Matthew Wheatley is an alum of the MFA program in Creative Writing at Chapman University and is a Founding Editor of the international, interdisciplinary journal *Anastamos*, which can be found at https://anastamos.chapman.edu.
Book review

**THE SHORT LIST OF CERTAINTIES BY LOIS ROMA-DEELEY**
**FRANCISCAN UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017**

In the epigraph to part one of *The Short List of Certainties*, Lois Roma-Deeley quotes St. Augustine of Hippo, saying, “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.” Throughout this collection, Roma-Deeley uses multiple and uncertain realities to explore those two things: anger and courage.

One of the ways she creates these unstable worlds is by crossing out words. One such poem that does this is, “The Mirage of Saints confess Their Unholy Thoughts.” She writes, “But not until I beat my breast as the army of saints / come toward me—” The interplay between the crossed and not crossed-out sections create a tension of two realities conflicting with one another. In the one, good and holy saints approach the author. In the other, a marauding army of saints approaches. In this, the certainty of how to interpret the scene is removed. Roma-Deeley skillfully plays with these kinds of tensions, building and releasing them throughout the collection.

Roma-Deeley creates multiple realities in another way in “Ghost-Stepping.” As the narrator and another person, referred to as “you,” walk down the street and into and apartment of a Wall Street banker and his wife, a separation and togetherness between the selves is created. The you and I are separate, but speak together to the woman. The woman hears the voice of her younger self in the closet, she being then both young and old, inside and outside. Who these people are and their relation to one another are uncertain. The you and I are almost on another plain, able to interact with the husband and wife, but not able to be seen. Roma-Deeley wields this confluence of realities well, creating a rich world full on tension and intrigue.

It is in these uncertain and multiple places that the commonalties between them show the reader the aspects of life that seem certain. One of the most common similarities between the poems is the presence of pain and violence, even if not in a physical sense. In “The Mirage of Saints confess Their Unholy Thoughts,” both the narrator and reader feel the violence of the crossed-out reality seep into the uncrossed-out one. She writes, “Now the noonday sun stares me down / … / guides my hand against my will.” Even though part of it is struck through, it is read along with the rest of the poem. The violent undercurrent cannot be removed.

The same theme of felt violence occurs in “Ghost-Stepping” as well. The woman hears her younger self:

- beaten for speaking. For being silent. For ears sticking out from her head like a cup.
- For pee running down her leg. For breathing too loudly. For being anything at all.

For the woman, the pain and violence that was inflicted upon her in her youth has become an ever-present certainty, even years later when she is married and well-off. There are not many things about our reality that the book shows can be known for certain, but the fact that there will be pain is one of them.
This pain and violence comes in many forms, from war and abuse in the previous two poems, to sexual assault, the pain of losing a loved one, insanity, becoming irrelevant, Boko Haram, and mass shootings. How the violence will be perpetrated is uncertain. That it will be perpetrated is certain. This, in a sense, becomes the anger of the opening epigraph. The reader can feel Roma-Deeley’s displeasure with the way things are, such as in “Me and J. Alfred,” when she writes, “This is not how it goes. / This is not how it went.” The repeating of “not” creates a sense of just anger over the state of affairs.

Fortunately, the collection does not end on such a dour note. The final and titular poem, *The Short List of Certainties*, takes the anger and violence from the previous poems, and transforms them into the courage to make things different. At the end of the poem, she writes, “Let us at last—or at least—bless the empty desert as if it were a blank page. Then, having courage, let us write a word or phrase on the short list of certainties something that sounds very much like praise.” At the end, the narrator takes back the agency, writing something good in the list of certainties. The narrator is working to counterbalance all the pain that has already been recorded there throughout the collection.

*The Short List of Certainties* is an excellent collection of poems that deals with the pain that we all must face, and ultimately, how in spite of that pain, we all must choose our path out from it.