

D. ERIC PARKISON

## Full of Red Nectar: *Showtime at the Ministry of Lost Causes*

Cheryl Dumesnil. *Showtime at the Ministry of Lost Causes*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016. \$15.95, paper.

Cheryl Dumesnil's new book contains poems that are strikingly bright and inviting. They're a pleasure to encounter. A reader has much to look forward to here: compelling language, a nearly neighborly atmosphere, and, often, an understated audacity of method. To overhear these poems is to become invested in the drama of personhood while laughing along with a speaker who is in awe of the world she observes. At least, that seems a helpful way to understand the relationship between these stylistically diverse poems. Read the opening to "Ode to Pink Floyd:" for example:

You were the perfect soundtrack for our theaters  
of discontent—two honors students stoned

on Acapulco Gold, scribbling 'We don't need no  
thought control' in the margins [of] our Western Civilization

text books, or sprawled on my dorm room floor...

The winking humor is charming, and the piece is funny and profound at turns. That's what makes it all the more surprising when one realizes that the poem shares an approach with an especially somber piece like "Don't." The latter opens with the speaker ruminating on a sick child, and ends approaching mortal terror:

Think instead about the hours he spent  
on the beach last weekend, digging

a giant pit in the sand, then pratfalling

into it, over and over, in slow motion.

No. Don't think about that either.

Not the hole. Not the falling.

Both poems surprise by showcasing the speaker's humility in the face of these counterposed sorts of ineffability, and by bringing the reader to a place where smoking weed in college and fearing for the life of a child seem to overwhelm with equal force, if not by equivalent means.

As with most of the book, both of these poems are written in couplets. However, those in "Don't" are the better designed. The diminishing line length as the end approaches underwrites the terrible sense of foreboding present in the poem, and the meaning of the hole is upended to great effect. The imperatives are countered by a clever apophasis: Dumesnil balances these elements to capture complex moments and feelings. This balance helps the book feel revealing and honest, and leads to work that can be strikingly vibrant, refreshingly transparent, or, personal to the point of obscurity.

Dumesnil's poems seem to divulge details of her own life, or slight variations. It's a strategy she shares with many respected poets at work today. Think of Li-young Lee, or Ellen Bass, Sharon Olds, or the late Philip Levine: their power is in the tension they create between persona and personality. Dumesnil takes considerable risks in this direction, sometimes closing that distance too completely. Consider "What You Were Doing Up There" which opens:

That house, that roof—  
above your mother's  
porcelain angels who

saved no souls, shingles  
threatening splinters  
to your tender feet

Poems are most alive when they provide the right details at the right time. This offers plenty of details: a house, its roof, the shingles,

porcelain angels, and splinters. There isn't much tension, though. The jump between stanzas, which foregrounds the inaction of the angels, seems conspicuous. Objects in poems often carry their own associations (Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose," James Merrill's windows and mirrors, or the horse dung in "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota"), which are explored in the course of the poem. Here, the porcelain angels are mentioned, and dropped. That the addressee is positioned over them on the roof, that they are incapable of saving souls—do angels save souls?—isn't revealing. They are too patly included and dismissed.

To point this out isn't condemnation of the method, though. *At the Ministry* is such a compendium and interrogation of materials that some unevenness in power is inevitable. The poem "Coming Home" demonstrates a similar method to "What You Were Doing Up There"—a concrete image is used to elevate the material towards the sort of transcendence the best poetry can supply—and in that poem, it works. The brief lyric in its entirety:

A flash of iridescent, humming green  
lingers at the hook

in the porch's crossbeam,  
where the teardrop of amber glass

used to hang. Remember? The one  
we bought our first June

and kept full of red nectar for years.

Everything feels intentional. The first person plural underwrites a compressed drama. "We" implies a companionship that is intimately at issue. When the speaker says, "Remember?" rather than "Do you remember?" the heartbreak is palpable: there was a "we," an "us," and while an "I" is implied, the "you" has gone. The rhythm of the first line creates expectation, which is immediately undercut: "Lingers at the hook," is insidious in its brevity. The hard consonant contrasts with "green" like a sort of anti-rhyme. That intuition is heightened by the off

rhyme of “green” with “crossbeam:” everything seems out of place. The amber tear, emptied of sweet nectar, accuses the “green humming,” with its suggestion of verdancy and vitality. The past feels irrecoverable when the ‘first’ June is mentioned, unavoidably invoking a ‘last.’

Cheryl Dumesnil has written a fine, if uneven, book which is well worth the read. The poem “Revolution” constellates the major themes of the book—love, both familial and romantic—with the complexities of our contemporary moment. An epigraph to the poem reads simply, “*Nahr al-Bared, 2007*,” and directs us to a battle in a Palestinian refugee camp. Two pages later, the American housing crisis throbs in the understated “When there’s no money left—”. The title poem, too, evokes our lives and the overwhelming sense of disorientation many of us feel. An ostensibly homeless street performer sings to commuters exiting a train:

Melancholy’s comin’ for you,  
better put down your broom.

Y’all die a little every day,  
go ’head now, put down your broom.

The reader gleans the implications: a domestic object, the broom, is meant for use in mundane daily tasks that ultimately don’t matter in the face of time. That the busker’s song is quoted by a poet concerned with the domestic feels exactly right. Dumesnil hears a challenge in the song—to find meaning in our lives, our traumas, and our own lost causes—and rises to the occasion with admirable, subversive, and incisive poems.