

Brittany Winland

## **The State of Hope**

Lesley Wheeler. *The State She's In*. Tinderbox Editions, 2020.

To truly know a place requires a split perspective—to see it both up-close and from a distance. Lesley Wheeler's new poetry collection dwells in this duality and makes the persuasive case that real hope is only viable through an honest reckoning with our position in the pervasive historical structures of violence. In Wheeler's case, the place is Virginia, or as she alternately calls it, "Dixie" and "the Confederacy." Because Wheeler did not grow up in the South, but has lived there for a large part of her adult life, her view and voice communicates both familiarity and separation. *The State She's In* cleverly draws on the double meaning of its title with poems that explore Wheeler's experience living in the actual state of Virginia and also the experience of living—and aging—in a physical human body.

There is a particular resonance reading Wheeler's collection in our present moment—with Confederate statues being toppled and wide-spread Black Lives Matter protests energizing the country. Wheeler insistently probes the undergrowth of the region's relationship to colonization and slavery. In a particularly effective triptych of poems, Wheeler invokes the theft of indigenous lands by slowly erasing most of her words in the first version, "Before Lexington," until all that's left is implication and culpability in the third, "Unsettled."

Sometimes ambivalent, most often stridently critical, the poems in this collection are never neutral, and one of Wheeler's greatest strengths is that she does not flinch from examining her own complicity in racist systems and histories, turning her exacting eye to Washington and Lee University, where she teaches. "John Robinson's List, 1826" and "Bells for Henry Allen" name the slaves bequeathed to the college—most of which were sold in contravention of the original will—to draw a direct line between the slave trade and the current campus. The money from their sale "translated to red brick buildings, / lichened shady trees, and my salary," Wheeler insists, noting that "the current college president declares / he won't apologize," even as past violence echoes today through the deaths of black citizens at the hands of police. In "Five-Star Reviews of Lee Chapel," Wheeler turns the found words of visitors to the monument of Robert E. Lee into a bewildering, maddening monument of bitterness, a survey of willfully ignorant defenses of Confederate monuments we are witnessing nation-

wide right now.

*The State She's In* throbs with danger: in everyday encounters like the Kroger check-out line, a racist ad in the newspaper, even deep inside the body susceptible to sickness and pain. Wheeler describes her mother's fight with cancer, her own body's journey into middle age—including, memorably and with dark humor, a colonoscopy—and the lingering menace of racial and gendered violence all around her. The 2016 presidential election, and particularly the rhetoric surrounding Clinton as a female candidate, haunts the collection. In "Credit," she describes a political disagreement with a grocery store cashier, and wonders

which of us ought to be kinder, knowing his feet  
must ache, his hands look raw, but feeling like dirt,  
like a *pussy*, to cash that word in, to be grabbed or  
judged not fit for grabbing . . .  
as I take my wealthy self back to a job where I serve  
women and men who at least pretend to value me,  
although I don't pretend to know what that's worth.

Wheeler's willingness to examine and question herself with the same searing vision she aims at her uneasily-adopted state infuses the collection with an integrity that makes every damning observation that much more potent. These poems are often angry, but they are also generous and acutely, warmly human. "Malice won't sit where you mapped it," Wheeler tells herself—and us. "Stop knowing / everything and look around."

An attentiveness to the land and its nuance adds to the beauty and complexity of the collection. Wheeler names and describes its rivers and mountains, its trees and weeds. Under her observant eye, the land comes vibrantly alive, a character in its own right. While Wheeler nods to the ways we have spoiled and polluted it, the land often offers itself through her words as muse and comfort. In "Evaporative Haibun," she acknowledges griefs both far and near—"migrant caravans massing," "friends reel through illness"—but insists too upon our capacity to care for each other and our world:

But a person wants to say. But  
a person wants to try. To spend the prickly minutes anticipating  
peonies. A lush dream of roses growing indoors, climbing the  
trellis of the bed, drawing bees.

This stubborn claim on our better natures manages to render Wheeler's wonderfully prickly, unfailingly honest collection also, ultimately, a

## *Kestrel*

hopeful one. Just as we cannot really know a place without looking closely at its worst qualities, we cannot be better versions of ourselves without the full measure of our faults. “Talking to mountains or you is / the same as talking to myself,” writes Wheeler, “just as impossible / & just as hopeful.” These poems suggest that a state of hope—in spite and because of all our grief, anger, and shame—is a deliberate and necessary place to live.

