



Science2Practice

Volume 2 | Issue 1

November 2024

Individual Book Review:

Bone Wishing

Brian Maxwell

Eastern Florida State College

Tara Flint Taylor's *Bone Wishing* is an intensely personal first collection, one that resonates with poignant specificity and striking imagery as it traces a journey through grief. The sixteen poems are confessional by nature, each an invitation to closely examine the remnants of what is left behind when life betrays us with tragedy and threatens to strip us bare. If *Bone Wishing* is elegiac in terms of subject matter—the untimely loss of a brother; a sister's illness; a self-induced abortion—the collection also offers shelter in a series of vignettes that depict the intersection of childhood and what comes after. Despite the strong and expected sense of lament, each poem tenders a handful of notes that collectively teem with wonder. There's is nothing blunt about loss, Flint Taylor seems to suggest, and what haunts as a dirge can be equally painful and plentiful when pressed into a hymn.

These acts of emotional prestidigitation are what keep *Bone Wishing* from becoming a house aflame with heartache. Instead, we walk the coals and stare as a "man launch[es] himself / over Niagara Falls / in a pickle barrel" (lines 1-3) only to end up on "The Tonight Show, / [and] Good Morning America" (13-14). The narrator "was eight / years old that day" (8-9), bearing witness from the safety of childhood, and later learns that she and the exhibitionist "shared / the same birthday" (15-16). As the first poem in the collection, "Nearly This" marks a point of departure, a roadside billboard announcing the arrival of the unexpected. When the speaker notes that "nearly everything / can be explained/ by this" (20-22) at the end, we recognize the innocent profundity of a passenger being recast as a participant.

"Dead Ringer" anticipates the more serious events to come as the speaker and her friends "used to play dead / in the dead of summer" (7-8), a "children's game on the front lawn or back porch / until one of us got a popsicle" (11-12). But when the game goes on a beat too long, we are granted a precise and terrible image: "A mother on her knees, saying Don't you ever, / ever do that again [...] Don't even pretend to die on me" (21-23). The body appears, or fails to appear, in "Saltwater Myths," where we learn of the accidental drowning of the brother at "La Llorona Beach" (12). The poem is bookended, however, by a folktale miracle and a scene from the narrator's past. First, a ship sinks "off the coast of Mexico," but after a funereal display by the families, "[t]he cargo of salt dissolved, and the ship / bobbed

back, everyone saved" (9-10). Later, we are told of a missing child at a local swim hole, where the lifeguards "megaphone / human chain—and we'd link hands / with strangers, rake the lake with our legs" (38-40). The juxtaposition of these accounts is palpable. Despite a thin hope in the form of "helicopters and divers" (15-16), the search for the brother proves futile, absent a folktale ending: "It took a while to understand / there wasn't going to be a body" (19-20).

As the titular inclusion, "Bone Wishing" is a more meditative effort that bridges the gap between past and present. The wishbone metaphor is not subtle, but Taylor uses it to reflect on hope as more than a wistful abstraction in the face of personal tragedy. "It's not like I wished for another life," she pleads, "better / parents, my own room. Wished I'd been born / somewhere else" (7-9). Instead the speaker acknowledges that "life would always be forked / bone, splintering—just before it snapped" (15-16). Here the camera zooms in as the metaphor slows down, highlighting the violence of life in the act of the break. Hope in this case is as much struggle as comfort, and the fragility of optimism is evident. "I thought it would always break more / towards me than away" (17-18), the speaker states in the closing couplet, a nod to the gravity of every private tragedy, each a way to test perseverance against belief.

Two more poems near the end of the collection highlight Flint Taylor's ability to wade through the morass of despair by locating the shimmering fragments of life. As the titles suggest, "Sea Glass" and "Syracuse China" provide distinct representations of human emotion in different but equally effective ways. In "Sea Glass," the narrator reflects upon time spent with her mother after the wake for her lost brother. The poem serves as a lovingly detailed portrait of the grieving parent as she wanders the shoreline seeking solace in found objects. "It's just old glass" (10), the narrator tells her mother. But by the end of the poem, we recognize the emotional significance of this collecting: "My mother never wanted flowers—fresh / reminders of what can die. She wanted a jarred rainbow / on the shelf, hard colors to fill our lives" (34-36).

"Syracuse China" is a return to childhood, where we encounter a group of kids "playing among mountains of spectacular failure" in the form of "piles of broken China" (3-4). The factory has been shut down, and in a familiar American scene, the town suffers. However, the children find joy rummaging through the defects, eventually figuring out that "a shard could be used as chalk" (34). While life goes on around them, they eventually lose their zest for smashing the defected ceramics and begin to create, drawing on every available surface until "even the cracked / foundations / of our homes were decorated with flowers, animals, suns" (38-40).

The final poem in the collection is appropriately titled "The Last of It," a depiction of the narrator dismantling a pile of "concrete / busted up from the backyard patio" (4-5). This pedestrian act of destruction becomes cathartic as the speaker ruminates on the "buckled ruin, the collapsed shape / grief makes after years of holding it together" (8-9). Eventually, when finished, she acknowledges "the terrible clarity that comes with the last of it— / you're done, you're done for good, there is nothing / more to break. Nothing to lift or pendulum into" (16-18). In place of a concrete image there is simply 'concrete,' a slippery symbol to be discarded when its welcome has worn out, a tangible reminder of all we build and all that breaks and crumbles around us.

Taken together, these poems highlight the labor of living with loss and the "makeshift / shelter for [the] self" (32-33) that can be built through the intricacy of memory. *Bone Wishing* may draw on sorrow, but the book also maps a path forward. This sketch of ordinary things is rendered in extraordinary detail, gifted to us as an assortment of places and points in time, each punctuated by the poignant specificity of the speaker's voice as she bravely works to shape the world around her and describe it accordingly.

Reference

Flint Taylor, Tara (2023). *Bone Wishing*. Slapering Hol Press.