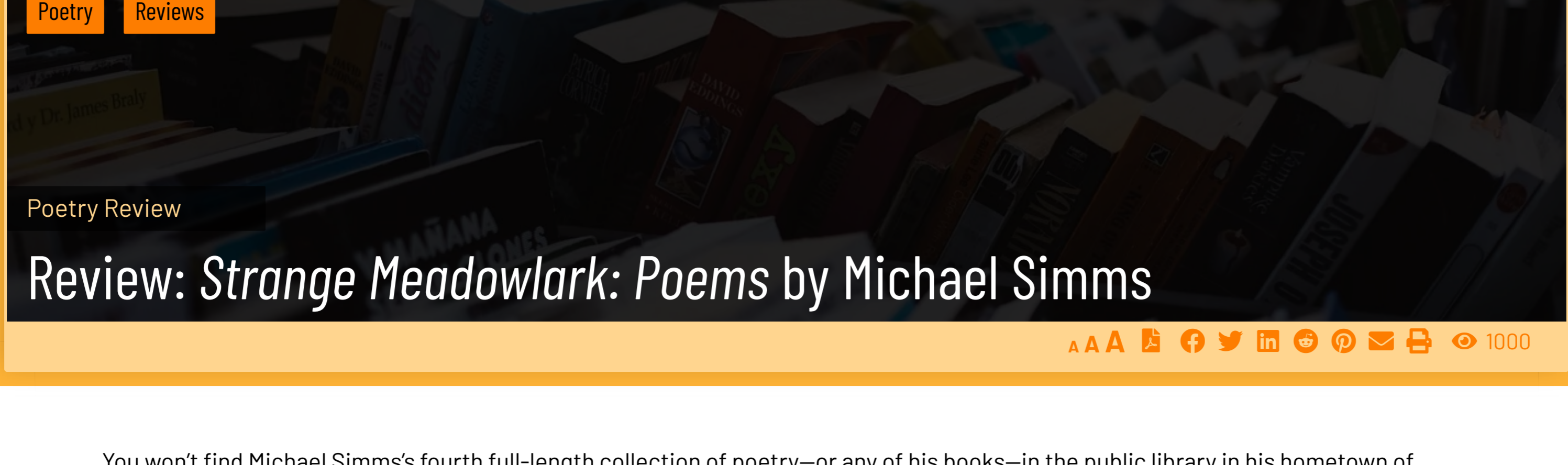


Angele Ellis 

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You won't find Michael Simms's fourth full-length collection of poetry—or any of his books—in the public library in his hometown of Llano, Texas. Llano, 65 miles northwest of Austin, was built along the Llano River, a place of great natural beauty. This little county seat is the unofficial deer capital of Texas, and also home to animals and birds such as quail, dove, turkey, feral pig, and during the winter migration season, bald eagle. Referenced repeatedly in *Strange Meadowlark*, Llano nurtured the poet's appreciation of nature, as demonstrated by its opening poem, "The Artist's Garden at Giverny," in which Simms—in short, deceptively direct stanzas that evoke William Carlos Williams—contrasts his own "small" Pittsburgh garden with the splendor of Monet's Giverny, as well as the gardens of his past:

...Years ago  
I folded compost  
  
into the soil  
to build an opulent layer  
over the dark  
  
clay of the mountain  
I terraced the earth  
with stone  
  
as I did in my father's garden  
decades ago / Now  
at the end of what I thought  
  
I knew  
white-tail graze the roses...

For the soil of Llano contains other things that compel the poet, in his sixty-eighth year of a life that for 35 years he has spent as editor and writer, husband and father, tender of home, garden, and animals, "to build an opulent layer / over the dark." These include the harsh evangelical Christianity of "my people," the abysses of child abuse and rape, criminality and addiction, mental illness and death, and *Strange Meadowlark's* tragic leitmotif: the suicide of the author's sister, Elizabeth, and the grief and guilt that flow like a river from that terrible loss. In "Odysseus in Hell," Simms frames his American narrative—by turns conversational and confessional, punctuated with moments of lyric grace—by using the hero's quest in *The Odyssey*:

...My people believe  
you can be saved  
if you ask  
and what saved me years ago  
from the hell of that house  
was poetry / strange  
angel that it was  
  
[...]  
  
Wandering  
through the underworld  
our sly but unwise hero  
  
stumbles across his mother  
who asks why  
he's come still alive to this place of shadow  
He recounts his failure  
to return home / Then he asks  
how she died and she tells him  
she died of grief  
for him  
  
My mother died of grief  
as well / Oh Lord  
my sister blew her brains out  
in a bathroom in Llano, Texas  
while her parents sat on the front porch  
enjoying the morning light

Like the ghosts of the ancient Underworld, Elizabeth returns to the poet as a tangible presence. "You Visit Me More Often Now That You're Dead" begins as a dream and ends as a vision:

...now you come at night  
when I wake from  
long bike rides through  
back roads of cane fields  
in the bright sun  
  
[...]  
  
...the pretty blonde  
gliding by smiling  
in the beautiful days  
before you were locked up  
drug-crazed violent  
ashamed of the videotapes  
shown at the trial  
  
[...]  
  
You stand by the window  
your face half in shadow  
your tall thin athletic  
body radiant / Death  
becomes you  
sister  
as you knew it would

Simms is aware—despite and because of the violence underlying his own past—of his privilege as a white man. He explores this thorny subject in poems such as "Night School," in which he comes upon a group of policemen, diligent students in his community college English class, too early and with chilling results:

...They were laughing  
about an ass whoopin they'd delivered  
to a Black kid the night before.  
  
As the cops took turns beating him,  
the boot, as they called the rookie,  
broke a bone in his hand.  
  
Bill, the gray one they called Sarge, said  
Son, never hit a guy with your fist.  
Carry a sap. Use the tools of the trade.  
  
[...]  
  
...I've often wondered  
how it feels to think of oneself  
as the hammer of justice.  
How does it feel to inflict pain  
as a joyful act  
of public service, an obligation,  
a jubilation,  
almost a prayer?

This question, to which there is no complete or satisfying answer, comes full circle in the title poem of this collection, "Strange Meadowlark." (Yes, there are meadowlarks in Texas, although they are actually a species of blackbird.) In "Strange Meadowlark," Simms weaves his lifelong love of music—including Dave Brubeck's jazz composition *Strange Meadowlark*—with a conversation with his father, who made Simms a particular target of childhood abuse, as the poet is a person with autism who did not speak until the age of five:

...When my father called  
without identifying himself  
saying simply I'm sorry  
I responded: Why? What have you done?  
Nothing nothing he said I've done nothing  
I'm just calling to say I'm sorry for everything  
  
[...]  
  
When he went on to talk about a few of his abuses  
against me, I minimized his crimes.  
I was lying of course but we both knew he was dying  
and I didn't want to send him off thinking I hated him  
although I did and I found something surprisingly transcendent  
about telling a difficult lie out of kindness.

Perhaps it is only in moments of transcendence—whether through art, nature, or love—that we truly live and appreciate the value of living. In *Strange Meadowlark*, Michael Simms wrestles with the paradoxes of existence, and reaffirms that the struggle is worthwhile.

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*Strange Meadowlark* by Michael Simms

## Purchase *Strange Meadowlark: Poems by Michael Simms*

Poetry Review Michael Simms

Angele Ellis

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Angele Ellis's work has appeared on a theater marquee—after winning Pittsburgh Filmmakers' Haiku Contest—and in over ninety publications. Her poem "Self Portrait as Wine Glass" was a finalist in the 2021 Jack Grapes Poetry Contest. She is author of *Arab on Radar* (Six Gallery), whose poems on family heritage earned a fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, *Spared* (A Main Street Rag Editor's Choice Chapbook), and *Under the Kaufmann's Clock* (Six Gallery), a poetry/fiction hybrid inspired by her adopted city of Pittsburgh.

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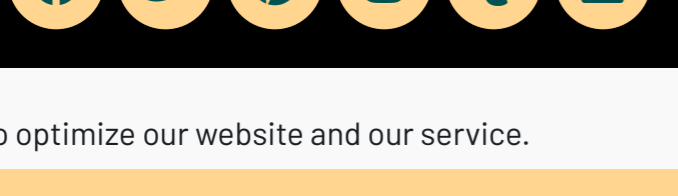
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