multiple books over the last thirty years. Their new collections show how they continue to create noteworthy poetry and to explore similar themes and questions, even as they employ markedly different poetic techniques.

**Deborah Pope's *Wild Liar*** ranges from wry and playful to poignant and confessional, always with subtle command of language, pace, and form. Its themes are not new: memory, mortality, family, love, grief, the power of art and myth to challenge, and the power of nature to console. We are invited into the first section with an auditory rush of clichés in "Sometimes a Voice," echoed in the later poem "Notes for My Eulogy." In "Introduction to Poetry," Pope uses concrete imagery to provide extraordinary clarity. Poems, she writes, "sway / to their own music, like a woman balancing / a basket with clothes pounded clean in a river." In "Waning Crescent," the moon is "a thin, white wire / curved like the indentation when a hammer / just misses a nail."

Another fine examples of poetic craft, "Winter Rain," begins *in media res* with

And still it comes on,  
the sound and pound

of it drilling the roof  
with a pocking of drops  
pinging up from the tin  
like mercury pop beads

It continues in primarily two-beat lines of accentual meter that flow down the page in one single sentence. Its sonic devices – internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance – are a delight to the ear. Similarly, the closing lines of "The Old Fathers" glide down the vowel register through "journeys / of moonlight and shadow, / the dogs long since whistled home." "Solitaire," from the third section, employs slightly longer lines, enjambment that breaks syntactical units to keep the eye moving and vivid sensory details: the smell of Lifebuoy soap, the "slight *tic* when a card / is laid," the glitter glued on a wooden dowel to make a magic wand. The nostalgic images of how "The Old Fathers" passed away are beautifully comforting. "Solitaire," which appears just before a series of poems about grief, returns to the theme of the unreliability of memory as we struggle to find both meaning and consolation.

The opening playfulness turns to longing, to the reflections that arise when, as "Remainder" puts it, "suddenly you see / the years ahead are fewer / than the years behind." In "Memory for Beginners," the last line of which provides the collection's title, we find a rush of unanswerable questions, what Pope calls an "endless deciphering" of

All the lost people and times of memory,  
the remnant, the disappeared –  
like a child's game of musical chairs,  
except when the music stops  
it is the child, not the chair, that is gone.

The sense of loss is tempered by whimsicality in poems such as "Confessions of a Failed Theologian" and the decidedly wry, but not irreverent "The Duties of Saints," which notes that the literally roasted St. Lawrence must watch over comedians and chefs and St. Martha has become the patron of baristas. "Winter Solstice" relates an archetypal quest that symbolically traces the emotional arc of this collection from questioning the uncertainty of life to acceptance of it.

The middle section is a series of tightly focused portrayals of female figures from myth, art, and history who speak through these poems against exploitation and objectification. "Who does not know of the men?" begins "Pasiphaë," referring to everyone from Minos to Praxiteles to Lewis Carroll. One of the cleverest subtleties of "Daphne in Arcadia" is its title. Notice that when Apollo "saunters off, / wearing his victor's wreath" plucked from this abandoned girl, he is sauntering through the paradise imagined by male shepherds.

The most powerful poem is "Gentileschi's *Self Portrait as St. Catherine of Alexandria*," the story of how Artemisia Gentileschi was raped at age seventeen and subsequently humiliated at the trial of her rapist. Her response was her depiction of St. Catherine, martyred after besting fifty of the emperor Maxentius's orators and philosophers in debate, a story which "echoed Gentileschi's own in its defiance, vindication, / then torture on an iron-spoked wheel." Where Caravaggio give us St. Catherine in the context of masculine tropes, Gentileschi gives us

the portrait of a woman who sees what her truth  
has cost her and faces it with fated resolve.  
And subtle triumph, for close against her body  
she holds an upright martyr's palm in her fingers.  
Its stem touches her heart and tapers to a point,  
like a poised paint brush.

The final poem of the section depicts how Bellini's *Annunciation* shows the Virgin Mary "in the held moment – / not the one of announcement, / but of *before*" the angel Gabriel will stride in and forever co-opt her life and identity. Others are coopted in these poems, by artists, audiences, and critics: awkwardly exposed Lorina Liddell, the exquisitely passive Aphrodite of Knidos. But Aphrodite, though prized by men for passivity, has an influence that has lasted for two millennia. Manet's Olympia "is nobody's canvas." Like St. Catherine, like Gentileschi, she refuses to deny her own worth.

The book's final section continues to explore memory, moving through grief toward solace, often in familiar North Carolina locales: Black Mountain, Topsail Island, Raleigh's venerable Angus Barn steakhouse. There is an unflinching vulnerability in the six consecutive poems, which describe the painful contradictions of grief, climaxing in "An Evening at the Angus Barn" and "Portrait of a Marriage." It is the wife's pain which is most poignant, even as her actions seem callous. She may appall some readers when she scolds her husband for wearing his cap in an upscale restaurant, though she knows that he is chilled from chemotherapy. Yet "Portrait of a Marriage" relates how she fights to deny the unspeakable burden the couple shares, one from which release is unimaginable for either. What Pope shares in these poems rings true to anyone who has experienced the welter of bitterness, helplessness, and denial felt when one is witness to dying. The ending lines of "Losing My Father" describe perfectly (to my mind) how acceptance and what passes for solace arrive:

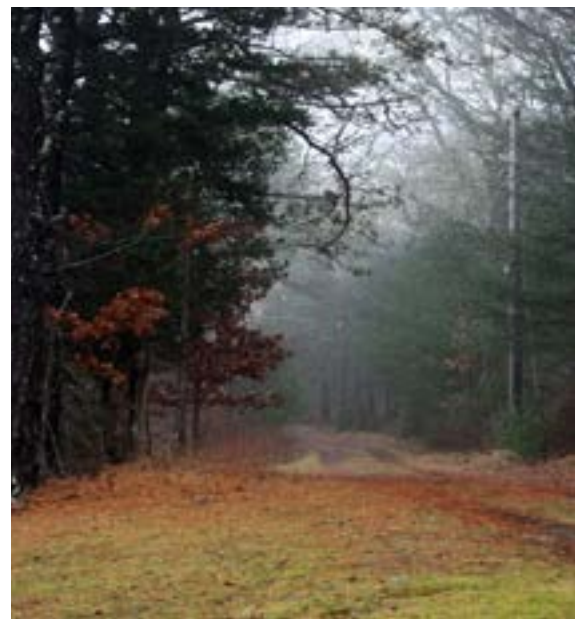
My crazy hope that he could hear,  
could be comforted by, the neighbor's mower  
seemed suddenly irreverent, wrong,  
He was beyond hearing.  
Then a great onrush of air blew into my chest  
and everything inside went small and away.  
Outside, the unspeakable ordinary  
outrageously carried on.

**KATHERINE SONIAT** has taught at the University of New Orleans, Hollins University, UNC Asheville, and Virginia Tech. Her previous collections include *Bright Stranger* (Louisiana State University Press, 2019), *The Swing Girl* (Louisiana State University Press, 2011), and *A Shared Life* (University of Iowa Press, 1993). Her work has appeared in journals such as *Gettysburg Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *New Republic*. She has been the recipient of fellowships to Bread Loaf, The MacDowell Colony, and Yaddo. Her awards include the Camden Poetry Prize, The Iowa Poetry Prize, and a Jane Kenyon Award. She lives in Asheville and teaches in the Great Smokies Writing Program.

The final two poems return to the natural world. "Hard Climb Trail" ends with

As we turn back up the trail,  
leaning together as we go, it is not  
clarity I want. What I want is to be  
in these woods for an afternoon,  
with those I love, without need  
of comfort, irony, or question.

Whatever tricks memory may have played, whatever has been lost, whatever questions may remain, love sustains.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SYLVIA FREEMAN

Now, how does one read **Katherine Soniat's** latest book, *Polishing the Glass Storm*? In her prefatory notes, Soniat advises that, as the subtitle indicates, it "is best read sequentially within each section . . . and also from section to section, as one would read a novel." What will be created here, she explains, is "a dissolving context in which time and space disintegrate on occasion – only to reassemble as a web of the vaguely familiar: Such pattern enables archetypes to play an integral role in the movement and arrangement." So – what movements, what archetypes, what web will readers find?

Regarding movement, these poems are filled with images of the flitting and the fleeting. Follow the birds: owls, phoenix, cranes, loons,

peacocks, the cry of the whippoorwill, the parrots that "tilt brilliance above the fern" in the poem "(earth:." "Bird Gnosis" tells us "(think bird and it sets you free like that)" and goes on to say

Bells from far away suggest another life –  
after / over / before  
Questions from the ocean Can love be here but not there?  
Touch the place where the heart in began No one  
asked for a home in space  
an alpha or omega

Rather than expect a beginning or an end, expect to find scenes of grief and suffering mixed with images of profound lyric beauty. One sister gazes at "shaggy natured" cloud shapes in "Plate Tectonics"; another's small bones are buried in the ground beside the Severn River. There is also the "quiet gold blur on the ridge" of the mountain lion at sunset in "A Curious Few" and "those wild diamond-caked shards of dream" in "Ameen."

Readers must surrender to the unmoored fluidity of Soniat's poetics and follow the emotional arc of the principal speaker, as grief leads to natural and supernatural explorations. Everything in these poems is at once personal and universal, idiosyncratic and archetypal, ephemeral and eternal. Time is recursive and untethered from order: events happen or have happened, were only dreamed or keep happening. Here the chronological context encompasses multiple lifetimes, the cycles of geological time, and a continuum of rebirth and reincarnation that transcends time. One does not navigate so much as intuit the seemingly real and the clearly imagined. One subliminal guide here is the concatenation of key words from one poem to the next. Interspersed throughout are titles bracketed by a beginning parenthesis and a colon, beginning with the poem "(passageway:."; each of these poems adds to an open-ended series of what the poem "Peaches" calls "moments into a new temporal pool."



PHOTOGRAPH BY SYLVIA FREEMAN

The passageways are both literal and figurative, taking us to places from the speaker's childhood and from earlier lives: Pearl Harbor, New Orleans, Asheville, Key West, Dresden, Annapolis. The preternatural awareness of children is contrasted with the hubris of their elders. The opening poem introduces the narrator's mother as a child with her cat Gray in her lap, just beginning to contemplate loss and leaving. Later, as the narrator's three-year-old granddaughter is playing under her sheet in the poem "In the Bed at Night," her smallest toy figure whispers, "You know, there's so much sadness in this world."

To read this collection as novel, think of *Lincoln in the Bardo* or *The Death of Artemio Cruz*. Expect a web of characters, rather than a linear plot, such as the suicidal woman in "(sway:" caught in mid-air in a flash of headlights. The poem "Pedagogy" begins with an acknowledgement of readers' needs: "Who knows how insistent the mind can be / about its need for words, syntax, and sudden flashes / of plot?" The center of this web is the dying of a beloved husband and father in hospice, and the web extends outward, upward, forward, and backward from there.

The archetypes are drawn from a wide range of mythologies and faith traditions, with the central figure being Kuan Yin, bodhisattva of compassion and mercy. From Egyptian myth come the hovering Ba spirit and Ma'at, who weighs the soul. Orpheus and Eurydice's doomed experience becomes a vehicle for exploration of the loss of that beloved and of the effort to defy the cycle of life and death.

In "A Curious Few," Prof. Eaglesmith ponders "how inexplicably some people get along / with the symptoms of this life, while others succumb without / trying." The poem's third section echoes the parting of Orpheus and Eurydice, recounting how the protagonist "turned away like a deceased ghost, so hard was it to walk away" before "evening came / to stretch her across the hospice then farther." The poem's final section is central to apprehending the book as a whole:

As a child she imagined death and blindness's pale flicker as the same.  
Recall the song of the empty room – litany thrust against shades.  
The end to definition.  
Without a word Kuan Yin leans in beside him  
with her seven yellow feathers of compassion. She listens for his least  
inhalation. How does breath return again and again in the humid decathlon  
of a jaguar panting?

Near the end of the collection, "The Time It Takes" opens by stating the Buddhist belief in transition of the dead into a new life. Weeks after the death of her beloved, the speaker speaks to him directly:

Two of us in your hospital room that afternoon: you mindless  
of me or who I ever was.  
Tonight, I knew you'd come, the cicadas  
that loud. It just takes time to make it up the tangled ravine,  
and into my room

In "Apostrophe," he speaks for the first time in the book, part of a dialogue between them that employs symbols found throughout the collection: mirrors, birds, weather, Kuan Yin's "bedside elixir." The next poem, "Mummy Tales," invokes the promise that the Ba Soul will welcome the beloved one back into the house of the living. However, the title poem seems to undercut that hope with thoughts like "bees in a crazed terrarium" about "myth Ba erects / skeletal joke of naked-as-you-go poor / old kings and queens relentlessly tied and bundled." The final line of the book begins with the word "SHUT" (all upper-case). However, it is not the last word here, but rather "a directive lovers and young souls deny."

For this reader, Soniat does not end in denial, however. Rather, she invites readers into what the title poem calls "the royal we / who cross every boundary and will not be set aside." She offers readers the gift of being allowed to go on the journeys experienced in these poems, to imagine consolation beyond the temporal experience.

In her poem "War Memorial," Katherine Soniat connects an interaction between the speaker's husband and hospital caregivers to a ninth-century Zen story about the fox-spirit asking abbot Baizhang for release from endless reincarnation – reincarnation into what Deborah Pope calls the "unspeakable ordinary." Both of these poets address the grief, the suffering, and the joys of this life, and both in their own way look to the transcendent. There is much to admire in both collections. Foremost, in Pope's case

it is the clarity of observed detail; in Soniat's, it is the expanse of vision, leading us to, if not acceptance, at least an awareness that transcends the need for definition. ■