

## Book Reveiws

### *Dirt*

by Jo McDougal

Pittsburgh: Autumn House, 2001

*Dirt*, Jo McDougal's fourth book of poetry, was written and compiled during a period of grief and loss in the author's life. Poignantly rendered without a trace of sentimentality, this collection takes the subject of human behavior and interaction, nearly always through a female narrator, and highlights three interconnected themes: survivorship, magic and love.

The poems of this collection are compact, incisive and seamless; they do not lend themselves well to chopping and slashing for quotation. This is one of McDougal's strengths; nothing is here that does not contribute directly to the objective of that particular poem. No frills, few adornments, only a solid telling in plain language, the lean essence of poetic vision. Her use of tropes is notably restrained, rarely permitting even two or more metaphors to a poem. But when she does use metaphor, it is often strikingly beautiful, as the exquisite, "Ordinariness/ bright as raspberries," from "This Morning" (14). At times, the entire poem may serve as an extended metaphor, but she never strays far from the narrative of observation. She acquiesces to the power of a sequence of objects and impressions to tell the story. This is a poetry written from the juncture of things.

Her poetic narrators lead comparatively unrelenting lives; harder, more rife with compromise, more captive to the ebb and flow of convention, lives that lack many of the easier options of escape but that win through by endurance. In "An Old Woman Recalls A Sea Change" (23), a seven-

year-old daughter's life is absorbed when she must take over for her dead mother. Ms. McDougal's narrators are survivors, never facile, who bear the full brunt of whatever comes, and the beauty is found in that, the poetry fashioned from that. The spare music of isolation on the Kansas plains in "At Dusk" (47), or lushness in the context of the demands of tradition in "Courtly Love" (50), may stand as examples. The hurt of living is never denied. We sense that it has been felt, but by the time it gets to us it has been (or is being) transformed.

Most often this transformation has made the narrator or the characters stronger. A son's overcoming of partial paralysis from a stroke makes it possible for his mother to go beyond the pain as well ("The Good Hand" 59). Sometimes a sense of resignation occurs, a lesser form of survival, almost without a corollary, and still manages to inspire closure for the speaker: "I have nothing to bring to dreams./ The mockingbird and I are happy,/ losing everything" ("Mockingbird" 3). This is a poetry as fully dark as it is bright, and it surprises, for the dark is neither mystifying nor depressive but simply a part of the way things are. In "Tempting The Muse," the narrator's yearning is so achingly projected that Death responds in error, though he goes away, "but not before his eyes,/ red as a red snapper's,/ undid every button of my dress (75)."

These poems have a way of reaching into a situation and pulling it inside out, of illuminating a perspective that is unexpected but underlying all along. In some cases the affect is inevitable, as in "The Breakup" (51), where no specific cause can be adduced, "Just the wearing away,/ water constantly reminding stone." In others it is the shock of a ready truth, as in "Kissing" (38), the child narrator watching undisclosed as her Aunt and one-legged Uncle pursue a romance that has long-since accepted the fact of the amputation. Sometimes the medium is the triumph of the commonplace, as in "Weight" (16), when a husband rejoins his wife at a ballgame, the bleacher sags as he settles himself, and that familiarity reconstitutes her world.

It is a poetry of going-out and coming-back, and if a little magic is called for, this is no more than what may occur naturally. It can be a pure magic as "In A Neck Of The Woods" (68), where a man has been reported missing and the narrator surmises that without his noticing the

night has eased into his shape and taken him. Or it may simply be that the everyday occurrence has somehow shifted, common expectations jolted and things granted a dynamism of their own. The quest for magic is magic in the questing and McDougal extends the trope successfully, as in the succinct “The Phenomenological World”:

As I drive by my neighbor’s yard,  
a swan I’ve mistaken daily for an ornament  
raises a wing.

We come away with a new appreciation for the perseverance of the ordinary as it is re-framed in the presence of the incomprehensible.

Though there are facets that have gone unaccounted for here, the accumulation shows lives lived plainly but with a redeeming backbone of unexpected strengths and surprising understandings passing through the filter of survivorship and magic and love.

*Jack Wolford*