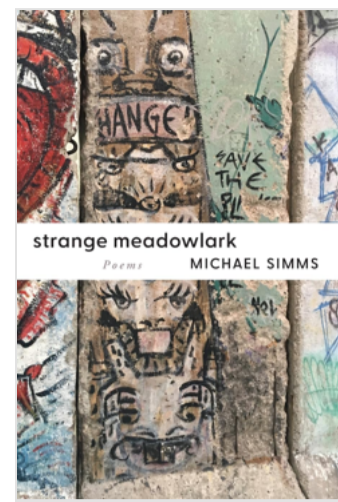


BOOK REVIEWS, POETRY REVIEWS

A review of *Strange Meadowlark* by Michael Simms

December 17, 2023



Reviewed by Michael T. Young

Strange Meadowlark

by Michael Simms

Ragged Sky Press

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Anne Lamott said, "good writing is about telling the truth." Michael Simm's poetry is about just such truth telling. It sings but sings with the kind of honesty one finds in Hayden Carruth, that deep digging to get to the heart of a matter, highly personal moments yielding universal insight. *Strange Meadowlark* is Michael Simm's fourth full-length collection, and it radiates like concentric rings from existential concerns to teleological ones, from personal to public. And in these radiating concerns it is also radiant as it pursues transcendence and endurance through the various sufferings of a difficult life: indifference of the world, loss, contradictions of how the most terrible things happen while life goes on elsewhere. As one of the early poems puts it

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 ("Odysseus in Hell," pg 12)

The music of the poems is suffused by a nuance of idiosyncrasies that leaves one having to learn how to read them, stopping and starting occasionally. But these reveal themselves as integral to the themes. For instance, there's a conspicuous absence of periods. Sometimes these absences are supplemented by back slashes, although often not. Things just run on. But such an oddity is justified in the larger arc of the book. Thus, within the context of the collection, one sees this absence of periods—a punctuation mark that brings us to a stop, that contains thoughts within reassuring boundaries—as symbolic of the absence of that sister's reassuring presence, and this dominates much of the collection. The difficulties of self and other find expression not necessarily in a blurring of distinctions but in something like the opening section's struggle with a kind of survivor's guilt. Following a poem called "Zed," which contemplates the pain of a parent surviving their child, is another poem, "Against Prayer," which wonders, addressing God:

So I ask you now
if you can save
a thief and thug
like me why take these
sweet ones? Who
are you who gives
and withholds light?
What are we to you? ("Against Prayer" pg 7)

It harkens to Psalm 8:4 where David asks God, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" But David didn't question God's goodness. In Simm's collection, the disparity between the speaker's deliverance and the death of infants—or his sister, or the abuse of a father—adds the weight of an existential problem for which he finds no easy solution. The speaker assumes the reality of God but can't reconcile the deliverance of one and the death of the other, so genuinely wonders about God's perspective, what his deal is. And it plagues the whole collection. Interestingly, there is joy and grace, but it is small, peaking through cracks in the darkness. It is transformation through the trauma that ultimately is the deliverance in the collection, the hope it points to.

Because these questions, these struggles, come through as personal for the speaker and certain losses and pains occur throughout, it seems appropriate to think of a consistent speaker of the whole collection. The absence of a sister is a through line; the hole left in life by the suicide of a loved one persists. In a later poem, time itself is seen not as an "arrow but a pothole in the road." More obviously we see it when the poem "White Rock Lake," declares, "Welcome or not, the dead intend to stay." Or in a poem about Conrad Aiken who, in youth, discovered his parents' bodies after his father killed his mother and then committed suicide, puts the poet into a lifetime loop:

a continuous
loop, a rhyme
repeating in his mind
like the single entity
of the marriage ending

Aiken was "always circling back." Just as Simms, in these poems, is always circling back to his absent sister, or the silence around his abusive father. These hauntings trouble a lot of the engagements throughout the collection where the speaker seeks transcendence. The first poem that finds a kind of genuine clarity is "The Cove." It's a meditation on a memory from childhood, when the speaker went fishing with his grandfather, and the speaker finds

My favorite part
was the quiet waiting
in birdsong

He learns out of this moment, that patience is

deep below the surface
where the water weeds
move in slow darkness
and fish glide by
with a will of their own

This poem sits roughly midway through the collection and serves as a fulcrum. From this point on there is more deliberate confrontation with the ghosts of the past. Although this confrontation was inevitable from the start.

When we remember what we'd rather forget
we see and speak more clearly
every day becomes an emergency, an emergence. . . ("A Cowboy in the Chapel," pg 21)

The hint at a butterfly transforming carries the hope in these poems, or should I say "grace"? The confrontation with the traumas of the past leads to a transformation that allows one to accept the love that we can't earn. The penultimate poem "PUPA (a meditation on becoming)" couldn't be more explicit in this transformation when it says,

a thing with wings
that doesn't resemble
hope so much
as grace, the undeserved love
that comes into our lives
as a gift

The spiritual journey that leads to this point has its shaman, or guide, in the friend Faye Donnelly. She helps the speaker understand the relationship he has to his sister in a way that allows him to accept the presence of his sister not as a hole, or an absence, but a reality he can live with and learn from. Although before we get here, we also travel through section 3 of the book, which engages some of the persistent issues, but on a national and even international level, where the personal pains are played out in terms of racism, homeliness, and the war on Ukraine. This is part of the beauty of the collection: how it allows us to see that personal struggles connect with public struggles and, in that, shows how personal healing can shed light on public healing, if, that is, we are honest enough to confront those painful things. For as I said in the beginning, these poems sing with a painful honesty, searching to find the freeing truth. They are both beautiful and painful, poems of trauma and transformation—the kind of poetry that leaves us renewed and grateful.

About the reviewer: Michael T. Young's third full-length collection, *The Infinite Doctrine of Water*, was longlisted for the Julie Suk Award. He received a Fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. His chapbook, *Living in the Counterpoint*, received the Jean Pedrick Chapbook Award. His poetry has been featured on Verse Daily and The Writer's Almanac. It has also appeared in numerous journals including Cimarron Review, Gargoyle Magazine, One, Rattle, and Valparaiso Poetry Review.

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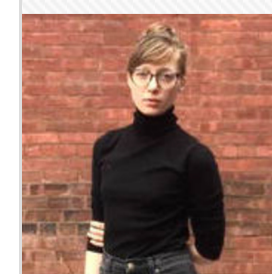
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