

3.

The poems in Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum's brilliant first collection, *Ghost Gear*, bewitch and beguile. These are poems about first love and stolen cars, pool-hopping, and bullies on Huffy bicycles; poems about blue-collar neighbors and adolescent boys exploring. Unapologetic about storytelling, McFadyen-Ketchum grants an Atticus-Finch-like speaker the stage in several poems, allowing him to recount stories as he would at a family gathering, as if he were leaning against a counter in the kitchen at the end of a night.

The love of language and the ability to detail a complicated notion with great clarity are the hallmarks of McFadyen-Ketchum's poems—long, winding narratives in which familiar images and ideas are reimagined and infused with new light. Images double up upon themselves and surprise us. The rusted joints of railroad yards, a glass-sharded trail, and roots sprouting from cold stone floors—all are treated with grace and reverence. During one escapade, adolescent boys watch a brace of evening bats, “wing their scripture / across the holy eyes of planets” (“Nightswim”). In “The Lives of Boys,” two victims of a fireworks mishap return from the hospital with “ears gnarled / to dog's chew toys....” And in “First Catch” events roll backward with breathtaking clarity. Broken blue-egg bird shells reconstruct themselves, a teenage suicide bounces back to her perch on the roof, blood from a fight retracts into nostrils. And finally, a young boy undoes the hook from his first trout, undoing his regret:

...my father and I watch as it fins back
into darkness and again we find ourselves moving in reverse:

hooked worm zipping back along its half-dome
of microfilament...

and all the beasts yoked to their wagonloads moving west
through the Appalachians buckle to their knees—
...and I never born.

Amy Tercek

McFadyen-Ketchum recounts with cinematic clarity the possibility of a life unfolding in reverse, of regrets blanched from memory, of turning back even the degradations of history in the steely infrastructure of the American landscape. This, by any writer's standards, is a difficult feat.

One of the most refreshing aspects of McFadyen-Ketchum's poetry is its essential optimism. In the thrilling near-death experience of "Lost Creek Cave" or the nocturnal trespass in "Corridor" and in "The Lives of Boys," the young narrators experience a proximity to death that exhilarates them: "*Look it's the world. We're finally seeing the world*" ("Driving into the Cumberland").

In this way, the poems are vehicles of adolescent escape. They transport the narrator from a world of danger and uncertainty to a world where a young man believes he can drive a car off a cliff and survive—a world where he can escape from a cave filled with rushing water. This is a fearless world where a father's love is safe and predictable, where racial slurs are not allowed at home, where the Tennessee Southern can barrel by just inches away, leaving a boy aware and yearning, but unscathed.

4.

Imagine yourself in a Miami downpour, sharing a café awning with a garrulous stranger. The stories he tells are easygoing and direct. Now and then you find yourself chuckling out loud, amused by an anecdote or a wry observation. Occasionally, you might squirm at an overt sexual allusion. But the fellow's descriptions of life in Southern Florida are dead-on, his love songs to family and children and friends are lovely and poignant. This was my experience reading Brad Johnson's entertaining new collection, *The Happiness Theory*.

As if the bright Miami sun has burnished his vision, many of Johnson's characters walk around with nowhere to hide their shadow selves.