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**Birds of America: Poets George Looney and Michael Simms Reflect on Nature, Loss, and the Inevitable Passage of Time**

Looney, George. *The Acrobatic Company of the Invisible*. Minneapolis: The Cider Press, 2023. 81 pp. \$18.95.

Simms, Michael. *Strange Meadowlark*. Princeton: The Ragged Sky Press, 2023. 85 pp. \$18.

...Believing  
absence could be any kind of answer

is a lark, and a lark is a bird  
whose song can almost make us forget

time ignores us.

George Looney, from “The Singing of Accidental Larks”

We barely recognized ourselves  
But the crows knew  
Who we were and where we’d been  
Why we returned  
Without meaning to  
Perhaps they recognized our regret  
As theirs

Michael Simms, from “Coda: The Crows”

In recent collections, two American poets move past Dante’s dark wood and into a landscape of portents—including birds, whose songs and rushing wings evoke angels and demons, ghosts and dreams. Writing from opposite ends of Western Pennsylvania (George Looney lives in Erie and Michael Simms in Pittsburgh), both poets weigh the past against the present—the frayed but unbreakable bonds of family, the aspirations and mistakes of youth, the enduring presence of nature, the disappointments and gleanings of mature lives. If one applies Simone Weil’s aphorism *attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity* to poetry, then these are generous collections, rewarding the reader with their immersion in the moment and their creators’ strong, individual voices.

Looney—founder of the BFA in Creative Writing Program at Penn State Erie—begins *The Acrobatic Company of the Invisible* with an epigraph from the late poet William Matthews:

These may be  
the dead, the sick, those gone into rage

and madness, gone bad, but they’re our dead  
and our sick, and we will slake their lips  
with our very hearts if we must, and we must.

The undeniable claims that “our dead and our sick” have over our very hearts, as Matthews writes, provide a through line for Looney’s work in *The Acrobatic Company of the Invisible*. In “Psalms on Sheet Metal and Margaritas,” Looney—both whimsically and hauntingly—portrays ghosts as having existences that not only continue, but also evolve, in concert with those of living humans:

Each morning October’s rain on the tin roof  
of a mobile home’s added-on porch  
is what the dead hear in the first few years  
they are dead, listening from rocking chairs,  
sipping margaritas

[...]

The dead ignore the living every bit as much  
as the living ignore the dead. Which means  
now and then one of the dead is surprised  
by a woman stepping out of a shower, how

water glistens on her skin like some foreign language  
inscribed on her skin. A holy text, no doubt,  
a dead man says out loud, to no one.

In “The Consolation of the Invisible”—which contains the title of this book—the speaker’s father, suffering from dementia, sees children invisible to others getting up to “tricks” in his house. Are the children memories, fantasies, or angels? The speaker’s tone darkens and lightens—like his father’s failing mind—throughout this poem, before settling on the side of the divine:

...Do they come to make him comfortable with what waits  
after his body finally gives out, the place where having

been born and lived and died can’t be distinguished  
from never having been born? If so, maybe his wife

has it right. Maybe they *are* angels, and there’s no heaven  
better than the acrobatic company of the invisible.

Ghosts and angels also provide a leitmotif for *Strange Meadowlark*. Simms—founder of the online journal Vox Populi as well as Autumn House Press—mourns and celebrates one ghost in particular: his tragic sister, Elizabeth, whose death is announced as starkly and memorably as a news bulletin in the poem “Odyssey”:

...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 a denizen of the ancient Underworld, Elizabeth returns to the speaker as a beloved presence he cannot quite grasp. The suffering that lay at her heart—abduction and days of gang rape orchestrated by a former boyfriend—is evoked in “You Visit Me More Often Now That You’re Dead,” along with Elizabeth’s luminous, dreamlike beauty:

...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

In “Faye Donnelly Explains Why the Dead Are in Our Lives,” the titular Faye is an elderly friend living in a nursing home but still painting, a work called *Sentience* (“...Clouds / and distances and surprises / and impertinence and the sense / something large is being unsaid”). Faye consoles the speaker for the loss of Elizabeth in the face of his confusion and anger. While doing so, Faye moves the discussion—like the father in Looney’s “The Consolation of the Invisible”—toward a world beyond this mortal plane:

...When my sister first came back

she was nothing more  
than a whisper like a breeze  
...and I wasn't frightened  
by her presence but worried  
for my sanity which had never  
been shall we say robust  
so I ask Faye what she  
thinks about ghosts and  
she says they're real because  
we make them then doubt  
them / *So my sister is real  
because I want her  
beside me?* I ask and Faye  
says *Yes we bring back people  
we love when we need them  
the way we see what we want  
in the mirror sometimes and  
tell ourselves what is barely  
true and leave out a lot*

Poetry too leaves out a lot, even when it observes exquisitely, in couplets or tercets. In “Stories of Blue Herons in Late Winter” from Looney’s *The Acrobatic Company of the Invisible*, the blue heron sharing a March sky with “the somber itch of crows” and “the sparrows...condescending” is actually a kite held by a young boy:

...a bird the boy’s never seen. He thinks

the kite is the shape of a myth. Let it be  
years before he knows how wrong he is.

[...]

and he runs, the kite a hieroglyph come to life.

And in Simms’s “Pupa (a meditation on becoming)” from *Strange Meadowlark*, the life of a butterfly from caterpillar to a being with “translucent wings / ... in a fluttering arc” also evokes a child—here, the speaker’s daughter—as well as his aging but still changing self:

...tearing free

from her adolescent shell  
and flying away  
full of grace

leaving behind *Felicity*  
her favorite doll

and *Sebastian*  
the puppet  
her mother made, lifted into life  
with no voice of his own

...his painted eyes  
rolling in hollow sockets  
witness to my daily

decay, my flesh  
absorbing and releasing  
my bones dissolving

...because I'm not a solid body

but a location

Let the wonders of location and dislocation transport you in these new books by George Looney and Michael Simms.

**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.