

English class. Collins's widely known poem pays tribute to many of the victims of the tragedy of September 11, 2001, and the speaker's daughter explains how she began to cry in class, how the poem brought humanity out of the statistics and gave a face, a voice, a life to each victim mentioned: "A poem, she sees, is a monument. / A field of meaning. We witness and we wake." We wake with the realization that "All those names / meaning people. Their lives!" have been lost. The power of Collins's poem lies in the intimacy of the name that makes each victim unique, recognizable, familiar. Satterfield's speaker lauds Collins's poem for an impact that her own work shares: "The poem, marking a moment, makes / that moment stretch on past the frame of its making."

Satterfield vividly dramatizes this stretching of moments beyond their frames in her sweeping sequence "Collapse: A Fugue." This historical journey reaches across centuries and takes note of the patterns repeated, the "music played & cycled back into rotation." Through a study of settlements—Greenland, Roanoke, Jamestown, and modern-day honeybee colonies—Satterfield presents the "agendaed endeavor" of establishing a colony as a theme and variations: "when one part beginneth / & the other singeth / that which the first // did sing." The study unfolds alongside an iPod on shuffle, both trails taking the reader on "an easy slide through the centuries." Here, as elsewhere in the book, Satterfield shows her passion for music, referencing Sandy Denny, Fugazi, the Rolling Stones, and Outkast. In depicting the honeybee colonies, the malady identified as Colony Collapse Disorder becomes a metaphor for civilizational collapse. Drawing parallels between the loss of bee colonies, the mysterious disappearance of the famous Roanoke settlement, and the failures of Greenland and Jamestown, Satterfield shows that all share the same symptoms: the impulse—and destiny—"to build, prosper, disappear." Each colony's story follows the same arc, fueled always by human efforts to accumulate and exert power. Our own civilization may even be infected with the disease: the speaker quips, "Surely // there's no sign of imminent / environmental collapse."

In the book's title poem, Satterfield continues to critique power structures even as she expresses concern for the impact that social constructs may have on her own family. "Her Familiars" asks readers to recognize the constraints and expectations that societies place on their citizens, posing the question, "Ever notice how age or oddness offends?" The poem describes the persecution of women as suspected witches, juxtaposing the trials of these women with the "Pretty Committee" of a popular television show beloved by the speaker's daughter: "Thank God // the girls in the Pretty Committee / all find the right dress & / strappy stilettos; thank God / they twitter & text to stay / in step

with the times." If not, the speaker hints, they, too, might well be persecuted for diverging from the norm, like the witches accused by "Hopkins, the self-appointed / Witch-Finder General, bearer of / needles and bodkins, Puritan / cloak & cape, the best accessories / of his time."

Satterfield's interest in contemporary culture's limitations is equally apparent in "On Valentine's Day I Pick Up My Wedding Dress." The speaker lovingly describes her own wedding gown, which she has just picked up from the cleaner, and recounts memories from both her own wedding and one that she witnessed years earlier in Venice. She finds incomparable beauty in what she calls "the world's full bouquet," the unique imprint of stains left on the dress by green lawns and puddles pooling in streets. When her college students show no reverence for Valentine's Day or for love, the speaker laments, "My cynics / beyond their years didn't even / Google Valentine, imprisoned bishop / who worked to keep lovers' hope aflame." Rather than commemorating the day's historical significance or the struggles of their predecessors, the students have presented poems on "sex, / not love; sex and Singles' / Awareness Week." This poet is worried: to her students, is Valentine no more than a ghost, some caricatured figure from church history? If so, perhaps love—as an ideal or force in society—will be equally obsolete.

In "Family of Strangers," Satterfield provides a moving account of poet Deborah Tall's visit to the university where Satterfield teaches, at the same time succinctly summarizing a major theme of the book. Although Tall was suffering from terminal cancer at the time, according to the poet's end note, Tall's eloquent remarks to students about "the importance of place, / of knowing and living with the past, / even when it's invisible" reveal a thematic kinship with Satterfield's own work: both poets recognize the past's influence on the present. One of the accomplishments of *Her Familiars* is the way it makes that past visible and known. Satterfield appreciates the intimate relationship between present and past, the familiarity and actions of those who preceded us. We recognize ourselves in these ghosts because we, too, keep repeating the same tune.

On the Shoreline of Knowledge: Irish Wanderings, by Chris Arthur
University of Iowa Press, 2012
230 pages, paper, \$21.95

Review by Sean Ironman

In 2008, during a lecture at the University of Wales, Chris Arthur declared that he wanted to champion the type of writing that Samuel Johnson

described in *A Dictionary of the English Language* as “a loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition.” That type of writing, the essay, attempts to follow the writer’s thought process, with all the meanderings, speculations, and meditations that show how the mind works. *On the Shoreline of Knowledge: Irish Wanderings*, Arthur’s fifth collection, contains thirteen essays that do just that.

These essays concern themselves with contemplating life, exploring questions of family, memory, and meaning. The introduction, like many of the essays that follow, begins with a concrete occurrence, in this case his mother saying, “I’m just going round in circles,” and dissects the circle itself. “The practice of painting a circle (*ensō*) with a single fluent brushstroke, with one focused sweep of the hand, is a discipline close to the heart of Zen.” To Arthur, the act of writing an essay is an act of meditation. It’s about pondering the greater questions of life calmly and honestly, not about trying to reach a destination.

On the Shoreline of Knowledge can be divided into two categories. The first contains essays that start with a small concrete object or event—a chestnut, a daughter’s question, a painting, a bird—that kick-starts the writer’s explorations. In these essays, Arthur is interested in exploring the significance of things we think of as insignificant. In Arthur’s view, nothing is insignificant. Toward the end of “Pencil Marks,” for example, he writes, “As I’ve grown older, I’ve become increasingly fascinated, sometimes terrified, by the depth of meaning contained in the seeming shallows of the ordinary.” This essay begins with a pencil Arthur picked up a few days after noticing it on Dr. Mathieson’s Hill, near Lisburn where he was raised. This act is the catalyst for his contemplating significance of the hill that shows up on no map and is known only to local residents. Throughout the essay, his mind meanders from the hill to a lecture series by Stephen Pattison to Virginia Woolf, all the while exploring the idea of where we come from and the importance it holds in our life. He writes:

My sense of home, my sense of Ireland, my sense of where I belong and who I am, is anchored more to Dr. Mathieson’s Hill and places like it than any of those more publicly sanctioned markers that are often said to define something so close to the heart it’s hard to name—though “identity,” “nationality,” and “ethnicity” variously attempts to, and variously fails.

He ends back at the pencil, completing that circle, with an observation on how objects remind us where we come from.

The second group of essays deals directly with memory, not with how memory works or the limitations of memory, which so many essayists and memoirists tackle, but with how putting a memory on paper cannot truly capture the meaning behind it. In “When Now Unstitches Then and Is in Turn Undone,” Arthur writes: “I hesitate to put these memories into written form. Not because they’re shameful, but because I know they’ll look belittled, exposed, amount to next to nothing as soon as they’re laid out on a page. Though clad in words, they’ll seem vulnerably naked in the unforgiving morgue of print.” He recognizes his limitations and explores the boundaries of being a writer, of being human. The final essay of the collection, “Zen’s Bull in the Tread of Memory,” explores how his mind works, how it jumps from topic to topic, and ends with why we remember, why he goes through the act of writing, and why the ordinary is extraordinary.

Arthur ends the essay and the collection by bringing it back to the introduction and the idea of the circle and mediation. “That being so, putting the final period at the end of the last sentence of this essay doesn’t feel like drawing things to a close, even less like arriving at a conclusion.” In Arthur’s view, nothing comes to a conclusion—life is too grand and complex. Maybe that’s why his essays forsake narrative line, character arc, and other fictional techniques—they’re too restrictive. Arthur isn’t attempting a new form with these essays. He doesn’t push the boundaries of the essay. He searches for meaning in the small things. He turns the shallow into the deep.