



★ **Hummingbirds between the Pages**

Chris Arthur

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In Chris Arthur's masterful, elegant essay collection *Hummingbirds between the Pages*, expansive and granular meditations on time, language, nature, mortality, and Northern Ireland capture wonder in the everyday.

Taking its title from a habit of settlers, who would mail the bodies of hummingbirds home as a proof of their existence, these essays present individual topics as mementos.

Whether considering lesser-known facts, like Darwin's killing of a fox, or once commonplace objects that lead to uncommon insights, such as a pocket watch that is twined with an illustration of a prehistoric scene, these essays suspend time with ease. Each page reveals an attentive narrative spirit that raises profound questions on existence without a trace of self-consciousness.

In several essays, loss takes center stage, in degrees from unremembered conversations to a daughter's first experience of death, a mother's declining health to a fleeting encounter with an empty hearse on a university campus. Such moments glimpse the eternal within the "vanished moment."

Especially perceptive essays include "Before I Knocked," in which a vintage postcard inspires musings on the unknown sender as well as the author's father; "Sleepers," a reflection on a family's anthracite stove and hearth that morphs into an expression of Ulster's handed-down values; "Shells," which uses an aunt's long-ago gift to reveal how little one knows of relatives' lives; and "Skimming," which elevates the pleasure of skipping stones to an act that links father to son and son to daughter.

Without magnifying their importance, Arthur frequently considers the events required as a basis for any present moment, skillfully locating people and incidents on a historical continuum to emphasize the unseen forces that bind them. Through singular phrasing and meticulous descriptions, these essays return again and again to the unlikely miracle of being alive.

KAREN RIGBY (University Press 2018)

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