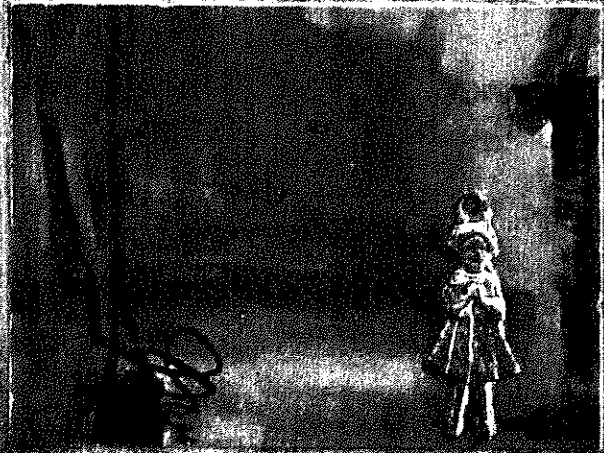


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## Ghost Gear

by Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum

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(pa.)

Full disclosure: I tend to find anything slower or lengthier than a Motörhead song a little bit dull. I've always been this way; I joke that the reason I gravitated toward poetry instead of prose was because I lack the attention span for all those extra words. The poetry I most often love is spare and tidy as Lorine Niedecker's cottage. You'd think, then, that Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum's *Ghost Gear*, full of poems that stretch across pages and lines that require a deep breath to read aloud, wouldn't be my can of snuff, but these poems charmed me. They linger, stretching and complicating their narratives and images in such a way that the reader has no choice but to slow down and watch as the poems build a world.

And the world of *Ghost Gear* is one of profound balance: No harmony can divorce itself from tragedy; each moment of violence is also a moment of beauty. Even the language balances upon itself, as images stack and phrases repeat, repeat, repeat.

"Singing" opens the collection with a slow pan across the landscape of what winter isn't:

What do I know of God but that each winter  
I thank him for it? No spider webs  
snagged in the bluestem, no horseflies at rest  
in blossoming cones of henbit, no slug trails penned  
to the cooled hoods of cars...

It continues, braiding through the lines that will hold the collection together: knowledge and divine mystery, darkness and bright light, all reflected in the doubling of image and language: "...in these hours condemned to darkness / before the sun gyres open the face of February...The grackles are

doors ... / The grackles are doors ... Stepping across these thresholds, / I step across these thresholds. Singing, I sing" (McFadyen-Ketchum 3).

It also suggests the quiet, inventive language of the collection. McFadyen-Ketchum is a master of verbs, and in "Singing" "...the burr oak is wintered / full of grackles" that "[rasp] their flight plans limb to limb" (3). In later poems, the sun will "[gutter] down to its wick of daylight" (7) and "finger through the willows" (15); eyes will "[pucker] against the light of the new world" (12); and a single headlight coppers as it sinks into murky water (50). These complicated verbs point to the complicated world of this collection where a father works hard and tells the same stories over and over, where a mother watches her children carefully, and where kids run around outside in summer and fall in love in high school—but each of these lives is also peppered by casual, unavoidable violence and tragedy that marks generations.

The title poem spirals around a story that the speaker's father tells and retells—a death-and-rebirth experience where the father, pre-children, is pulled by a wave into the ocean, and into a drifting net: "The sea did not care about my father, / But.../...he lashed the flesh of his life from that ocean" (10). After narrowly escaping death, he

slowly [emerges] from the sea  
...my father returned  
from what they believed to be the dead:

*Ghost gear, they call it:*

nets and riggings lost at sea to fish for no man. (10)

Here, the speaker is telling the story of the father's many retellings. He knows the details, gestures, and shifting moods of this story by heart, but "Only once have I asked my father / why he chose to live. Only once / has he told me..." how he found the will to survive (11). In *Ghost Gear*, as in "Ghost Gear," the uncaring sea of the world tosses people around,

and even as they stare into and study and retell the story of the indifferent instants that try to unmake them, they avoid too much explanation, as if divine mystery is the lynchpin of survival.

But McFadyen-Ketchum's language is so sprawling and orchestral that even terrifying moments feel rhapsodic. In "The Ever-Chamber," another retelling of one of the speaker's father's stories, McFadyen-Ketchum takes twenty-four stanzas to explain a lightning-quick encounter with a cottonmouth. The poet has built the tall scaffolding of this poem to slow the reader into careful observation—to see the cottonmouth's "sudden wakened eye black as a poppy seed," the way the father "mimes / the way the snake struck... /...two fingers transformed into fangs" (16), and the way the snake, bisected in a self-defensive swing of the father's machete, looks "like a plastic model of the cell: a nucleus of bone / surrounded by nerves, tissue, and chaos" (17). What couldn't be more than ten seconds stretches before the reader, as if the adrenaline that took hold of the father is coursing through the reader's veins too.

The opposite of Niedecker's condensery (Niedecker 194), McFadyen-Ketchum elongates his images, stretching and folding and stretching and folding them so that they can be examined from all angles. And if scrutiny doesn't lead to answers, the effect of these beautiful words is that lingering over moments, examining and reexamining them, serves as a kind of explanation.

This collection of lyrical narratives is full of transcendent retellings of terrible things, all tempered in the lyricism with a spiraling inertia of memory that drives the collection—and this coming of age story—stalwartly forward. McFadyen-Ketchum doesn't shy away from grand questions or grand sentiment, and he reaches too far in so few places that to mention them specifically would be quibbling. His grand ambition serves him most resonantly in the second section, which adapts its title from its second poem, "The Word Damn and the Word God," a poem that teeters on the electrical cusp of coming-of-age independence. The poem builds slowly to a

salutary chorus:

Goddamns to the carp we never caught, to the knife  
destined for Chris's gut. Goddamns to all the dogs too  
weak  
to loose their chains. Goddamns to all the stories we  
do not tell.

To all the fathers angry with their sons,

*Goddamn.* (28)

And because no poem in *Ghost Gear* is complete until it's  
perfectly balanced, this poem ends with an image of dou-  
bling, of the well-behaved kid and his swearing friend, or the  
sacred and the profane in equilibrium:

If I could, I'd take Chris in my arms ...  
...and wait for the sculptor  
who fools greatness out of stone, our two bodies  
draped  
one into the other.

The word damn and the word God. (28)

The people of McFadyen-Ketchum's world are always  
doomed and always blessed. In stepping across the threshold,  
they step across the threshold. In singing, they sing.

—Saara Myrene Raappana