

Ian C. Williams

Fixed In Limbo

Gaylord Brewer. *Country of Ghost*. Red Hen Press 2015.

Gaylord Brewer's ninth collection of poetry, *Country of Ghost*, observes the mysterious from a distance only to meet with it intimately, elucidating and complicating our understanding of the invisible. Following the jaded guide only ever referred to as Ghost, Brewer immerses the reader in deep reflection, addressing isolation, the intersection of love and loss, and the tenuous relationship of the corporeal and the ethereal. Brewer's language blends artfully intricate word choice and narrative voice. At once concrete and ephemeral, his imagery appears for a moment, then fades away, dragging the reader like a specter through these poems. Over the course of the collection, the speaker reaches out to Ghost, and through the speaker's sentimental, enamored wonder, we too desire to speak to the apparition, to ask him where he has been, where he is going, who he was before—questions that are never fully answered.

Loneliness permeates these poems, stressing Ghost's dilemma of being both present and absent. As the speaker calls to Ghost, he asks our questions for us, his voice becoming the channel through which we communicate. In "Becoming Ghost," Brewer asks, Where are you going? Where you have arrived, of course. Recognize this place and, perhaps, weep or smile at the knowledge you pursued. The loneliness found instead, its barbarism and solace.

Even while we accompany the speaker, we question Ghost's isolation. While he does occupy the hollow space between life and death, there is a community in this place. Not only can the speaker see and, in some capacity, communicate with Ghost, there are other specters that fill his realm. In "At the Praça Del Rey, Ghost Acknowledges One of His Own," Ghost addresses "Scarecrow" and exchanges "four dull coins" with him. At other points, Ghost interacts with both the dead and the living, but never embraces either community, instead resorting to the isolation that consumes him. We're never provided with any solid explanation for his actions, and we're left to wonder.

While we view Ghost with a sense of haunted curiosity, Ghost does not see himself as possessing value. His existence is marked by his own hypercriticism. In "Ghost Paints a Self-Portrait at 2:00 A.M., No Cracked Mirror Necessary," Ghost is described as his own "harshest critic," and his work as a "minor study of agony." This criticism progresses to misery, exemplified as Ghost views his reflection on the bus:

The Other's got you in its sights,
mocking each nod or grimace,
doubling the signature scowl,
the sham of lifetime's mask.
Mimicking your whole bloody life's story
and not much impressed.

Ghost begs the universe for an opportunity to make up for the mistakes of his life. Brewer addresses the spirit, voicing the suffering Ghost feels, saying, "if there were a ghost // of a chance for one blessing more . . . you'd pray / till the hollow body trembled." Though we may ask, we never receive an explanation for why Ghost feels such deep self-loathing.

As we move through the collection, Brewer protects Ghost's past life and mistakes, but glimpses of his marriage and fractured relationships surface every now and again. Even in death, Ghost longs for his wife. He pleads for her to "share perhaps / one scant moment of this country to which / I have returned." In "Ghost Writes a Postcard to His Wife," his words ache with regret as he quietly acknowledges his failures as "faded demands / for a sorry last attempt at remedy." The tragedy of loss

follows Ghost as closely as Brewer does, reminding him of every mistake. These shortcomings are left vague and undeclared, as abstract regrets that define Ghost's existence.

At the beginning of *Country of Ghost*, it is easy to expect Brewer to answer the questions that arise—who is Ghost? What is his relationship with the world, and will he ever find reconciliation with the things that torment him? While we long for these answers, we, like Ghost, never find complete closure. By leaving these questions open-ended, Brewer not only nurtures the mysteries of the undead, he also connects us to Ghost, who lacks the answers to his questions as well. It is in this questioning that Brewer's strength soars—by having us beg the universe for the answers to Ghost's questions, we no longer follow Ghost as simple spectators. We come to understand what it is, truly, to be Ghost and share in the adversities of limbo.

Gaylord Brewer's poems have appeared in *Kestrel* 25, 28, 30 and 35.

Jim Matthews
Kindred Spirits

Suzanne Heagy. *Love Lets Us Down*. All Nations Press 2015.

For the first hundred pages, Suzanne Heagy's *Love Lets Us Down* does not feel like a novel but a series of short stories that share only a location, the Meridian Inn, a slowly decaying motel in anonymous suburban Indianapolis. A few of the characters never do leave the isolation of their own tales, but as Heagy begins to weave her narrative tapestry together, even those seemingly random threads contribute to a powerful and affecting picture of human beings struggling to find meaningful connection with each other.

Slowly and deliberately, Heagy takes the time each story and each character needs, from the virginal bride killed on her wedding night who takes forty years to get to the motel, to the woman whose assignation with an old lover proves that some things lost are lost forever. The searching souls at the Meridian Inn cross paths, but those intersections have the feel of real life happenstance, never pulling the reader out of the story, never feeling plotted. None of the easy paths is taken; no narrative shorthand is employed. When a fifteen-year-old girl, who is clearly looking for trouble, demands to sleep in the family van in the parking lot, all of the clichés of crime fiction rush to mind, but the actual trouble she finds is less dramatic, more real, the kind most teenage girls are more likely to find than a serial killer or rapist prowling the night.

With admirable control, all of the elements of Heagy's prose are sublimated to her powerful characterizations. Her style doesn't draw attention to itself. Even passages that strike the reader with their beauty stay firmly within a character's point of view, like the night desk clerk's musings on the beauty of underlit, chemically treated pool water. The greatest strength of this novel, however, lies in the detailed specificity of its many voices. *Love Lets Us Down* displays a remarkable range of perspectives on a wide array of life situations, from an elderly widower hauling himself two hundred miles to his wife's grave while lamenting his daughter's remoteness and selfish lack of concern for him, to a lost young woman who seeks to forget her aimlessness in booze, pot, and sex. Every one of these characters has a specific voice, and Heagy's strong control over those voices never wavers. Inner musings shift seamlessly to conversational dialogue and back, as happens in real life. Heagy's sharp, perceptive observations about human folly and failure always remain firmly within the limitations of the character who delivers them. Her dialogue always feels natural and appropriate in both rhythm and diction.

All of these qualities make for a novel that pulls you in and makes you feel the desperate need of these characters, whose fellow human beings are failing them. Anyone who has recognized that a relationship will never get better than it is right now will sympathize. Anyone who has made the best of a bad situation will recognize kindred spirits. Not all of Heagy's resolutions are emotionally satisfying, but then how often are they in our non-fictional lives? The Meridian Inn looks a whole lot like a place we've all been. *Love Lets Us Down* only lets us down when we realize that the twenty-four hours of the novel are over. We know these people's lives will continue on; we just won't be there to see it. Surely that is what the best of fiction strives to achieve.

Suzanne Heagy has served as *Kestrel's* Fiction Editor since 2008.