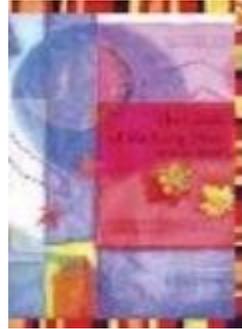


The Clock of the Long Now

Review by M. B. McLatchey
Author: Marion Boyer
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Ever since J. Alfred Prufrock measured out his life with coffee spoons, transcendence in poetry is no longer identified with the Romantic sublime. Instead, for the post-modern poet, transcendence is often the endurance of everyday life – human perseverance against the punishing crush of the commonplace. In Marion Boyer's *The Clock of the Long Now*, the transcendent is her subject. Yet, it resides not only in our capacity to endure our everyday lives, but also in the affirmation of our lives against a vast and arctic backdrop. "Sit beside me," the speaker says in a poem entitled, "Cold", "so we might appear/anything but frozen/an eyelash away from zero." *Anything but frozen*. Here, as throughout this collection, Boyer arms us against a kind of extinction by reminding us of our own humanity and worth.

What seems to threaten the worth of the figures in these poems – what seems to keep them always living "an eyelash away from zero" – is their struggle to press on in life beyond their own personal histories. As the speaker knows in a poem titled, "February" -- a poem that recalls the miscarriage or still birth of a child -- "You can bathe your mind in distraction, pull images/around yourself like a terry robe, set up a chair and lean/against the delicacy of its frame; I am aware of these/ things, the armor distance provides." However, as we hear in a later poem, "Antarctica", no matter how hard we try, our personal histories follow us like dogs on our trails:

Despite the things we rely on
To cover our mistakes –
Onions, snow, flames,

there's no escaping history.
Every chink and crevice
of the world is filled with it.

If there is anything to learn from nature, according to Boyer, it is perseverance in the face of events that we can not change. "I Suddenly Respect the Daffodils," she proclaims in another poem, "folded by a weeklong snowstorm, their heads pasted to the dirt./ They held their starch for a day after I cut and put them in water./ The bulbs, even now, store up for another April." From daffodils that reseed themselves in a tragic cycle of destruction and regeneration to "the fly inside my window believing there is a way out" to "cheerleaders in their tiny skirts who kick up/ their legs even though the score is hopeless," what Boyer celebrates is the stoicism of the one still standing. And what is the source for this stoicism?

For Boyer, it appears to be a Buddhist-like resolve to live in the present and not to be dogged by our pasts. The effect of this resolve is to recognize that every moment is to be beautified, sublimated – and ultimately, to realize that the large questions of our lives are being answered in the small conversations:

In Small Conversation
about purchases or soap
people count on plums
or peculiarities of weather
to sand the hardwood
between them with each word.

A woman sells me stamps,
wishes me well, and warns
about rain.

I am in her head and now she's in mine.

Later in this same poem, the speaker sets aside the old dualities that have haunted us throughout this collection – past and present; death and resurrection; loss and hope. What emerges instead is a new mythology that identifies spiritual renewal with the most subtle human encounters:

A man behind the fish counter
wraps paper around salmon
in a crisp way, frowning
over the scale so I know
his concern for me

is whittled down to pampering
the silvered flesh he hands across the glass.
Later, I'll unwrap the package like a gift.

What this poem signals is a paradigm shift that, in turn, resolves the book's central tension. There is a shift from living in a world of dualities to living in the present moment, what Boyer calls "the long now". In the book's opening poem, the speaker asks, "Do you know/ a translation for *eyelash* that means *moth*?/That is the language I've lost." What has been lost is not a way of *saying*, but a way of *seeing*. The clock of the *long now* offers a correction to our vision because it makes the present resonate. It releases us from our captivity in a temporal scheme, and in turn, frees us from the requirement to see our lives as the sum of previous events. In Buddhism, the clock of the long now is the middle path: the condition of enlightenment, which in itself is a release from the straight-jacket of the temporal, the mundane, and the personal. It is a realignment of our own histories with the histories of all humanity. The cold and cosmic backdrop that Boyer offers us again and again in this collection reads like her rendering of the collective unconscious. Where this vast backdrop might diminish us, in Boyer's universe it becomes a staging that consoles us:

Behind a curtain called rain
atoms overcast one another,
link and mate, each molecule
knits a new door. You know
how the world is. It spins.
It spins.

Through language that is mythic in tenor, Boyer casts us in a mythic universe, at once liberating us from our personal histories and magnifying them. *The Clock of the Long Now* is a beautifully wrought and deeply human meditation on our obligations to one another and to our pasts. What Boyer grants us in these poems is a course to follow – if not to Elysium, then certainly to our shared humanity.

Reviewed by M.B. McLatchey, April, 2010.
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