“Dear child, illusion is a lovely sight. / Reflection and wonder is the only Christ.” Wendy Videlock’s poetry collection *Wise to the West* reflects on and wonders about a luminous, secular world—and in particular, it muses on Colorado’s Western Slope, which the poet calls home. In her poem “The Inquiry,” quoted above, Videlock suggests “That which is false also / is true,” and this collection continues to explore the often logic-defying wisdom of living in the American West. “Here in the West,” for example, informs us that:

whatever
one’s pain,
one never complains
about the rain.
What’s good for the plains
is bad for harvest.
What freezes in spring
is sugar beet-borrowed.

As arid as its conditions may be, Videlock’s love for the region is apparent. Poems such as “Said the old wrangler,” first published in *THINK*, read like miniature folk tales with the poet’s signature wink. This short-and-sweet poem, included here in its entirety,
begs to be committed to memory:

Said the old wrangler,

There’s coffee in the lodge,
a snake in the pit,
some dogs on the loose

and a leak in the roof where
something akin
to sympathy seeps in.

Videlock is an established and respected formal poet, so it was surprising to me to find so few received forms in *Wise to the West*. Yes, readers can spot a few 14-line poems to classify as sonnets. (“The Inquiry” is one of them.) The villanelle also makes an appearance; “Sticks and Sky” uses the form to ruminate on the way “the sky is wider than a Twitter feed” and concludes:

Unplug for a spell and you’ll understand why

it’s good to be found outside the public eye.
To learn the difference between word and deed.
I am steeped in the sticks and stuck on the sky;
unplug for a spell and you’ll understand why.

But overwhelmingly, *Wise to the West* is a collection of nonce forms of Videlock’s own devising. I hesitate to call even her loosest poems “free verse,” as the poet’s sharp ear and penchant for repetition are quite deliberately crafted. Videlock is adept with nonce form, and in “Learning to Breathe,” she gives the reader a reminder that:
the body is home
and a beginning is
the same as
a nonce
form

or a summer
storm—

not an erasure but
a departure

from the norm.

While “Learning to Breathe” is not strictly organized in any apparent way, we hear the distinct binding agent of Vide-
lock’s lilting internal rhyme. Another fine example of the way her sonic play serves as the poem’s sinew is “Deconstruction,”
an exceedingly clever gem which Natasha Trethewey selected for the 2017 edition of The Best American Poetry series. “Decon-
struction” begins:

The chickadee is all about truth.
The finch is a token. The albatross
is always an omen. The kestrel is mental,
the lark is luck, the grouse is dance,
the goose is quest. The need for speed
is given the peregrine, and the dove’s
been blessed with the feminine.

I find all of Videlock’s finest poetic qualities at work in “De-
construction”—her playful sense of consonance, her witty way
with metaphor, her loving gaze upon the natural world, and her
confidence in structuring a lengthy catalog of ideas. Videlock favors this style of list poem and knows how to keep it from losing its energy. Consider “Subject to Erasure,” which launches into a similar anaphora from its start lines:

Captains, drop your weapons.  
Fathers, show your faces.  
Makers, know your pencils

are softened by your natures,  
are sharpened by your visions,  
are subject to erasures,  

are snapped by undue pressure.

Videlock’s skill with litany is also at play in “On Hearing Yet Another Person Say They Haven’t Got a Creative Bone in Their Body”:

we can’t help but spend our lives making
   music, making choices,
make strides, making up
for lost time,
making hay and haste,
and promises and progress,
making love, making
history, making
predictions, making
productions, making
light

of the situation . . .
As a collection, *Wise to the West* is organized so as never to lose its momentum. Peppered in between its longer poems are intensely short, Confucius-like moments of Wild West wisdom and invented proverbs. The collection opens with one such poem, which also made its first appearance in *THINK*; its title doubles as its first line:

The stark and the spare

and strands

of windswept hair

are always in

abundance

on the desert air.

Blink and you might miss another maxim, again with an integrated title:

The unexamined life contains

few birds, no moon,
no slow

—stirred soup.

Too many such aphorisms-as-poems might feel cloying, but the collection is balanced, and the lack of separating sections gives the entire book a rolling-stones-gather-no-moss quality. In fact, it is difficult to stop reading—the reader seems to pick up speed as she goes.
Toward the end of the collection, Videlock pumps the brakes ever so slightly with a series of elegies and tributes to individuals who have touched her life. Her wit and litany are still as present as ever, but the poems take a more serious turn. “O Timothy Tim” is dedicated to the memory of Tim Murphy—one assumes the elegy refers to the prairie poet who passed away in 2018. “A Few Things We Learned from Our Friend Dale” concludes with poignance:

The weight that you were born to bear
will glean from the soul and take to the air.
There’s a hidden path in the wild rye.
It’s not so bad having to die.
The hardest part is saying goodbye.

And Videlock dedicates a poem to (presumably) fellow Western Slope poet Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer in “More or Less”:

From the wrecking ball to the cold compress,
from the lullaby to the wedding chest,
from the child’s bed to the brambled

and the dispossessed,

comes the woman in the long red dress,
comes the woman broken
open and infinitely blessed.

I am grateful for these poems that anchor the end of Wise to the West, as not only do they balance her quick, playful proverbs with poems of gravitas, but they also balance Videlock’s interpretation of the West. There are people in this corner of Videlock’s world—there are human connections. In this Col-
orado desert you will find ghosts as well as friends and lovers, and for each wrangler and snake there is a blessed woman in a red dress. Taken as a whole, *Wise to the West* serves as a bridge between the inhospitable and the home. Videlock closes her collection with the poem “Ode to the Slow,” whose final words reach across the chasm:

—here where the rolling stone knows
the world is only made of sand and the arc
is the mark of the fallen star,
here where the ghosts and the slopes are wan
and empty of virtue and of sin, I lower a bridge
and watch the morning fog roll in.