

Rick Campbell

Resiliency

Michael Hettich, *A Sharper Silence* (Terrapin Books 2025) and
The Lucky Man (self-published 2025).

Poetry begins with elegy, in extremity.

—Donald Hall

Michael Hettich is a prolific poet; he's published more than a dozen books in his career. The poems in these books continue in his style that a reviewer once called domestic surrealism. He's always been a shapeshifter; he merges the human with the natural world. He melds with gardens, forests, mountains, bears and sometimes other people. When Hettich writes about nature, he's not just observing it, he's often part and parcel of it; he becomes what he writes about. In "Yearn," he writes, "If I lay down for a few days, I might become a pond/reflecting what I can't allow inside me . . ." He becomes the pond, and it's a metaphor for his psyche that tries to limit what can touch him because now he feels that the world that's coming will not be gentle.

For Hettich, the boundary between human and nature—animals, trees, rivers, forests—is not fixed or solid. Perhaps if we look closely enough at ourselves in nature, we too might see that for all of us there is no being outside of or separate from nature, but we tend to encase ourselves in a bubble wrap of difference, of either/or of human/animal. Not Hettich. In his poem "Prayer Flags," as he waits with Colleen to receive the results of her latest cancer scan, he's dozing and then wakened by their neighborhood bear who is "adolescent and clumsy, who walks slightly pigeon toed while sniffing a stump." The bear is an everyday reality, not an animal to be feared. In fact, he's a respite from their fear that the coming news won't be good.

Reviewers of *A Sharper Silence* have, maybe for understandable reasons, tended to read these poems as an elegy for the poet's spouse, Colleen. She died in January of 2025, and she was known to many readers familiar with Hettich's work. I think a more accurate reading is that these poems seek to prepare the poet for the great loss that he knows he can't avoid. His beloved has been battling cancer, and he knows in his heart that she won't win. He knows he will have to figure out how to go one without her. In "Simply Breathing," he says, "I've been breaking things, so I can try/to mend them." He's practicing for the life that's coming. In the prefatory poem, "The Secret," he writes about how it would feel to dream alone and "how it would stun me to

Kestrel

wake up without/her breathing beside me.” This is, of course, what’s all too soon about to happen. Poems, lines like these, which make up the heart of this book, are a prefatory elegy, a prayer for strength.

The final section of *A Sharper Silence* contains “A Strange Sort of Wonder,” a long poem that’s a narrative about the terrible destruction of Hurricane Helene but also about the harsh conditions that Colleen and Michael have endured: cancer, chemo, pain, sorrow, loss. The story of the storm’s destruction is sometimes lyrical: the oaks sigh and “let themselves fall/into each other’s arms/like lovers.” Sometimes it reads like the news, discussing the loss of power, the flooded creek, the struggle to get Colleen to the hospital for the care she needs. Later, the poem’s wistful. Colleen wants to sleep because “sleep allowed her/to feel her body as though her body/was still taut and skittish.” Near the end the poem asks, “Will we leave any traces when we vanish from our bodies/the way the downed trees/leave their traces across the land?” The storm is a metaphor for Colleen’s death that is too imminent and for our deaths too, whenever they may come. In “First Light,” Hettich again talks of the storm’s destruction, of their creek and its inhabitants buried in a landslide, and concludes that yes, it, we, will recover; maybe he won’t see it, but he believes that “life itself as we know it, . . . somehow/it sings, it sings in us still.” The earth is resilient, and we, its people, its poets, are too.

The second book here, *A Lucky Man*, is a memorial for Colleen. It gathers poems about her from his previous collections. In the collection’s introduction, Hettich says that he was asked to read a poem about Colleen and that he found it “an oddly daunting task since, to my mind at least, almost every poem I’ve ever written is in some way a love poem to her.” The book begins nearly fifty years ago in Colorado when they’ve just met and then sleep beside a mountain lake; deer come close; they dream. The poem’s final line is, “the length of a life.” This short line is the book’s long theme. The collection concludes in an unnamed place that might be here and everywhere, now and what’s left of forever. Titled, simply, “Love Poem,” the speaker listens to hummingbirds sing:

I will always miss you in the morning, with the sunlight
I will always miss you when I open any door.

I will always miss you, until I blow away myself
glittering a little, like dust.

The good reader knows that it’s not, or not just, hummingbirds singing this love song.