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Book Review

Later, Icarus

Elizabeth McManus

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This arresting first collection from poet and artist Elizabeth McManus delights with its meld of classical legend and intense personal experience. Dancing playfully at the edges of familiar tales, it seduces with its range of poetic form and startling imagery, the text itself subtly enriched by the delicate design of Lorna Gray. These are accessible, memorable poems, which come from a place of silence and leave the reader restored by the pleasure of the poetic journey.

They are poems also that look 'behind the headlines' of classical, and other, legend, sneaking a peak 'off-stage' at the ordinary lurking beneath the extraordinary. As such, they will appeal to Sixth Form and undergraduate students of Classics and the Humanities more generally, complementing modules on legend, myth, and the world of the hero in particular, and claiming a place on a prescribed reading list as a prompt to broader imaginative engagement with familiar texts.

The title poem recalls the disappointment of Icarus, no longer flying high but 'Slunk into beachside scrub/Scorched by shame' before 'He walked into town/Remaining silent thereafter'. Odysseus, in *Later, Odysseus*, is both reluctant battlefield hero and nostalgic domestic retreatant, looking back over his shoulder

At your chair
And your books
And the place by the fire
Where your hound would lie
If you were a man/Who liked hounds

Homeric allusions, in *The Duty We Owe Our Dead* and in *Wreckers*, counterpose the rites of death with the urgency of living, as Helen 'watches doomed ships in/Lamp eyes shining steadfast beacons/Ships break casting goods/Shadows trawl through sand', while 'The duty we owe our dead/Is only to live/No need for chariots/To drag their bodies/Round city walls'. Instead,

The rich soil
Of our beloved dead
Yields
The flowers of our todays
We raise our faces to the sun, unbowed
And in that unquenchable fashion
We live.

At times, mirth and amusement burst into the sacred enclave of myth and hallowed legend, no more so than in *Return to Eden*, where in whimsical sequel, Adam and Eve one day awaken to find on their doorstep 'An apologetic serpent, With a note/Between its fangs'. It's a note from God and the serpent, like remorseful leaseholders who have just evicted the best tenants they could ever hope for, saying they miss the pair of them and

Would sincerely like to welcome you back
To Eden
And to assure you of the permanent tenure we can offer . . .
Eden simply is not Eden without you . . .
Yours kindly, God and Serpent.

Yet it is 'the amazing ordinary' and the 'small hellos' which frame and enliven the legendary and extraordinary, the evasions of our 'ordinary . . . everyday faces' both concealing yet facilitating the epiphany of silent communion. This is an everyday ordinariness that accommodates love and death, both entirely natural yet capable of surprise. In *It's No Secret*,

Your staircase kiss
Shocked me
Shocks me grievously
Your public love.
In Fond Looks,
I fed my appetite
With fond looking
Window shopped you
Till I was hungry to buy
Browsed your wares
Sampled and tasted
Nourished true delight in you
By looking fondly
Let me win you over
Draw you down this silk road
Feast on me
Wax fat with content.

In love, relief can be both 'extreme' and 'light'. In *Light Relief,*

He's the light relief
Not the wisest thing
The sensible thing
Or the dutiful thing.
Drives the getaway car
My accomplice
Doesn't carry my burdens
Gives me a hell of a smile.

More urgently, in *Unrepentant*, and with haiku-like brevity:

I took you off
Like a hairshirt
Carefully
And with extreme relief.

Death, however, is never far away in these poems. In *Rubicon*, we witness mourning for a mother who is 'disappearing . . . moved

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to another country' until finally 'she's far away/Melting like a sugar mouse'. It's that 'melting' into death that sets the tone for other poems that evoke the transience of life. In *Meltdown*, the body in its coffin is 'plain and straight' and where 'A frenzy of atoms/Settles like snow/Outside weather shades/Melting'. The solace of resurrection is absent – 'No phoenix, no lazarus' – yet 'This point of perfection/Comes to silence in still flesh/Hands fall open'.

In similar spirit, the poet anticipates her own death in *Going Out*, expressing the desire

. . . to go out quietly
To the sound maybe
Of the pages turning
As you read with concentration
Sitting by my side.
Or to Long Time Sun
and By Thy Grace
On a loop, quietly, by my side.
And the cat purring
After a snack.

These allusions to an old Irish blessing and a devotional hymn sung by Snatam Kaur aptly evoke both Celtic and eastern spirituality as the context for the final 'Going out into mystery', not without defiance:

I don't want to go out
With vacuous last words
Concerned about inanities.
Instead, valuing the amazing ordinary,
Before going out.

This 'going out' is that same 'coming to silence in still flesh', greeted with hands fallen open at a point of perfection. And in the final poem of the collection, *Chagall Saw It*, we are left in no doubt that we have been privileged to encounter here a fresh poetic vision stripped of illusion yet rich enough to provide sustenance for the journey that is in the end one of hope and affirmation:

There is no god
Directing or rescuing
But there is blue.
Chagall saw it.
There is the restful sound
Of nothing happening.
There is a brown hawk
Over green grass. And sometimes
That curious thing
Another day.

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