KATHERINE SIONAT 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.

John is ten or eleven. He is the child, not the chair, that is gone.

The sound 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. 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 “Papaiha,” referring to everyone from Minos to Praxiteles to Lewis Carroll. One of the cleverest subtleties of “Daphne in Arca- dia” 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’s comedians and philosophers in debate, a story which “echoed Gentileschi’s own in its defiance, vindication, / then torture on an iron-spoked wheel.” Where Caravaggio gives us St. Catherine in the context of masculine tropes, Gentileschi gives us...
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.

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 dissolveing 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 poems are filled with images of 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 con-template 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 series of abrupt flashbacks. 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 the beloved and of the effort to defy the cycle of life and death.

In “A Curious Few,” Prof. Eaglesmith wonders “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 filter as the same. Recall the song of the empty room – literary thrust against shades. The end to definition.

Near the end of the collection, “The Time It Takes” opens by stating the Buddhist belief in trans- mission 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 those that employs symbols found throughout the collec- tion: 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 eects / skeletal joke of nakt-as-you-go poor / old kings and queens relentlessly tied and bledled.” 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 / cross every boundary and will not be set aside.” She offers readers the gift of being allowed to go on the jour- neys experienced in these poems, to imagine con- solation 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 – reincarna- tion 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 transcendental. 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.