Sally Rosen Kindred

Dancing Through Barbed Wire

Randi Ward, *Whipstitches*. Asheville, NC: MadHat Press, 2016.

Whipstitches, Randi Ward's new collection of poems, shares its name with a surgical suture and an overcast stitch meant for joining or gathering. While its title alludes to traditional practices, this volume strategically eludes convention. What's compelling about this book is its fresh attention to form—from the shape of the book to the dimensions of the poem and the line—and the way form in this work speaks to the importance of other shapes and the relationships between them: a child, her family, and her West Virginia home.

This conversation begins with the dimensions of the book itself. From the moment it arrives in the reader's hands, *Whipstitches* announces its engagement with form, boundaries, and the visceral world. Its landscape format stretches expectations of text; it creates a horizon, and the form of each brief poem, its mark on the vista of the page, creates a distinct reading experience. Each poem is a stitch, a point surrounded, not by the conventional space of a 5 x 8 sheet, but by a broader white expanse crossed by curling traces of gray lines, like threads. The poems appear as order within the context of tangled raw materials. Each stitch is a moment of fierce attention, a certain knotting of image and sound.

The focused shape of each poem on the page develops and complicates an understanding of self and world, girl-child and West Virginia farm. At times the brevity enacts an isolation cultivated by the poem's image. For example, in "Happy Birthday," the text curls in on itself like a child cradling her own voice:

> Behind the sofa,
> hunched over
> an unmasked vent,
> singing for
> my self.

Here self-definition is quiet but powerful; the body, possibly fearful, possibly merely maternal, "hunched over," holds itself. The transformation of "my self" into two discrete words emphasizes a personal representation accomplished through voice (and, through the choice of song, heralding, no matter how covertly, her own existence).

But the solitude isn't finite; the music goes somewhere, the "unmasked vent" receives her song.

These poems deftly use lyric precision to further delineate what body and landscape mean to each other. An early poem, "At First Light," captures the impulse to depart in a description of deer in the morning:

> They lit out,
> the white tips
> of their bristling
> tails bobbing
> above the bloodweed.

This poem's music is dense, energetic, suggesting a desire to escape that the poem refuses to complete. The "lit" and "bristling" energy of "white tips" propels the poem, the quick, soft "i" assonance giving it drive. The motion is enacted, too, in the repetition of "b" sounds—"bristling," "bobbing." The soft rhyming "o"s in "above" and "bloodweed" buoy the deer, supporting them. But transcendence feels impermanent. Bobbing means temporary rising and necessary falling, and within the moment of the poem, the "bloodweed"—a word suggesting kinship and perhaps a muted violence—still has an important, if sporadic, hold.

Many of Ward's poems use metaphor to take full advantage of their compression; figurative language develops the collection's concerns with the relation between inner and outer worlds. In "Buzzards," the poem's title is set immediately against a domestic figure, the "black kettle," collapsing outside and inside in ways that define both as harsh, menacing. "Lightning" does similar transformative work, as the title is juxtaposed with the opening image:

> Frantic silverfish
> scurrying
> between couches
> of darkening
> clouds.

The figurative leap between the title and the first line, and the closing move from "couches" back to "clouds," turns sky to floor and back again. This disorientation helps merge the two worlds, stitching them together with the threat of sudden motion, the bright-in-dark panic they hold in common.

The poems also gather disparate types of intimacy and hold them in tension; they sew the beauties of a place and its people to their

pains and dangers. There's an understated violence to many pieces that illuminates the treatment of home, from the more obvious imagery in poems like "PTSD" and "Combat," to the way, in "Bath," "She soaks long / enough to make /a blind mirror cry / her deepest bruise / blue." In the remarkable "Clothesline," the beauty of the landscape is received as a response to the hardness of family life:

> Thank you,
> gentle breeze,
> for reaching out
> to me
> through his
> indifferent
> sleeves.

In this captivating moment, the breeze reaches not apart from, or around, but through the emptied sleeves to touch the speaker. A friction between the intimacies of the family and natural world suggests both pain and relief, a tempered healing.

The book's sequence, also attentive to form, leads the reader through the seasons; its framing poems stress a changing relationship with this land, a moving towards and away. Mirroring the deer who "lit out" at the start, the book closes with the speaker's return: "Dancing / through barbed wire / just so I can feel / these fields / remember / my feet." The reciprocity here—the speaker feeling the fields, the fields remembering her in turn—is both a dance and a wounding. Engagement with place in this book is impressive in its complexity, powerful in its vision. These fine poems cut and suture; they behold, gather, and claim the wounds of home.

Susan Shaw Sailer

A Capacity to Connect

Liane Ellison Norman, *Way Station*. Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2016.

Few poets' lives encompass the enormous range of experience that Liane Ellison Norman's does: participating in the 1963 Martin Luther King March on Washington, giving birth to her second child in Nepal, being jailed for protesting nuclear warhead construction, running for U.S. Senate, fundraising for several Pittsburgh groups—and in addition, publishing a novel, a biography, a book of nonfiction, and five volumes of poetry.

Way Station, her most recent volume, returns to themes in her earlier books: justice in social issues; the beautiful physical world and its vulnerabilities; family as bulwark and site of grief (Norman lost a beloved daughter to cancer); the power of the arts; women and work; the challenges of old age. In her poems, themes do not simply recur, they become more distilled, more compassionate, more profound.

Connection is perhaps the overriding concern of *Way Station*, how people and other creatures connect to accomplish what they do in the world, and how the connection of reader to book can change lives. In "2015," Norman speaks of her poems as "small stones" she throws into "still ponds / [i]n hope that someone will see rings." This capacity to connect is what gives additional significance to the martyrdom of the young woman killed in Cairo's Tahrir Square for defending revolution. Soldiers bludgeoned her and ripped off her abaya: "The bright / blue bra / shining out / went viral, proclaimed / that under / the heavy layers / men hide / their women in, / an actual person / could make a choice / about— / if nothing else— / her underwear" ("Blue Bra").

Old age is not often the subject of poems, but Norman observes herself and writes "I grieve for the mind I once had, // dependable, clear, and— / I thought—not inclined / to walk out on a girl" ("Way Station").

A mole removed from her underarm is both merit badge and a barnacle of old age ("The Mole"). Knowing it's on "the tip / of my tongue," the poet likens forgetting a name to a "rainbow trout" flirting "with the world of oxygen" ("Losing Memory").

Old age, however, has not turned Norman to God as life draws toward an end. In fact, she writes of death as "the next big thing." Concerning accidents resulting in death for some and survival for

others, Norman questions whether that means "God had decided for" the survivors and against the dead ("Tornado in Oklahoma"). In "The Logistics of Heaven," she recalls a Mormon missionary coming to her parents' home. Asked whether her father wouldn't like to think he would be married for eternity to his wife, he replied, "Oh, I don't know. One lifetime might be enough."

The physical world occupies the poet, as site in itself but also in connection with people. Norman writes that in the varying levels of trees in a forest, the understory benefits before the canopy leafs out and after canopy trees die. About the trees, she concludes that "Some thrive, some block the sun," a metaphor concerning people and their acts ("Understory"). Dolphins "have no need for nuclear / bombs, armies or campaign funds." Instead, they use their brains to cooperate in churning up mud on the ocean floor to confuse fish, who rise to the surface, jump, and become food ("Satellite Dolphins"). "The earth / we once called / Mother" is drying out, thawing icebergs, "causing / drought in Iowa, // hurricane / along / the Eastern seaboard" ("Headlong").

But poetry and music provide a counterpoint and can revive spirits, as when, after the war in Sarajevo, people formed a chamber orchestra, whose music could "perfect the silence after so much murder" ("Surviving"). Reading, too, can save the spirit. When the poet read *Middlemarch*, "lightning lighted up my organs. Because I knew Dorothea // from inside, smart, yearning for purpose, a way to mark the world for good" ("Why *Middlemarch* Made Me Cry").

Nevertheless, Norman believes that to get the world right, people need to step in when they see wrong: indifference to climate change, discrimination against people of color and women, and income inequality in the U.S. Where world leaders fail, the poet suggests that we the people need to intervene. Life is a way station in which each of us plays a role in helping or hurting our inheritance—Earth and each other.