

FINDING THE PLACE

a review by Jamie Tews

Kristine Langley Mahler. *Curing Season: Artifacts*. West Virginia University Press, 2022.

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KRISTINE LANGLEY MAHLER is the author of *A Calendar is a Snakeskin* (Autofocus Books, 2023). Her work has been supported by an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Nebraska Arts Council and a residency at Art at Cedar Point Biological Station. She was twice named Notable in *Best American Essays*, received the Rafael Torch Award from *Crab Orchard Review*, and won the *Sundog Lit* Collaboration Contest.

Whether it's a childhood home, a college town, or a random place of temporary residence, many people have a place they are pining for. For Kristine Langley Mahler, it's North Carolina, specifically Pitt County, which is where she spent four years of adolescence. Her family moved from Oregon to North Carolina when she was a child, and even though she was disenchanted with the place, it seems she can't let it go. *Curing Season: Artifacts* is a collection of essays about feeling out of place and working toward a reconciliation of past and present self. The collection is titled after North Carolina's tobacco season, the period in which the freshly picked tobacco is cured for use, and in these essays, Mahler puts herself through a curing season of sorts. In this exploration of self, she plays with various essay forms, experimenting with shape and image on the page.

"Club Pines," the second essay in the collection, opens with an aptly recollected description of the climate in Eastern North Carolina: "August on the coastal plains of North Carolina is like being shushed, like being smothered into agreement, a thick heat so relentless no one can raise a ruckus" (5). Here, Mahler captures the feel of coastal heat while also allud-

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ing to the way the South has, and does, shush people, how it has been hard at times to raise a ruckus. Throughout these essays, some more than others, Mahler articulates how it feels to question a past, how to question living in a place with a troubled, storied history. This opening line also seems to reflect how Mahler felt about being in North Carolina: shushed and smothered.

Mahler takes the reader to and through the homes of different girls she was friends with in North Carolina. She names various details of the interiors and exteriors of these friends' homes, and then she describes her relationship with each girl and how she felt around the girl's family. The essay is divided into single-paragraph sections, and each section has a punchy opening like "A white cockatoo screaming from its cage

in the corner, a baby brother rug-burning his knees, parents sitting under their Christmas-lights-strung gazebo in the backyard drinking cocktails and listening to Jimmy Buffett" (13), but they all work their way toward sentiment. Mahler uses her experiences in the girls' homes to highlight differences she notices between the girls' families and hers. And while being in and moving between different homes with different girls, she notices things about herself, too. This is a nostalgic, melancholic essay about Mahler as a young girl in a new place, and she uses these other girls, their homes, and their lives as a measuring stick of sorts, a way to figure out who she was beside and apart from them.

In all of the essays in the collection, there is an exploration of how the person Mahler is today makes sense of the girl

she used to be. "I am trying to bring everything into alignment," she writes in "Alignment" (177). This essay opens with astrology and gemstones. The author reports that she is a Cancer sun with an Aquarian moon. She prefers the Old Testament to the New, and she likes ancient prayers, as they bring her back to the girl she used to be. Circling back to astrology, she explains her resonance with the signs, the ways in which her Cancer sun pulls people toward her and Aquarian moon pushes people away: "it feels good to know that I am born to push and pull" (180), which, again, succinctly sums up the work of the other essays. She has been and is wrestling with what North Carolina means to her, but she also knows how much it, and those years, mean. Mahler feels she belongs to North Carolina more now than

she did when she lived there because now she knows more about its history; now she is reckoning with the ways she has changed herself and the ways she has allowed herself to be changed. Overall, in this collection Mahler is questioning, contemplating, and remembering how she grew up and how the place, North Carolina, had a hand in her development. Near the end of "Alignment," she asks, "will I still be circling around the sorrows of my life when I am 47?" (185).

Curing Season explores Pitt County, NC, and examines girlhood and loneliness. Mahler writes about carrying an assortment of sorrows with her throughout relationships and from place to place. Mahler starts and ends the collection with a porch. The final essay is called "Pull Me Through the Doorway," and in the second paragraph, she writes: "I spent hours under the overhang of my front porch in North Carolina, watching the neighborhood from a spot where I could see but not be seen. I see myself on that porch all the time, a mnemonic for my self-positioning and how I believed someone would look deeper to find that girl selecting into her own loneliness by refusing to come into the light" (187). The reader can also see her on her porch, watching people pass and contemplating what they might be wondering about. This is a collection about memory, about how we can, to an extent, choose how to remember places and periods of our lives. ■



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