

Amour de Voyage

Archaeology at Midnight

Martha McFerren.

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We've heard the complaints. We've even made them. Most contemporary poems sound pretty much alike and talk about mostly the same things in the same way. In a sense, we may well find ourselves in a new Augustan age, where everybody knows what a poem is and how to write one.

The differences between McFerren and most of her contemporaries attracted me immediately to her work. Of course, that same difference also has probably hindered her reputation, since most editors take what they recognize, rather than what they read. I commend Pinyon Publishing for its daring and its taste.

An old-fashioned Modernism hangs about her work. Where contemporary poetry aims to express the inner self, McFerren looks for wisdom in the world around her, which includes, of course, the past and its narrative expression in myth. Frankly, confessions have begun to wear me down. I don't really see why I should find the usually paltry sins of others interesting. After all, I've got my own problems. I suppose I'm old-fashioned myself. I want poetry to tell me something of how to live my life—good advice from a good head. I really don't want to sort through somebody else's psychic jumble. The poet should sort through that before it ever gets to me. After all, most of us can whine and *kvetch*. What makes the poet special?

My first acquaintance with McFerren's work was with an early poem called "Mountain Soprano," a long, rhymed masterpiece on Appalachian lore, whose diction owed something to Stephen Vincent Benét. There was more to it, of course, but it stood out not only in its excellence, but in its difference from, say, W. S. Merwin, very influential at the time. McFerren's poems have reflected her interests: ancient civilizations, travel, books, and folklore. I suppose Robert Bly would call her a "bourgeois poet," but, let's face it, most literary poets are bourgeois. I think uniting all her interests is her pull to the past, for its romance, strangeness, and more. She profoundly feels that those before us were like us, that they mean something to us, even heavily wrapped in the mysteries of strange times and cultures. She usually asks the question, "How is the other like me?" I admit that all of her interests aren't necessarily mine, but McFerren is an outstanding entertainer. She seems to have a holy horror of boring anybody. A lot of this collection reminds me of a really good talker and storyteller.

I'd call *Archaeology* her best, most mature book, but that unfairly slaps her others. Nevertheless, I feel that her concerns reach their fullest, ripest form here, and her technique has become even more stunning and more subtle. She always was a virtuoso rhymer, with a fantastic sense of rhetorical pace. For me, she runs in high gear

throughout this collection. In fact, that's my problem. The book brims full with so many strong poems, it's hard to settle on what to talk about.

Archaeology begins with two quotes, the first from travel writer J. D. Brown, the second from Louisiana Poet Laureate Emma Wilson Emery:

She could not move in any direction without the walls of history collapsing upon her. These walls had become her armor which, turn as she might, she could never shed. In short, she was doomed to spectacle.

. . .

The man sat down again and studied my palm. By this time I had found my voice, and in a timid manner I asked, "Mister, will anything ever happen to me?" I remember few of the things the East Indian told me that day, but I do remember how he answered that question. "No, no, my child," he said. "Things will never happen to you. They won't have time. You'll happen to them first."

These two quotes capture a lot of what McFerren's up to in this book: the past's presence in and future influence on the lives we make for ourselves. Perhaps I've misled by suggesting grandiosity, but the poems certainly don't come off that way. If anything, they know their limits. They do, however, set your insides humming.

The poems concern mainly travel and Celtic lore, with side trips to Texas, pop culture, and one's own home. The book opens with a wow of a sonnet, which gives the book its title.

ARCHAEOLOGY AT MIDNIGHT

His knees drawn up, my husband lies asleep
so like the Tollund man — the sacrifice
found pickled in a bog. He sinks night-deep,
a similar repose upon his face.

Always I've dreamed of archaeology,
the pots and beads that decorate a death;
the gold. Poor health, an inability
to master languages, and general sloth

all kept me back. I also lacked the spleen
for its vendettas; who'd become whose mentor;
the provenance of jumbled figurines;
a major stew about each little splinter.

But in the dark I dream about the altars.
Knossos with the roof off. Newgrange. Malta.

The language shows a characteristic mixture of high and low language ("In the dark I dream about the altars" vs. "pickled in a bog") and lofty and mundane thought. It also shows that the gritty details about the past, establishing chains of evidence, don't interest McFerren so much as the inscrutability of it. The mystery comes to us, significantly, in clear language. McFerren doesn't try for the so-called "vatic voice," that theoretically prophetic, and usually self-indulgent strategy for conveying high seriousness. She rejects obfuscatory language. Looking straight at something and still being unable to figure it out increase the enigma.

Notice all the ways the past touches the present. The pose of the Tollund man becomes her husband asleep. It subtly hints that we will all end up in the bog, or at least in the ground, eventually. The professional archaeologists seek to create a line to the past through the relics they unearth, and the mentors among them a line to the future through attracting the brilliant student to carry on their name. The past becomes a way to our selfish immortality, and our view makes it less than it is. Nevertheless, it remains outside our comprehension and thus still attracts us.

"Etruscans at Midnight" (several poems contain the phrase "at Midnight" in their titles), another sonnet, begins with husband and wife, mad at each other, finding their way to a museum exhibit of Etruriana. They come across

. . . two immense sarcophagi, each lid
a sculpted couple awkwardly benign,
four arms askew within each narrow bed,
two sandstone torsos cramped and intertwined.

They lay in midnight as we stood in noon
holding hands, less troubled than before.
Those heavy sleepers loved to party down!
May such Etruscan parties be in store

for both of us . . .

I love "cramped and intertwined" for its neatness and condensation. We find love even in death—a plain prayer for the couple.

"Sheela-na-gig" resembles most closely Deep Image stuff, although it's much funnier than most of those Jungian musings. The title refers to the stone carvings, often Irish, of a stylized grinning hag with sagging breasts, opening her vagina with her hands. Scholars disagree on what she represents: fertility goddess, goddess who confers

kingship, a warning against lust, have all been put forward. For the most part, the poem plays with energetic language and with humor.

Punch's Judy.
Suet-pudding.
Old Foul Face herself.

. . .

She makes *rectangular*
a dirty word.

However, about two-thirds in, the mood changes as we hear the terrifying voice of the goddess herself:

*Come in, come out,
come in and don't come out.
Did you think that this was good?
Did you think that this was bad?
Within my hotbox
time coils asleep.*

The poem ends with the power of the goddess, as the poet asks, "What's to become of me?"

"Altamira, 1879" uses the tripping rhythms of nursery rhymes, first to describe why people were poking about Altamira in the first place, and second to recreate the wonder of the cave art's discovery by the 8-year-old (some say 12) girl.

she looked up high
and there she found
a rust red sky
of thirty bison.
Look! Surprise!
Her cry of *Toros!*
changed our eyes
and in this low vault
made us know
red comes two ways:
above, below.

The most elaborate poem in this mythic vein, "The Flight of Grania," retells the story of Grania, Diarmuid, and Finn, "the king who'd lived as king too long." The story has had a lot of versions—most emphasizing the star-crossed lovers and ending with Diarmuid's

death from goring by a wild boar. McFerren ends with Grania—another incarnation of a kingship/fertility goddess. But this is no praise of the irrational. McFerren asks

Who were the men and women, living beings,
who offered up their blood for her wild body?

There's always a price to pay for power or for stepping in its path. To some extent, the myths themselves ignore this, as they often ignore the real victims.

What saves poems on topics like these is ultimately that they're not merely catalogues of what McFerren's read about. She feels them strongly in her life and makes us see them in our own.

The past also comes into McFerren's poetry as contemplations on art, particularly as refuge. In "A Dream of Fleeing," images of escape (the Flight into Egypt, Marie Antoinette trying to run from the Revolution) occupy the first part of the poem. McFerren admits "Fleeing appeals to me," but she shows herself as much caught in her circumstances as Marie Antoinette. In her case, her impedimenta are books.

That's my weakness, books.
I've packed myself so often,
with no great concern
for underwear and socks
or even my mother's jewelry.

But the books! Which books?
Graves' Greek mythology?
My childhood copy of *Alice*?
An unread book that might,
when read, prove my salvation?

From here, the poem becomes a hymn to books as the world's salvation.

What is more precious
in this burning world
than words on paper?
For the world is always burning
without burning away,
and when the fires die down
we'll always need books—
rooms that can't be packed.

Confidentially, I think that's a bit rosy. I strongly suspect, for instance, that most of the Republican field of Presidential candidates haven't read a real book since college. But, then, this is a "dream," after all, just like *Alice*.

Myths come in many colors, of course, and McFerren explores those of popular culture (she created an earlier collection called *Delusions of a Popular Mind*)—the Fifties' notions of wifeliness as chronicled in *Seventeen* magazine, or the myths of dating rituals and of popular fiction. These may not have the high-toned provenance of Greek and Celtic gods, but they certainly have their hands on the steering wheel of our brains. "Pursued by Genre" tells of a drive the poet takes around New Orleans, where she lives, and what she sees as she looks out the car window: mini-dramas from bad romance novels—the weeping belle at the grave, the bride on the church steps about to be jilted, "The child outside the bar / calling Father, dear Father," and so on. She doesn't stop to investigate, because "My light changes." Thus, she leaves up in the air the question of the actual events' relation to the interpretations she's imposed.

As I've mentioned, travel poems also find a place in these pages, but don't expect travelogues. The powerful "Money vs. Listening" nails the dominant tone of New Orleans—which ironically bills itself as The City That Care Forgot—desperately in need of money and never having enough.

New Orleans was painful
even before it drowned.
We've known, before and after,
the peculiar sadness
of giving money
to those who badly need it.

Tourists toss spare change to tap-dancing kids in the Quarter.

At the gentlemen's cub
sadness is tucking tens
and twenties under the thongs
of the weary grinding girls.

Up to this point, I would call the poem broadly political, but for McFerren, the political doesn't answer anywhere near close to everything. She makes it personal, by telling the story of a sick acquaintance—whom, she admits, she thinks "both excruciating and boring." She spends some of the money her mother left her to make the sufferer's life more pleasant and to show some care and thought. She does what she can. It is a truly sad story, and I won't give the end away, except to say that nothing gets resolved.

Despite the mostly serious tone of the poems I've talked about, McFerren can write really funny stuff. This isn't anemic whimsy, but often belly-busters. There's an ode to

butter and a rant on "Anglofood" in "The Purest Thing in England," as well as "Secession," about a man who seceded from himself.

With a cork-pulling pop
he vanished pleasantly,
leaving only his white cravat
suspended in mid-air.

Notice how neatly she has rendered what is, after all, a pretty complex picture. Speed's essential to the joke.

Unfortunately, we need more like McFerren. Most poets have ignored the major changes in our time, because they look inward and because the self doesn't really change or differ significantly among most of us. McFerren looks out, to find out what she doesn't know about herself and about the rest of us.

George Cleveland
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