



*Presence*  
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*This Far* by Kathleen O'Toole  
(Paraclete Press, 2019)

Having spent quite a few months in the company of Kathleen O'Toole's *This Far*, I moved from the glorious pleasures of her poetry to the prosaic task of writing a review of the book in early 2020. Then everything changed.

The pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests make O'Toole's work more timely and more urgently needed than ever. *This Far* speaks directly to loss, to social and racial justice, and to the redemptive qualities of nature, and does so with compassion and a sense of connectedness that is both vibrant and necessary.

In her introduction, O'Toole suggests that "music might offer another way of understanding the coherence and architecture" of the collection, and for me this rings true, in part because, as O'Toole says, the three sections of the book "seemed to flow together like linked movements in a musical composition." But there is more to the metaphor than that. These poems *sing*. They sing in the language they use; in their imagery; and in their pure, true tones of human experience.

*This Far* demonstrates O'Toole's gift for close observation, rooting her work in concrete details and imagery that draw the reader into the world of each poem. In her introductory poem "Mindful," which is placed outside the three sections of the collection, O'Toole describes the "shutter click of attention," and this is a perfect metaphor for her ability to see the meaning and significance in the small, in the ordinary. Her poet's eye sees a 'snapshot,' an instant that is both fleeting and permanent when written into a poem.

The first section "Their Voices" is, at heart, a threnody for the poet's late father, a leitmotif that grounds the entire

collection but is also much more than a lamentation. It does mourn, but it also remembers and celebrates, acts that O'Toole then extends not only to other people who have died, but also to her mother's life, a life once lived with "her groom" become a life lived alone ("Trousseau"). The loss is palpable, but so is the love rooted in the quotidian details of a family. Here is an ill father who was a "devotee of ice cream and meatloaf / black & white milkshakes, bacon & eggs" who can no longer eat but asks his family to "savor / all that sustains you, partake for me," turning food into loving sacrament ("Sustenance"). Here is a mother who "has not written a poem since I was born" but who raised a poet daughter: "Always, it was her voice luring me toward song, / reciting poems to me—no doubt in the womb" ("From Birdsong").

Throughout the collection, nature (often in the form of birds) is observed and described in ways that bring the reader to an understanding of, and appreciation for, its role in everyday life, and how that role provides a foundation of significance and beauty for our very existence. In "Walking the Elements, Beara Peninsula," the speaker describes how she can "detect a common pulse beneath / my palm and underfoot that leads / me deeper." In these lines, O'Toole presents us with a profound description not only of the speaker's experience of being within nature, but also of the work of the poet herself: she looks for that "common pulse" that connects us, then lets that commonality of experience guide her "deeper" into her poetry. In turn, we as readers are drawn deeper into that commonality as well.

In "Lumen de Lumine," the collection's second section, O'Toole's focus broadens, moving toward poems where art and nature become ways to better understand what it means to be human. What could easily have been clichéd becomes, through O'Toole's voice and vision, profoundly moving and deeply contemplative.

"Christ Crucified at Our Savior Church in LA" begins with a description of the depicted Jesus as "sinews and / biceps pulsing with the energy / of a Michelangelo Adonis," then moves into a description of how this muscular energy reminds the speaker of a friend, George. Yet it is not just physical strength they share; it is moral strength as well. Like Christ, George ministers to those in need—in this case, a friend in a nursing home—and the poem ends by conflating George with the Savior by describing him as "Christ bounding into the fray." Thus, what begins with contemplation of an artwork becomes a call to action, a concrete illustration of how we all should be like the active Christ; we should all fight for what is right.

Fighting for what is right also figures prominently in “What Kind of Silence,” the third section in the collection. Here, in poems such as “Witness” (about Willie Reed, who testified at trial against one of the murderers of Emmet Till), O’Toole asks us all to examine our own consciences when it comes to racial injustice. “How do we, who commemorate Evers and King / and Birmingham, reckon the escalating tally / of unarmed black men and boys, gunned down / by cops and armed civilians? Will we find / our way to testify—to act, on all that / we’ve witnessed—or walk away?” Always timely, these questions are more urgent than ever today.

The collection ends with a return to lamentation in “Vespers, Hunting Creek.” The moment of the poem is deeply rooted in nature, as the speaker describes the smell of honeysuckle, the shadow of trees in moonlight, and the sound of “fish rippling” around her. The speaker goes on to think about “friends passing swiftly from us, / our own numbered days.” It seems “sinful” to “disturb this stillness / with word,” so she asks that nature provide the prayer. The poem ends with lines that, in these days of pandemic and loss, speak to how we all feel at this moment, how we all might let nature honor the unfathomable losses we have experienced:

Let nightfall  
    honor them  
with its silence, pray  
    only the psalm of osprey  
    and tree frogs  
commingling  
    with stars.

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