

The Ties (and Times) That Bind Book Review

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Drone String, by Sherry Cook Stanforth, Huron, OH:
Bottom Dog Press, 2015, 89 pages.

Tangle by Pauletta Hansel, Cincinnati: Dos Madres Press, 2015, 106 pages.

Sherry Cook Stanforth's first collection of poems, *Drone String*, draws its title from the world of traditional music, one she knows well. A drone string is a recurring bass note against which individual melody notes respond with harmony or dissonance. The drone pipe of a bagpipe instrument is a common example of this sound, but Stanforth, a song writer and musician, knows it from her mother's mountain dulcimer. "Drone string" has such rich potential for metaphor. Time itself is the drone string against which we live out our lives. In Stanforth's case, she has carried forward her family's musical talents, performing with her parents and others as a vocalist, flutist, and harmonica player, with several recordings to her credit. She has added teaching and writing to that mix, as founder and director of the Creative Writing Vision Program at Thomas More College, as co-editor (with Pauletta Hansel and Michael Henson) of *Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel*, and as an Appalachian poet whose work has appeared in a range of publications. And with her husband she has raised four children—as well as bees—in the same kind of music-rich tradition she experienced.

Family, music, poetry, place: these are the melody notes in *Drone String*. The book, dedicated to Grandma Mary, includes two family photographs. Its poems fall into three sections titled from lines that recur in several traditional songs: "Who'll Rock the Cradle?", "Who'll Sing the Song?", and "Who'll Rock the Cradle When I'm Gone?" With section titles like these, on top of the subject matter, a reader might expect more of a sentimental journey than a life or lives examined. The book works hard to counter that expectation.

This happens early in the first section with "Shopes' Field," a place name in Georgia connected with the poverty-driven work of picking yams. The poet is on an I-75 road trip with her grandmother at the wheel who is

rolling eyes at my love
for hominy and banjos, tossing good

old Dixie right under the bus—
Only good path is the one
leading straight outta here.

The poet then recalls the story of her grandmother's work in that field as a child while others were on their way to see the film *Gone with the Wind*. This allusion is not just a touch of realism. The poem leads the reader to understand by implication, amplified by the allusion, what the poet realizes: nothing removes the stain of nostalgia for the southern rural life like the bleach of poverty. This is far from an original observation; it has been a recurring theme in much of southern and Appalachian literature. However, the poem serves as evidence of the poet's relative proximity to ancestral poverty and hardship, a position not without value in any time but perhaps especially in our time of the diminishing middle class; as such the poem cannot be dismissed as merely a personal anecdote. In fact, it suggests how broadly speaking the literary "personal" can be.

Several other poems play this anti-nostalgia melody. "Great Grandma's Crow Lament," written in her voice, reveals the touch of violence that can follow certain folk beliefs, such as the presence of a crow predicting death. After killing the messenger, she later issues a warning of her own: "Hear me good, girl: / set your mind to lose whatever you got / in this world, 'cause nothing steals back time / or keeps a man in place once he's called." The poem offers a case of belief transforming into wisdom, thus working against stereotype as well as nostalgia. I was reminded of another poem written in a grandmother's voice and reaching a similar conclusion: "Grandmother Watching at Her Window" by W. S. Merwin. Later in *Drone String*, a mother's accumulated wisdom is passed on to her offspring. In "Dog Day Cicada," the poet and her young daughter consider the web of life as a spider kills a trapped cicada.

"Indulgence" and "What Mary B. Remembered" also play against nostalgia. "Tree Hugger" demonstrates in part how sentiment cannot save a tree that stands in the way of a new garage, and "Child Fiddler" focuses on hard work and natural talent in the middle of what seems to be gruff father love. "Lost Claims" and "Mikey" describe the inevitable loss of property and home, and "Family Reunion, 1979" depicts the "bad girl" who got away with no regrets.

In terms of form, the book offers variety: narrative poems, lyrical poems, persona poems that capture authentic voices ("Granny Stella Was a Chicken-Chopping Mama" sings you straight to the—never mind, I don't want to be the spoiler), free verse poems conscious of their syntax and others in a run-on freefall of language gathering energy in accumulating sounds and images, and prose poems. "App, Too" is a prose poem written in a punctuated run-on freefall mode, an identity manifesto that strums the string of ancestral connections from Georgia to Cincinnati, hills to hills, as if to say: "I'm here and I'm dear, and Here is a big place." She convinced me, though I confess I was already leaning in this direction; the larger the place we're from, and the more of a place we have to love (even if we don't wish to live there), the more likely, perhaps, that we will take care of it.

Regardless of form, all of the poems are characterized by rich sound and imagery ("... then slippers // snap along the night-smudged hall") and deftly handled rhetorical moves. There are ghosts, storms, a flood, visits to Cherokee and Celtic ancestral homes, music, death and dying, and the lives that follow. The one poem that had the least appeal for me was "Accident," where the same accomplished level of writing is used to find the silver lining in a range of dark clouds, a strategy more useful for surviving those dark clouds than for making a poem that concludes, "this, our purpose."

Stanforth had already alluded to this general idea several times in the book; the need to state it flatly seems superfluous. That aside, *Drone String* has much to offer as a personal, familial story set in its (and our) larger context of time and place. It gives us much to think about if we read it with the attention it clearly deserves.

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For obvious and practical reasons, we need to distinguish past from present, see them as distinct regions of time and experience. Since human DNA and memory reveal how limiting those categories are, it is not surprising that accomplished poets explore the two, as well as the bleeding boundary between them, in their poetry. How do past and present correspond, echo, penetrate, and twist into shapes of meaning that are both bittersweet and revealing? Pauletta Hansel, named Cincinnati's first Poet Laureate in 2016, offers several possibilities in her fifth book, *Tangle*.

Like *Drone String*, Hansel's *Tangle* includes photographs and draws on family, self, loss, and Appalachian roots. The "tangle" in this work is how these elements in their past and present variations are both connected and complicated. The book's five sections—"Here, Where I Am"; "Familial Tremors"; "What She Leaves Behind"; "Memento Mori"; and "What Called Me"—reveal by their titles the poet's refusal to follow a strictly linear script. But the book as a whole flashing back and forward is only part of the story. Individual poems frequently embody past and present no matter where they occur in the book. What holds this collection together, makes even of tangle an art form, is the poet's love of words, of language honed by both craft and a thoughtfully examined life.

"Pomegranates," the book's opening poem, recalls the recent past, "The winter the blood stopped," signaling that the "unrelenting possibility / of life inside my own" was over. She spends that winter eating the red, seedy fruit famous in Greek mythology as the symbol of fertility and rebirth; it "breaks open / on my tongue," writes Hansel, suggesting that the poet will give birth to her voice. It is as if she had eaten the seeds of a *poem*granate. This pun is not as silly as it appears. Hansel, an educator and former arts administrator as well as a lifelong writer, offers her strongest collection to date.

There are numerous poems about writing—"tried to write about me, 14," "The Purpose of Poetry," "Writing Poems in Spring," "Now," "The Hermitage," "A Few Things You Should Know About Poetry," to name a few—that appear throughout the book and particularly in the closing section. What "called" her was not just poetry, not just the natural world or the particularities of her life, but the attentive seeing that all of these require and that has the potential to connect us. In "The Hermitage" retreatants on the grounds of the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse are linked to the natural world and each other by "a web illuminated / by our solitary / attention." Even a poem ostensibly looking back at her father's religious calling, "My Father Evangelizes, 1956," reveals an early influence, love and love for the word, that echoes through Hansel's work today: "I stand here called to Wisdom / by words," the father tells his congregation; "I am not wise, I said to him / and he said, *Read*." In the closing stanza, the father's traditional religious belief tangles with Hansel's aesthetic:

Come now, let words
wash over us
as water over rocks,
and though our sins be scarlet,
they shall be as snow, though
they be crimson red

they will be as wool, freshly shorn.
 I say to you now, *Read*,
 be one with Him
 and with each other
 through words.

The poem serves both memory (of the poet's father) and prophecy (of the poet to come). It is easy to imagine the possible generational and religious differences between any father and daughter; whatever they might have been, if indeed there were any in Hansel's case, does not matter. Her poem privileges connection; the personal recollection is thus a path to the poem's wisdom, implied rather than explained.

Connection, of course, is inherent to tangles as it is to attentive seeing, vision often being the first way in which we connect with objects and all life forms around us. What follows in and around both is imagination. Hansel's poem "How to Look" imagines the universe of particulars that resides within the body as well as far beyond it. I was struck by the craft and content of the lines,

The nearest stars
 are so far away.
 It takes a very sensitive
 receiver—clouds, birds,
 constellations all
 have something in common.

The line breaks deliver "clouds, birds" as constellations themselves, and as separate entities that share traits with the "constellations." Each of these items is also a "receiver" as is the reader of the poem. The poem closes with "the one real possibility / we are all of these things." One big tangle in concise language. Hansel put into poetry a version of what astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has written: "We are all connected: to each other biologically, to the earth chemically, to the rest of the universe atomically." One big tangle.

Though Hansel's tangles may embody connection in a positive sense at times, they never reject their embedded contradictions. A tangle also represents a condition or situation we may need to escape, whether physical, psychological, or intellectual. The book opens with a rebirthing metaphor (and as demonstrated above, its red color echoes through several poems the book), but Hansel rejects the conventional poem-as-child metaphor: ". . . our / poems are not our children. / They quicken outside our bodies, / run from us before they speak," she writes in "Of What We Make Our Poems."

Other poems push back against assumptions about Appalachian upbringing. There is humor but no nostalgia for rural Appalachia in "The Outhouse," its skanky characteristics leading to the figure of the Appalachian poet as an outsider in Appalachia: "I was a town girl. All I knew / was polished white, / clear water took away / whatever you put there." In "Grandpa Noah Fishing, Circa 1938," a memory of her grandfather fishing with dynamite closes with his funeral, one that Hansel couldn't attend:

. . . I had bigger fish to
 fry, in college learning
 I was Appalachian
 even though I'd never learned
 to bait a line
 or much of anything my Grandpa knew.

I'd read my books late into the night
and sleep till they brought
morning to me
those summers till I got too old
to want to be there at all.

In this we find the tangle of the past moving into the future; of identities lived and perceived, actual and expected; irony in the poem serving experience rather than being served as the point. Other poems in the confessional mode practice the art of withholding with great effect. In a poem's landscape, sometimes not knowing everything means knowing the right thing.

Any good collection of poems offers more than what can be discussed in a review, and *Tangle* is no exception. According to a Facebook announcement, Hansel in her role as Cincinnati's first Poet Laureate plans to "connect people to poetry and connect people through poetry." The poems in this collection, combined with her years of teaching and mentoring writers in this region, suggest that both people and the art will benefit.