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Uncommon Stereo: A Review of Carey McHugh's *American Gramophone*

All poetry is indebted to sound, and all sound must come from somewhere. *American Gramophone*, Carey McHugh's first poetry collection, explores the origins and vehicles of sound in its many timbres, intensities, and motivations. Across its three sections, the book introduces us to sounds as familiar as musical instruments and as unfamiliar as "what the nearly dead hear." Familiarity, however, is only relative in these poems, as they also evoke a nostalgia for something we might never have experienced, but something that nevertheless "paces, presses inward" on our peripheries.

The somewhat odd image on the front cover is worth some consideration. It shows a man, crouched down, plugging a cord into a jack on the side of what appears to be a cross-sectioned, wooden piglet. To the right of the piglet is another wooden pig, this one full-grown and also sliced in half, equipped perhaps with speakers. We can almost hear that sudden buzz of electricity, brace ourselves for the squeak of feedback, the initial moment of amplification. This is where all sound in *American Gramophone* seems to originate, first and foremost—from these phonographic swine.

In the book's first poem, which prefaces section one, we imagine sound trickling to a start between the wide-set brackets which serve as the poem's title. Something has "come as expected," and the speaker promises, "you will find me armed." This is the calm before the storm, "the silent approach"—the old gramophone warming up, crackling to life—and the quiet is foreboding. For when we dive into this world McHugh has built, we get the feeling that "there is something not right / in the farmwives," or in anyone, for that matter. There is an electrical tension in the air, the kind that makes the hair stand up on the back of one's neck. Our ears anticipate the opening chord of a sorrowful song. With the title poem, the music begins, and the premonitions come. Here, they are birds—"Crows returning in large flocks to rearrange / the body of a tree" or "The sound of something black / and sharp flying into its own reflection." Incantations are spoken, and "new wood growing / full of holes" is unquestionably the most dependable thing around. Even the animals have gone haywire, as all day long the "horses / drag their shadows the length of the field and back." We know we will be haunted throughout this book by such uneasy sensory details as "The sickness of violins" and "the weathervane spinning in rehearsal."

"American Chestnut Blight" introduces us to this agrarian landscape where diseases of trees and crops are always one step ahead of our prudence, and where "winter is a shinbone on the ridge." While an infestation is in abundance, everything else has gone, leaving a "new / vacancy." The speaker has no choice but to "leave the front wicket open at an angle pioneered / for [someone's] return." Water refuses to fill the creek, and in a particularly dismal business arrangement, "the slow mules have been gifted / to the soapworks." In short, the absolute destruction of this terrain is anticipated to last through the spring, and "We are calling it ruin."

These are poems that test the bounds of our perception. In "The Undertow," human anatomy is the limitation. Rabbit ears perk up at some portentous sound on the horizon while sound for the human ear is silenced, as the speaker prefers "the piano's back against a load-bearing wall," and "The song, smothered." The body's greatest impediment is the rip current inside "[which] cannot be surgically redirected," leaving it stuck "on loop with alternatives." Visual ability is reduced as well, since the speaker must rely on others to tell her or him that it's wintertime. Location, rather than the body, is what hinders perception in "Instrument for Oversight." We can only see what is visible from the hayloft—cattle roaming the nearby fields and "the persistence of this lamplit, inclement year." Left to look at the world as the barn frames it, the speaker wishes for "an instrument for oversight," something to clear away this ocular fog, such as "a partial dissolve of sadness." In all of these scenes, "possibility [is] visible but moving steadily away" while adversity nears.

Internal strife is also sounded in the collection, with some poems tackling the knot we have all felt in our stomachs at one point or another. In “Self-Portrait as Shedding,” this knot is “a heron / under [the] lung, winging up / openmouthed.” In “And Now, the Educated Hog,” it is a feeling “Like being bricked up / in a silo.” The omens looming over so many of these poems have taken their toll on those affected, creating insomnia, turning regret into something that “[reinvents] tempo, punishment, apprehension,” and encouraging bitterness in a speaker who “[doesn’t] want whatever you want most for me.” Loss is everywhere, and we are asked emphatically to “Consider the devastation at the height / of a swarm!” Sleepwalkers, former sharpshooters, and people especially fond of owls are just a few members of the large and varied community which populates this “snowbound” and dismal countryside.

No matter how far McHugh’s poems may carry us, they are always aware of where they come from: the porcine means of sound-delivery depicted on the front cover, dubbed the *American Gramophone*. But their origin does not limit them. McHugh may focus her hazy rural visions through a somewhat atypical stereo, but nothing gets filtered out. On the contrary, these poems teach us that from the darkest recesses of the body, and likewise from the harshest landscapes, issues forth the broadest and most brilliant diapason of voices. The speaker-fitted farm animals serve to amplify scenes already brimming with a quiet fortitude. For, while this is a setting home to people “on the verge of losing something vital,” there is no retaliation on anyone’s or anything’s part. The realization is that maybe “One delinquent sprig” doesn’t mean spring will never come again. The inhabitants of these poems know that “We are held up in the body we arrived in,” whether fortunate or “tucked and unlucky,” and that we must make the most of that. Indeed, though winter is “a slow fail,” its cold creeping in to numb even those places we thought would keep us safe and warm, it also “creates an entrance.”

Like a song playing through grainy speakers, each poem in *American Gramophone* also has an awareness of what is to come—“the stirring / low of swallows banking and impossibly / flown,” a buzzing at once placid and disconcerting. Together, these poems make “Music to leave the body / wind-blown.”