



TALES FROM GRIEVING MOTHERS

This week, we consider two books featuring heart-wrenching tales and beautiful writing. Seattle historian Paula Becker's "A House on Stilts" and Portland poet Marilyn Stablein's "Milepost 27" each share excruciatingly personal stories of having a child die too young.

Becker's first-born son, Hunter, was a lively, curious child who grew up in a loving family.

But, he was also a risk-taker, and in retrospect, perhaps it shouldn't have been a complete surprise that, as a teenager, Hunter experimented with drugs. Becker, who put her career on hold to stay home with her kids — even homeschooling them — concedes she was naïve about her son's drug use, which slid into opioid addiction.

"My deep conviction that I knew all there was to know about my son muffled the early warning bells that should have hit me like a screaming smoke alarm, shattered my equanimity," she wrote. "By the time I finally awoke to what was happening, we were engulfed in flames."

In this memoir, Becker traces the clues she may have overlooked and the missteps she may have made as her son got caught up in an agonizing cycle of addiction, attempts to get clean, relapses and homelessness.

After Hunter had stolen several items from his family's home to sell for drug money, Becker and her husband banned their son from living in the house with them. They did, however, allow him to stay in the little playhouse on stilts in the backyard so he didn't have to sleep on the streets.

"For families," Becker writes, "the struggle to decide and decide what choice to make in each separate instance — the struggle to support without enabling — is never over."

Hunter lived for only a quarter of a century.

"A House on Stilts" is an elegy for a beloved son who streaked through a life of joy and pain. It's also an offering of compassion and hard-won insight to parents who might have a child of their own in the grips of the same frightening epidemic.

"Milepost 27" is Stablein's slim volume of poems that attest to a lifetime of spiritual quests that took her from Kathmandu to the desert southwest to the Pacific Northwest.

But the event that most intensely challenged her faith was the fatal accident that took her 28-year-old son's life.

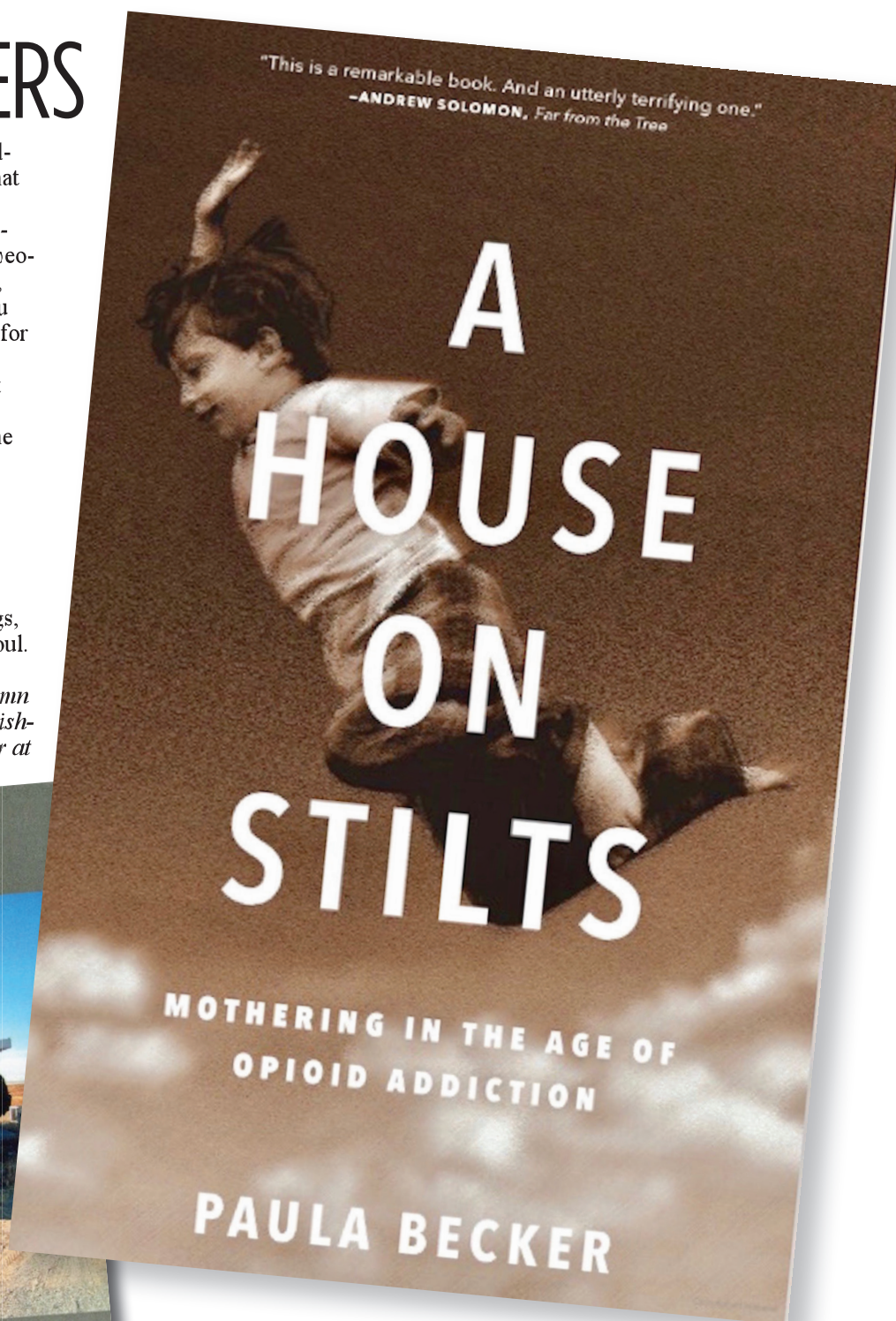
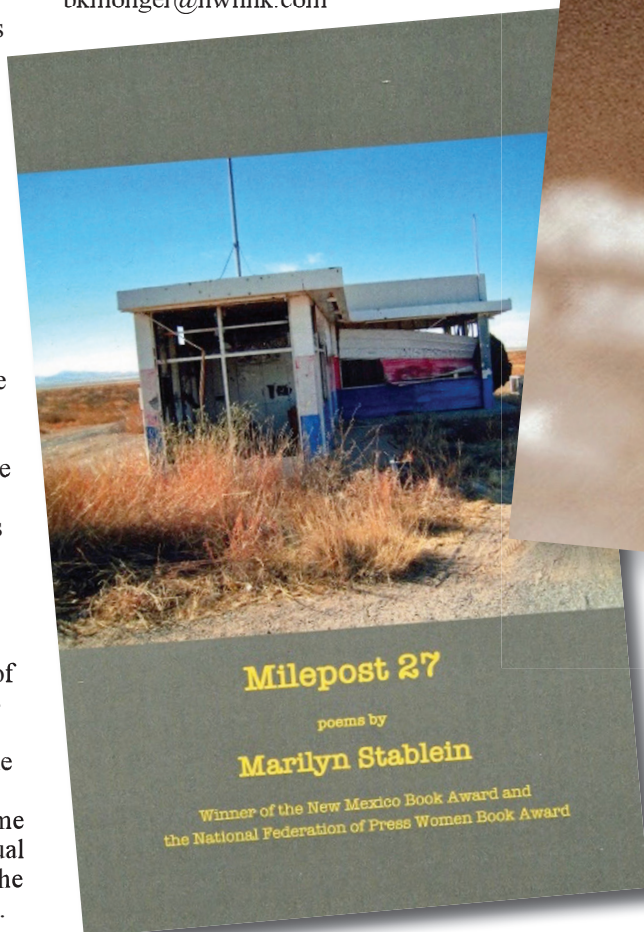
Her poem titled "How to Build a Descanso" talks about the roadside shrines people build to mark "the beloved's sudden, irreversible departure" and notes, "If you pass milepost 27 / on the interstate look for my son's *descanso*."

In another poem she talks about what she perceived when she came across a trailside cremation pit during a trek in the Himalayas:

fire's devastation
exemplifies a democracy
so uniform the very nature
of disintegration
implies integration. ...

Both Stablein's and Becker's offerings, in a multiplicity of ways, will sear the soul.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com



This Week's Books

"Milepost 27" By Marilyn Stablein
Black Heron Press — 89 pp — \$16.95

"A House on Stilts" By Paula Becker
University of Iowa Press — 232 pp — \$18