

Presence

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Wolf Trees by Katie Hartsock (Able Muse Press, 2023)

Katie Hartsock's newest poetry collection, *Wolf Trees*, is as fierce and lively as the title suggests. The poems are wolf-like: raw, wild and sometimes lonely. Like trees, each one sends down roots into the soil of tradition—classical and Catholic allusions abound—and branches up into the mysteries of staying alive.

Hartsock has type 1 diabetes, and this experience is at the heart of her collection. It is about her complex relationship with her corporeality—about being embodied in an age of machines, about losing an unborn child in an age of long lives, about her relationship with beer and cigarettes in an age that worships both hedonism and health. And yet the collection is not only about what makes this age different from any other, but also what makes it the same—trees still stand or are cut down, myths still make sense of madness, and mothers still want to see their children live.

In part iii of the poem, "Wolf Trees," she explains the meaning of her title:

A wolf tree in the forest stands a remnant

of the field where it spread high and wide,
the field where it stood a remnant of

a razed forest. Wolf trees, perhaps,
because when the forest came back, they preyed

on the growth of new timber, in a forester's logic
where prohibitive becomes predatory.

Or, because they should be, like wolves, eradicated
as the early twentieth century manuals advised.

*Avaricious flora. Unfit
for life.* But some say a wolf

because the trees stand alone, looming above
new diminutive woods,

apart from their packs that fell
to long-ago axes . . .

Part iv draws the connection to her diabetes: "A century ago, I'd never have got to the age I am now. . . . *And why was I not cut down like the rest?*"

In "Marriage Bed with Medical Devices," Hartsock confesses what it is like to have an insulin pump. She seems both grateful and unsettled. Perhaps this is the most fitting response to relying on a small machine to stay alive. She calls the pump her "little barnacle" and "bee-eyed satellite," giving animal life to an inanimate object. Later in the same poem she compares herself to "an idle power button," reversing the previous trope by comparing her human body to a machine. Similarly, one of the book's epigraphs, taken from Stu Sherman's *Self-Portrait of a Diabetic Life*, says "most cyborgs are not superhumans . . . but rather people with disabilities trying to live a normal life." Hartsock's insulin pump is there for all the most intimate moments of her life, which is perhaps why she asks it, "By now, if you are not my true topography, / then what?" It is truly a miraculous and strange world in which we live, when something so small and robotic can give someone a chance to be a spouse, parent and poet. Hartsock captures this with grace, incredulity and humor.

Wolf Trees is also a book about solitude and death. A wolf tree is a lonely thing, much like Homer's capsized ships or Christ's cross. Hartsock is a poet in that ship and at the foot of that cross, contending with pain. She grapples with it humbly and harshly. In part v of "Wolf Trees," a nurse comforts her after a miscarriage, and she remembers she "loved her and [she] hated her. She was so clearly / a mother." In her poem "Trying," about hoping to get pregnant again, she evokes Homer and womanhood: "I spoke to our lost ones / often and every day of each month / I bled again I would get lit then go dark / for the night. The wine-dark sea was me."

My favorite of Hartsock's poems is not directly about her at all, but about two cowboys and two figures of antiquity. "John Wayne Brings Wyatt Earp a Cup of Coffee" hinges on an epic simile comparing the encounter of the cowboys with "an older Ovid, on his way to exile" and "a teenage Christ." At the end of the encounter, "the epic erotic tragic elegiac poet // locked eyes with the youth in a way / that made the sagebrush whirl / and thrum below the signposts / to that big sky country, wild at the borders." Hartsock, too, is a poet meeting Christ at "some crossroads of the empire," and He "come[s] to teach . . . all his ways / of being real."

This seems to be what Hartsock seeks: to be real and whole in spite of insulin pumps, illness and even death. After all, in the confines of the hospital, what she seeks in "If you secretly wish your child could be secretly baptized," is a sacrament for her infant. She wants to be, in Dante's words, "lovelier for being whole" (*Paradiso*, Canto XIV). Reality, she shows us, can still stand, even in the middle of a razed forest, like a cross or a wolf tree.

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The Third Renunciation by Matthew E. Henry (NYQ Books, 2023)

Anthony Hopkins once asked a Jesuit priest for the fastest, most powerful prayer, to which the priest replied, "The fastest, most powerful prayer in the world, my friend, is 'Fuck it'"; it's a prayer of "release and surrender," a way of saying, It's in God's hands—a prayer that makes room for grace to enter. So it's with a powerful precedent that Matthew E. Henry, in his collection of sonnets, *The Third Renunciation*, writes, "Say most honest prayers begin 'fuck it,' / rejecting or accepting the fist clenched / around our hearts." (Most of the sonnets are untitled.)⁰ A fist-clenched heart is a hardened heart, and one needs ways to accept the grace always on offer, such as that honest and powerful prayer, "Fuck it."

One also does well to renounce the habits that prevent this act of surrender. I take it that the collection's title poem is inspired by *Conference of Abbot Paphnutius. On the Three Sorts of Renunciations* by St. John Cassian (b. ca. 360). According to Cassian, the first renunciation, prompted by God speaking to the heart, is of all worldly goods. The second renunciation, inspired by fellow humans, is of fashions and affectations. The third renunciation, prompted by worldly tribulations, is of present and visible things. The poem, dwelling in the space of the third renunciation, opens to "the noetic ascesis of mystics— / holiness in unknowing, unlearning" until it encounters at the end, "loss celebrated / as sacrament. even the loss of god" ("The Third Renunciation"). This celebration of the "loss of god" calls to mind the famous cry of Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-ca. 1328): "I pray God to rid me of God." In other words, I pray to the living God, who is beyond all human categories and language, to rid me of false notions of the divine, hence the lowercase "god" in the poem. Letting go of these notions requires "noetic ascesis," a self-discipline in one's thinking and conceiving that enables entry into a state of "unknowing, unlearning," which is the apophatic way, a discipline of saying what God is not rather than