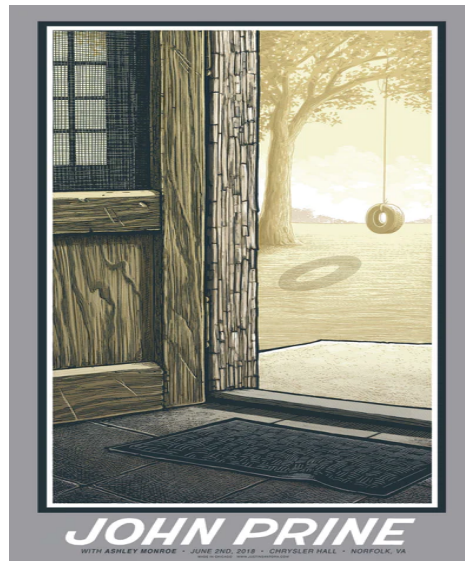


“All That’s Left to Linger On” by Mike Marshall Wilson

{Book Review of *Turmeric & Sugar: Stories* by Anna Vangala Jones}



I first read a story by Anna Vangala Jones two years ago as I walked upstairs to get my toddler down for her afternoon nap. I held my phone in front of my face as I walked, intending to read only the first few lines at the bottom of the steps, tuck my daughter into her crib, and then I planned to read the rest as I sat against the wall near my nervous sleeper. But I couldn’t look away from the text as I went up the steps, and by the time I got to the top I had to sit down right there and finish the story. The words left me no choice.

The story that sat me down on the top step is called “You Don’t Have a Place Here” which first appeared in *OKD* in 2019, and it is a fabulist tale about a narrator who gets a formal Human Resources reprimand for, of all things, allowing her dead friend’s ghost to follow her into the office every day. There is a meta joke here — the character finds herself in hot water for bringing a soul into a soulless place — and the story offers a wry critique of office politics, but the real mastery, I was so lucky to discover, is how Anna tells a story inside a story of how the narrator’s best friend became a ghost in the

first place. With faint brush strokes, through the absurdity of the HR meeting, the reader pieces together a background story of violence against women, survivor's guilt, and the weight of grief. Each paragraph, and sometimes each line, could be its own story: "I don't feel afraid or even sad that you're still here. I'd be both those things if you left. I think you know that, too. I feel bad I was your burden before and you're still not free of carrying me around on your shoulders now." The entire story is like this, a surface story and a subtextual one — like the story itself is haunted.

Anna's debut collection *Turmeric & Sugar* (Thirty West, May 2021) is full of stories that make you hit life's pause button. Realist stories gather together with surreal tales, all of them so humane, all of them told in addictive voices that feel like each narrator is urgently whispering some important and hard won wisdom into your consciousness.

Reading Anna's work for the first time on the top step was my own personal equivalent to Roger Ebert wandering into the Fifth Peg one random night in the fall of 1970, where a young unknown singer-songwriter named John Prine was performing a set. Ebert had never heard of Prine — nobody had, really — but right away Ebert knew what he was seeing. He wrote the next day: "[Prine] appears on stage with such modesty he almost seems to be backing into the spotlight. He sings rather quietly, and his guitar work is good, but he doesn't show off...after a song or two, even the drunks in the room begin to listen to his lyrics. And he has you." This is what it's like to read Anna's stories.

"Mae and Me", the opening story of the collection, captured me with its first notes: "When Daniel vanished, he left two women behind." This realist piece explores abandonment, addiction, platonic love, and Scott Fitzgerald's assertion that there are no second acts in American lives. We are always tied to our first act, whether we like it or not. The narrator, Anjali, is forced into her own second act when her husband, Daniel, leaves her to return to his relationship with addiction. Mae, Anjali's elderly neighbor, had become Daniel's enabler before the shame of his relapse drove him to abandon Anjali. When Anjali visits with Mae to try to learn more about her own husband's

behavior, the two form a tender friendship despite the obvious conflict. In different hands a story like this could go so wrong. But Anna swerves in all the right places, and ultimately delivers a story with the ends satisfyingly untied. Daniel doesn't resurface, and Anjali tries to move on even though it seems uncertain if she'll be able to. In "Mae and Me" Anna leans into the inexplicable nature of human beings. We are mysterious to others, and even to ourselves.

The thing about *Turmeric & Sugar* is this: when you are reading a realist story you will think Anna is at her best writing in that form, and then when she takes you into those surreal places you will think she's at her best when things get a little weird. It's one of those collections in which your favorite story will probably be the one you're currently reading. So it's hard to pin down which story is the best of the batch, but I do think "Doors" is the one I'll return to most often, the one that will affect me differently in each new moment of my own life. If this collection were a John Prine album, "Doors" would be "Souvenirs" — an evocative standout amongst an extraordinary body of early brilliance.

"Doors" begins, "When he shows it to me, the place where people go to start from scratch and pick the unopened door they skipped the last time—a do over, no questions asked—I am afraid." Things have gone wrong for this couple. They are splitting up and the narrator's ex is leading her to a row of doors. Here they can step through and erase each other from their memories. But when the moment comes to step through, the narrator can't. When she next sees her ex, he'll never know of the past they share. But she will. "When we meet on the other side, he will be blissfully unaware and know only our friendship. I alone will know every gorgeous and uncomfortable moment we passed together as more than that." She'll stay with their first act, while he will never know they had one. I had to stare out the window for a while after reading the final line: "I don't know. Ask me tomorrow if I made the right call." And isn't this life? How can we ever know if we did the right thing, even when we get a do over?