

Garth Robinson

## Thinking in Bug Time

Thorpe Moeckel. *According to Sand* (Mercer University Press, 2022).

Towards the start of *According to Sand*, Thorpe Moeckel writes of trying “to think in bug time/as though a day was a season and a season was a life.” Reading the poems in this collection, which all take the natural world as their central subject, I do get the sense of time gone liquid, of a perspective both honed and made strange. You can say this is bug time. You can say that Moeckel’s eyes are bug eyes, his heart a bug heart. His is a collection that is deeply of the woods, the mountains, the puddles and the sweet swamps.

Moeckel—who directs the Jackson Center for Creative Writing at Hollins University, where I earned my MFA—is profoundly weird. In *According to Sand*, trees are “acorned & gnomic.” Dragonflies “stirred summer’s soup,” and the heron’s call is a “gravelly flatulence.” Even God himself is an “old trotliner.” Moeckel’s lines have a tendency to break in unexpected places, or to go drifting away across the page. Ampersands abound. He is also a hearty inventor of words: “Olivewhite,” “antsoul,” the nuthatch with its “whawhawant, its cling & vlrp.”

Because nature itself is profoundly weird and fabulous and grotesque, and because our more familiar language fails in every regard to describe it, Moeckel’s weirdness is only fitting. He writes of the slug and the damselfly so well and so startlingly that you might think these critters have told him certain secrets of their lives.

Yet it’s not to say that Moeckel is unconcerned with his fellow humans, or that we’re absent from these poems. Children, brothers, surfboards, boats, marriage; these appear in the collection, but often blurred, or approximate, at a distance. We’re used to thinking of nature as setting, as the thing that goes on behind our dramas of love and war, but in Moeckel’s work it is the people who are often fuzzy or indistinct.

But every now and then, Moeckel will come out with a line so astonishing and human that you’re reminded he’s just some guy in awe of this world:

If sweetness had a sound,  
and sweetness had a sound,  
it dipped my heart in summer’s butter  
a while. Well,  
it did. It fried me good.

And isn't that just right? The slow sizzle, and the pop?

In his bio, Moeckel writes that he loves to explore “the good woods, waterways, and ridges of Virginia and West Virginia.” The poems in *According to Sand* are lovingly local, devoted to calling things by their names (even when these names have yet to be thought up). Moeckel is a wonderful explorer and chronicler of the good woods of Appalachia, and he deserves to be read far beyond.