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AN AROMA OF MEANING

A review of Irish poet Medbh McGuckian's disjointed and dreamy new book of poems.

BY CARMINE STARNINO
POETRY MEDIA SERVICE

The Currach Requires No Harbours, by Medbh McGuckian. Wake Forest University Press. \$21.95 cloth; \$11.95 paper.

"A dream dreamed in the presence of reason" was Jesuit Tommaso Ceva's definition of poetry. One way or another, all poets fiddle with that formula. Medbh McGuckian has fine-tuned it. She has hit on a dream-to-reason ratio perfect for replicating what she calls "the feminine subconscious, or semi-consciousness." Think middle state as a mental state: sensations mingle until language is a vapor of impossible-to-visualize surmises. McGuckian's poems don't make sense, they make mist.

Her debut, *The Flower Master* (1982), set the standard. Written around the time of her first child's birth, the book attempts to tackle the passionate ambivalence of her maternal feelings. Each poem is a series of richly evocative assertions that harm their own logic ("A man will keep a horse for prestige, but a woman ripens best underground"). Opacity rides up hard against precision, in a constant bestriding of clauses, but never quite overtakes it. What comes through, pictorially, is a mood of lightness and transparency suffused with half-sexual strangeness ("I begin to scatter/To a tiny to-and-fro at odds/With the wear on my threshold"). The effect is startling; seductive even. But, for all that, no less of a letdown. A reader kept on standby—unsure what happens next, struggling to understand what has happened already—is a reader with nothing to keep in his head.

The Currach Requires No Harbours, McGuckian's ninth book, is more of the same: dense, diffuse, and dimly apprehensible. Of course, her anti-depictions have a function: to scramble male tenets of poetic form. Against control-freak articulateness, McGuckian offers an exploratory seeping forth of sounds. By letting language have its way, she hopes to be led to insights otherwise unreachable. Yet McGuckian's digression-prone method is actually a spectacularly ornate free-association game. Far from freeing buried meanings, she has refined a mellifluousness no less con-fected for being slippery. Orotundity piles up, longeurs go long. The problem, you soon realize, isn't McGuckian's obscurity. It's her decision to double-down on it: not simply to seal off her non sequiturs from rational inspection, but to overwrite the act. The poems, in other words, make a big show of handing themselves over to ideas too deep

to be grasped. It's an attention-losing ploy because it's so self-indulged. That said, if you do sometimes find yourself paying attention (and you will) a big reason will be the lush music of her expression:

Days that belonged to war and peace
at the same time, they were always so:
darkened cinemas, the strength of lamps
reduced as low as possible.
Peace being restored at different speeds,
the sea disarmed, England calm,
and the shelf upon which it sat
more certain of the greens and golds,
or what she might look like while looking—her hummingbird nature,
her maple-tree nature. Hers is the first
of many languid arms to reach out
like a lifted horizon in a landscape's
perfect swaying, her opaque red plumage,
lips and heels like patched sails
in the same damp winter's afterglows.

—From "Regaining Control of the Night"

Here we have some atomized perceptions prettily captured in four stanzas. It's a beguiling blend of pinpoint grammar and just-short-of-ethereal imagery. McGuckian isn't always so semi-articulate and, by playing it straight, can achieve vivid enrichments of ordinary perception: "the way the moon attaches/her self-closing, liquid glance/to the perfect leaf." But she can't resist: she will always strike inward to a deeper voluptuousness. Which means that *The Currach Requires No Harbours* will be enjoyed best by those who find it easiest to detach their expectations from a poem's actual result. Take the following:

The trans-lake mountain,
cruel where the black passes over, is tender in its silver-toned
puckerings of preparation.
Every word after "mountain" operates outside the bounds of normal usage, but because McGuckian—a name that too closely rhymes with McGuffin—doesn't coordinate the consequences of those new identities, the sentence is a bit of a put-on. The words aren't badly chosen, they're arousingly chosen; or, as she once said, "a word has only an aroma of meaning." But what is "an aroma of meaning" if not arbitrariness with delusions of grandeur? We can say this much for McGuckian's poems: they're utterly hers. She has a reputation for a mind on its own wavelength, and it's well-deserved.

Carmine Starnino's newest book of poems is *This Way Out*, from Gaspereau Press. This article originally appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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Words You Can Use:

Coenaculous: We are all this. We are all fond of eating. Some may be more coenaculous than others.

Demology: This word is not like it sounds. It is the study of activities of humans.

Echolalia: This is the chronic habit of repeating the words of others, like an echo. It is not as comic as echopraxia, the repetition of another's actions.

Gambade: When the horse jumps over the fence, the action has this name. Unknown is the word for the cow jumping over the moon.

Submissions sought

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20 lines,

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Poetry

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Each entry with brief biography notes. All must be family oriented; no smut, slander or liable material.

Thief In The Night

Love picked all my bones so shiny clean
Just by being nothing like it seemed
I was having myself quite a ball
'Til love picked me up to let me fall.

So watch out for that thief in the night
Who takes away your heart and your life
Takes away the will for going on
Leaving you alive but so alone.

Love will rob your heart just like a thief
While leaving despair and leaving grief
So enter your night with brightest lights
To guard you from that thief in the night

The night of the thief so wasted me
Took a bite of me and tasted me
Chewed me up by taking many bites
Because love is a thief in the night.

- Weldon L. Smith
Eastland, Texas

Rhymes To Use:

Smorgasboard
Harpsichord
Seaboard
Chord
Cord
Gourd
Aboard
Record

Writers And Poets!

The Eastland/Callahan County Newspapers announce that the Baird Star will be publishing submitted poetry and short stories. We will also be publishing a literary journal in the near future.

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American Life In Poetry

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

We've published this column about American life for over four years, and we have finally found a poem about one

of the great American pastimes, bowling. "The Big Lebowski" caught bowling on film, and this poem by Regan Huff of Georgia captures it in words.

Occurrence on Washburn Avenue

Alice's first strike gets a pat on the back, her second a cheer from Betty Woszinski who's just back from knee surgery. Her third-- "A turkey!" Molly calls out--raises everyone's eyes.

They clap. Teresa looks up from the bar. At the fourth the girls stop seeing their own pins wobble. They watch the little X's fill the row on Alice's screen--

That's five. That's six. There's a holy space around her like a saint come down to bowl with the Tuesday Ladies in Thorp, Wisconsin.

Teresa runs to get Al, and Fran calls Billy at the Exxon. The bar crowds with silent men.

No one's cheering. No one's bowling now except Alice's team, rolling their balls to advance the screen around to Alice, who's stopped even her nervous laugh, her face blank and smooth with concentration. It can't go on and then it does go on, the white bar reading "Silver Dollar Chicken" lowering and clearing nothing, then lowering and clearing nothing again.

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Humorous Poem

Big heads and tangled hair
Smaller brains and timid glare

Tiny legs and tiny horns
Running from thunder storms

Big boned and stinky coats
They smell worse than tiny goats

They always follow they never lead
They are slower than an untamed steed

Roaming through the highs and lows
I'm talking about BUFFALOS

As the herd moves on through
We have to call the cleaning crew

- Esperanza Portillo
Baird, Texas



The pen is mightier than the sword