

and notices the stark contrast it forms with the preceding poems, presented (from a visual standpoint) as conventional lyric pieces. On both the level of the individual poem and the level of the book, Olstein works within received forms of writing to expand what is possible within them. By presenting this formally adventurous work alongside couplets and tercets, she skillfully and dexterously carves a space for innovation in conjunction with inherited forms. For Olstein, what's most compelling is not the desire to become more experimental, or to simply reproduce tradition, but to find a way to integrate the two. In many ways, she suggests the necessity of becoming conscious of the values, hierarchies, and assumptions that received modes of writing embody as we bring them into a contemporary experimental literary landscape.

In short, *Little Stranger* is a beautiful book, as formally adventurous as it is engaged with traditional forms. Olstein's use of subtle formal choices to make ambitious claims about the contemporary literary landscape is as impressive as it is engaging. This is a wonderful addition to this poet's already accomplished body of work.

—Kristina Marie Darling

**Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum. *Ghost Gear*. The University of Arkansas Press, 2014.**

The speaker of *Ghost Gear*, Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum's debut collection, is both a comprehensive singer and a conscientious listener. In "Ghost Gear," for example, McFadyen-Ketchum claims to be "a poet retelling a telling," thereby portraying himself as both a *vehicle* and a receptacle for the narratives of friends and family members. He also acknowledges that time and secondhandedness can dilute experiences (lamenting in "Sacrament," "If only I could sing / / the songs you sang to me then"). McFadyen-Ketchum counteracts such effects through profuse and vivid language, producing a word-rich investigation into how we interact with and recall our world. Separated into three sections (which are collectively bookended by the poems "Singing" and "First Catch"), the free verse of *Ghost Gear* thus poignantly follows McFadyen-Ketchum's poetic development. Initially a ghost-like figure who receives the stories of others, he eventually becomes a more prominent "reflection" whose utterances are uniquely his own.

To this end, a significant feature of *Ghost Gear* is its lush local language. For instance, McFadyen-Ketchum writes in "Singing," the opening poem, that "the burr oak is wintered / full of grackles," pinpointing the flora and fauna of his specific Tennessee setting (around Nashville). McFadyen-Ket-

chum's attention to such *language of place* helps him perceive *place as language*: later within "Singing," McFadyen-Ketchum professes, "The wind, if you watch, / is calligraphy." In "Tonight," "Lightning falls in its slow white script to farmland / and watershed," and in "The Ever-Chamber," McFadyen-Ketchum recognizes "the earth with its own compositions." A final notable example occurs later in the same poem: in a story he is sharing, his father "turns to hack that snake into its smallest parts, / the ink of it spreading across the water's surface." Readers of *Ghost Gear* know that the cottonmouth's blood is not ink and that the lightning is just electricity. McFadyen-Ketchum, however, is so carefully attuned to his Tennessee setting (even describing himself as "a pale specter just visible beyond the oak-line" in "Sacrament") that he renders all aspects of nature both authorial and readable: in charged particles, McFadyen-Ketchum sees characters.

Jolting metaphors and similes within *Ghost Gear* emphasize these junctures between what humans see and what they understand of both their natural and urban surroundings. When describing his father's memorable confrontation with a copperhead in "The Ever-Chamber," for example, McFadyen-Ketchum writes that his father saw "the reels of his future spinning before him / like wartime clips of men dropped toward France, / their parachutes iridescent jellyfish in the night." Among other qualities, McFadyen-Ketchum's metaphor conflates man-made products with somatic creatures, showing that natural elements can illuminate human experiences. *Ghost Gear* proves the reverse is also true: as McFadyen-Ketchum notes in "The Ever-Chamber," "the cottonmouth *hung like tinsel*" (emphasis added). McFadyen-Ketchum therefore appreciates that modern production impacts how we process, and so describe, our world. While the poet-speaker of *Ghost Gear* imagines "settlers [n]ever staking a claim to Nolensville, Tennessee, / Mill Creek Forever untouched, and I never born" in "First Catch" (the collection's final poem), the past is irreversible. One can only contemplate its significance, a point underscored in *Ghost Gear* through striking figurative language.

By relating personal and inherited stories, *Ghost Gear* shows that nature is destructive as well as poetic, bodily as well as emotional. In fact, reports of near-death experiences often occur through the hands of the poet's father, actions then filtered through McFadyen-Ketchum's hands while composing and presenting the language of *Ghost Gear*. In "Lost Creek Cave," McFadyen-Ketchum describes his father as "drawing the spiral of a corkscrew in midair, / the cave's perfect center now balanced on my father's fingertip." McFadyen-Ketchum, his father, and two others almost died in this cave when it flooded, and the story is one they must "tell together, father and son." Earlier, in "Ghost Gear," "Language fails my father" when talking about a tidal

wave that pulled him under, so he “resorts to sound: / / *Wham!* / / slamming one open palm into the other.” Readers of *Ghost Gear*, holding the text in their hands, thereby encounter McFadyen-Ketchum’s poems as both tactile and visual products. As McFadyen-Ketchum writes within “First Catch”:

Give this body a voice, and aloud I’ll say death.  
Give this voice a body, and I’ll drop to my knees, rub my face raw  
with the river stones of rivers and ask for forgiveness.

But words are merely words, this flash and ebb  
of Mill Creek no more than a trick of memories and light . . .

When language fails, McFadyen-Ketchum demonstrates that physicality can (and does) evoke meaning.

Throughout *Ghost Gear*, then, the poet-speaker wrestles with eco-familial subjects that define him as much as they seem to subsume him. Readers first encounter McFadyen-Ketchum as a ghostly “pale figure,” and while he moves toward embodiment in the second section (noting in “Slag,” “Make me a piece of the sky . . . / Make me a crow and, as darkness falls, I will make myself / a part of it”), the third part of *Ghost Gear* still depicts him as “afloat.” In “Self-Portrait at 5 A.M.,” for instance, McFadyen-Ketchum states,

the image the window holds most clear when I look through it,  
my face afloat in the glass—yet another false image  
imposed on my backyard, yet another false image  
floating freely on the reflection of the waking world.

McFadyen-Ketchum’s position as “afloat” in “Self-Portrait at 5 A.M.” differs from his ghostly portrayal in “Sacrament” (from the first section) because readers now perceive him as a distinct consciousness: unlike the sky, crow, or even a familial storyline, the mirror at the end of *Ghost Gear* shows his face “most clear,” not hidden by any background. McFadyen-Ketchum’s poetic persona may still be incorporeal, but he has nevertheless emerged as an astute contributor to and evaluator of his surroundings; in “Lost Creek Cave,” he orders, “Put this poem down, I ask. Let it float like an ark on sleeping waters.” Overall, Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum’s *Ghost Gear* is a provocative and rewarding collection that represents urban and natural relationships as the poet views them: circular, richly populated, often dangerous, and certainly worth attentive reading.

—Rachel Brown