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On Mekeel McBride's *Dog Star Delicatessen*

Dog Star Delicatessen: New and Selected Poems 1979–2006 by Mekeel McBride. Pittsburg: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2006.

The poems in Mekeel McBride's *Dog Star Delicatessen* are drawn from all of her published work, starting with a substantial group of new poems and proceeding in reverse chronological order back to her 1979 *No Ordinary World*. What emerges through this retrospective overview is both a stylistic and thematic unity and an ongoing, underlying resistance to the constraints of normative lyrical language. McBride is concerned with the occasional sublimity or "magic" of daily experience, and at times her work touches the realm of fairy-tales. Yet because she approaches this theme from many directions, her body of work reveals in many different ways the multiform experience of being.

Most immediately striking is the sheer volume of flora and fauna—varieties of being—that populate McBride's poems. Much of her work draws on the semi-rural areas of New Hampshire and Maine where she lives, and includes elements from working class life: beat-up cars, harmonicas, trash, barbecues, and many, many dogs. Against these cultural markers, there is the power of the natural world. From "Flower," which opens the book, to the final image of a geranium in "Meditations before and during Sleep" that closes it; from the pig that embodies "Loneliness" to the mouse that brings a little girl a kernel of corn in "The Well"—McBride connects humans, animals, and plants in a continuum of life. Yet these connections are not Romantic; McBride does not find human emotion paralleled in nature. Rather, all living things, animal and vegetable, exist in a sort of unified opposition to all things inanimate. The resistance to death as a state of non-being and the simultaneous embrace of being—this is the animating spirit in McBride's poetry, one that charts a clear course through all her work.

Such placing of animals and plants in dialogue with humanity is perhaps most comparable to themes in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop. Like Bishop, McBride sees animals as fellow sufferers along with humanity here on earth. One of the best poems in the book, "The Whale

Poem," presents the whale as both wholly distinct from humans and part of a continuum of suffering that embraces both the human and animal worlds:

Make your claim, Eve,
make it.
For garden I depend
not on your god,
not on the hand

of lightning, harsh
scripture of the harpoon.
This planet is blue.
I do not ask
to be forgiven.

While this poem grants consciousness to an animal in a way that Bishop would not, it does offer a revelation of simultaneous kinship and difference between living beings who share a relationship to death that is much like what Bishop accomplishes in a poem like "The Armadillo." And like Bishop, McBride is keenly aware of the danger of her own claims, as the first stanza above demonstrates: connecting the human and the animal worlds raises the possibility of erasing the distinction between the two and bringing human experience into false congruence with animal. Instead, as McBride suggests in the second stanza, the more meaningful connection to be made is in the very incommensurability of animal and human. The fact that both are united in being becomes a means to strip privilege from human narratives of destiny and consciousness. McBride walks a fine line gracefully in this poem.

McBride also approaches her revelations on a strictly human level, but here again she tends toward the secular and everyday. One of her key strategies is to flip expectations about ordinary objects and experiences, transfiguring them, as in "Zero Gravity":

. . . And I figure if it were

to happen this is the way an angel
would appear—in work boots, in a truck
heavy with the ordinary tools of the world,
hard hat and sky friendly ladder. A man

who understands the holy language of the fish,
those beings who neither hold nor let go
but simply allow the light current
of the living water to carry them.

The appearance of working people and their possibility for transcendental experience is proposed by McBride, and accepted by the reader, without overt reference to class. This is a poetry that is broadly democratic in a way that Emerson would have liked. And unlike traditionally lyrical poetry, where we might expect mere pathos—or worse, condescension, her poems allow a strangeness and value to working-class experience.

Lastly, she includes those disfigured parts of ourselves we have trouble accepting as ordinary, as in "A Thing or Two That Might Be True," where she writes:

There were seventeen of us
dwarfs & elephant eared girls
jugglers & clock faced boys
babies who looked much like circus dogs
& bayed at the salty far stars.
Oh how I was eclipsed
by every unnatural wonder
a tattered crow girl
with such ordinary feathers.

Here, as in other poems, McBride creates a unity of being in which it is possible to achieve a sublimity of experience—to reach the strange from the ordinary, or the ordinary from the strange.

There are difficulties with this book, as well as pleasures. One of McBride's more frustrating tendencies is to bring us too easily to a conclusion without making us work for one. I suspect that most readers would appreciate being challenged more often than is typical in McBride's work. The recent poem "Oracle, Brooch, Hors d'oeuvre . . ." does this well, resisting the urge to come to a pat conclusion, and leaving the reader in a place of strangeness. I also found myself wishing that McBride would occasionally vary the structure of her poems, which all move linearly in stanzas and by means of syntactic sentences. While it is hard to complain about the use of poetic language in a poem, something potentially surprising and fresh could come from challenging this pattern of thinking, which over time becomes one of the less satisfying unities of her poetry.

Yet despite these reservations, I believe there is a great beauty and humanity at work in McBride's poetry. Her work offers us a world in which the ordinary can give way to the transcendent, if we will allow it to. While stylistically these poems could be read and enjoyed by a child, McBride's themes are complex and challenging, and may cause readers—if we can be persuaded to see the possibility in our daily lives—to look at the world anew.