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Christy Leigh Agrawal
SUNY Geneseo

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An Interview with Carey McHugh

Carey McHugh received her MFA from Columbia University. She currently lives in Manhattan where she works at the Columbia Mailman School of Public Health. Her poems have appeared in *Smartish Pace*, *Boston Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Gulf Coast*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook, *The Original Instructions for the Perfect Preservation of Birds &c.*, was selected by Rae Armantrout for the Poetry Society of America's 2008 Chapbooks Fellowship. I had the pleasure of interviewing Carey about her new book, *American Gramophone*, a collection of poems, when she came to SUNY Geneseo for a reading.

CHRISTY L. AGRAWAL: I'm really interested in the titles in this collection, and how they engage in conversation with not only the poems themselves but also one another. According to the Notes section in the back of *American Gramophone*, many of these titles are actually extracted directly from mysterious relics of a disparate American and human history: a photograph of a car accident scene, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a how-to book of taxidermy, and so forth. Can you tell us a little bit about your process of creating a title? How do you select and then synthesize titles for your work?

CAREY MCHUGH: I'm always on the lookout for titles and I take them from scraps of the everyday: from informational websites, artwork, conversations, old encyclopedias, museum placards, signs on the backs of trucks. I look for peculiar or creepy or linguistically odd nuggets that I think require further investigation. In these cases, the title provides the context for the poem, and I build out the text to answer or echo the title. When I take titles from the world, I often lean toward moments that might already hold a narra-

tive. The title sets the scene up front, and I am free to explore the emotion of the scene in the body of the poem. For example, there is a poem in the book called “Death (as a Woman) Comes for the Draughtsman.” It’s taken from the title of an Alfred Kubin pencil sketch. The title already gives us the story, so the poem is free to explore the atmosphere of the moment: the panic, the astonishment.

CLA: I’m curious about when and how you determined that these poems were going to be part of a series, since there is so much reverberation between the poems, both formally and thematically. Were all of these poems written specifically for this book, or did they come together somewhat independently to form this book? How did you decide how to structure them in different sections?

CM: I wish I could say that I sat down and wrote all the poems effortlessly and fit them together seamlessly, but that would be a giant lie! I started this book in graduate school, and over the years, it’s had many forms. I’ve taken poems out and replaced them with newer poems, and then at times, I’ve gone back and reinstated poems that I’d removed. There is an element of experimentation when it comes to putting a collection together, but I feel like the book has a solid center and the poems circle common themes and landscapes, so even though the poems were written over the span of about a decade, the book feels very cohesive to me. From the beginning, I knew that the book should be in three sections, and though I wanted the sections to vary slightly in tone, there are still threads—themes and structures that run throughout the book.

CLA: As I was reading, I noticed a distinct quality of transience: many of these poems exude a slightly unnerving energy, as if they waver on the edge of some inevitably approaching precipice that threatens to bring either everything we ever wanted or everything we ever feared, or both. This feeling of impermanence and imminence is mimicked in the agrarian landscape, where an ever-changing land can signify many things, even opposing ideas. How does the agrarian landscape depicted in this collection relate to the, at times, nostalgic emotions evoked within the poems, and what does this setting mean to you?

CM: This book inhabits a space at the intersection of memory and imagination. I had a rather transient childhood, but my extended family lived (and still lives) in Tennessee. It was the one constant landscape in my life. We would return to visit each year and I think I was always a little surprised to find it intact; there was a fear that it might have vanished in my absence. I think this notion lives in the poems. When I was very young, my father and grandfather owned a cattle farm and they would let me and my brother tag along as they worked—branding cattle, mending fences, baling hay—it

seemed like such a mysterious world! Much of the agrarian imagery in the book comes from my memories of that time. In many ways, I think I'm writing to revive or respond to that landscape.

CLA: The way in which the form of your poems intersects with their content is very engaging, inviting readers to interpret the poems as not only a grouping of words, but also as aesthetic creations. One of the first times I picked up on this subtle relationship between structure and meaning was when I was reading through "Prep Guide for Basic Drill and Ceremony," a description of a surgical kit that twice mentions ribs while also mirroring the image of a ribcage in that it's composed of twelve lines, the same number of rows that compose the average human ribcage. What is your process of creating form and physicality for your poems? Do you structure them after they've been written or as you go, and how important is form to you in relation to meaning?

CM: Symmetrical stanzas with consistent line lengths appeal to me. They work to pin down a poem. They offer a tension that contrasts with the emotion and chaos of imagery in the text. I let the poem dictate the form as it unfolds; however, I should also confess that I go through phases where I become obsessed with certain structures. For example, many of the later poems that I wrote for the book are in single-line stanzas.

CLA: In "Supply Notes from The Home Book of Taxidermy & Tanning,"—only two poems away from the end of this collection—is the first and only place in which the word "gramophone" is mentioned, with "grinding wheel" right before it. I looked up the meaning of grinding wheel and discovered that it is "a wheel used for cutting, grinding, or finishing metal or other objects, and typically made of abrasive particles bonded together," and it actually looks a lot like a record, the kind that might be played on a gramophone. I realized that this book could function very similarly to how a figurative grinding wheel as a record would function in my mind: a sometimes chaotic, sometimes smooth, and refractive melding together of the agrarian, the American, the bodily, and the emotional, a blend used to pierce and carve and grate and smooth and dissect and reconstruct the sound of some distant and yet ever-present song of humanity. This song is made even more complex by the word "taxidermy" in the title of this poem, which brings to mind ideas of preservation, of the impossibility of resurrection or recreation, and the insufficiency of physicality next to memory. This all led me to wonder how you decided on the title *American Gramophone*, and that soft pink and yet violent, fleshy image (which I read online is a hog and not a pig!) for the cover, as entryways into this collection?

CM: The gramophone is such a strange and beautiful creature. I like the curve of it, the squat body and long stem—almost a flowering hibiscus. Nearly a water bird. I like that this machine holds the prospect of these organic forms. Many of the poems in the book take place in an agrarian past, in a landscape

with its own strange machinery and muted song. The gramophone seemed to be the perfect machine to bear this folklore and to amplify the sonic imperfections (all the scratches and skips) that exist in a dwindling memory. I was researching gramophones one day when I came across the title of a record label based in Omaha, Nebraska called American Gramophone. I liked the title so much that I stole it for a poem (though I spelled it slightly differently). In my mind an American gramophone is a strange, inelegant machine—put together on the fly, maybe with spare parts, with all its seams showing. A rustic instrument that could echo a difficult landscape and the work required to maintain it. As the book evolved, I realized that this is how I wanted the collection to be held together.

As for the hogs...I was trolling the Library of Congress website (another valuable title repository!) when I came across the photo of a man working on an exhibit featuring three wooden hogs. A blurb that accompanies the photo explains that the exhibit was created for a livestock show held in Chicago in the late 1920s. The exhibit featured a hidden phonograph, which described the devastating effects of roundworm on hog populations. As the phonograph played, the pneumatic hogs would deflate—presumably to emphasize the devastation. The blurb that accompanies the photograph begins with the following sentence: “And now, the educated hog.” This sentence was so funny to me, so brilliant and strange that it became a title for one of the final poems that I wrote for the book. I love the photo, and luckily, it is in the public domain, so we were able to use it for the cover.

CLA: In our poetry workshop we discussed how your collection of poems builds meaning by continually defining and redefining things: bones appear again and again throughout this collection, however, each time in a different way (in my favorite moment they are described as: “the rigid endorsement of the body.”) This process of definition and redefinition not only creates a very detailed and multifaceted sense of meaning, but it also generates a sense of movement or fluidity: an unyielding refusal to be still. “It is what we fear the most: being motionless,” you write in “The Haywagon,” voicing part of the tension that drives me forward through this collection: a resistance to being defined or ‘rooted’. And yet, there’s a fear of being unrooted or disconnected. How do you encompass and unify so many contradictory feelings and concepts in the same space, and what do you hope your readers will take away from this fusion?

CM: I think the book generates much of its momentum from this tension that you discuss: the impulse toward motion versus the wish for preservation. Being motionless implies a lack of agency, a stasis, a surrender. However, humans are also record keepers by nature, and this requires the need for reflection—the effort to distill a single moment demands a pause, a circling back. Record keeping comes in many forms: taxidermy is the record of a kill,

planting and harvest are records of landscape and season. Photographs, sculptures, paintings, poetry, and other artistic endeavors preserve an attitude, an emotion, a memory, a narrative. The final poem in the book is called “Original Migration Guide as Wholecloth Quilt.” What better record of the past than a textile built from lived-in fabrics—extracted, patched together and handed down? We may never be able to fully inhabit a memory, but it seems impossible to stop trying.

CLA: Many writers (including myself) worry about having to choose between a career in writing (which might take the pleasure out of writing by putting too much pressure on it) and a career away from writing (a choice that might be less fulfilling); hearing you talk at SUNY Geneseo about how you found your way really helped assuage my concerns about all this. Could you offer some advice or warnings or encouragements to us young, hopeful poets and writers?

CM: There are many career paths that offer opportunities to exercise your writing muscles—law, journalism, publishing, and teaching, among many others. Pursuing this type of professional path doesn’t mean you’re giving up on your creative writing life—it just means that you have health insurance and can pay your rent! Be practical. That’s my best advice. But whatever your day job might be, keep a toe in the creative writing world. For me, having a workshop is essential—for feedback and for deadlines. It keeps me writing. I’m a member of an informal, three-man workshop, and we’ve been meeting for over a decade now. They’ve been instrumental in providing criticism, motivation and encouragement. They helped me bring my book into the world. As for the rejection letters: they will always keep coming, no matter how much you publish. Expect rejection—then you’ll be pleasantly surprised when you find that a piece has been accepted.

CLA: What’s on the horizon for you? What can we look out for next?

CM: I recently found this incredible, pocket-sized first-aid book for miners in an antique store in Sweetwater, Tennessee. It was originally published by the Washington Government Printing Office in 1922. The book has helpful tips for assessing and treating wounds, ruptures, and poisons, as well as instructions for transporting injured miners. It’s very detailed and a little frightening. I’m currently working on a series of poems that takes titles from the section headings in the book. The project is in its very early stages, but hopefully it will work its way into a new book or a chapbook. I’d like to say that I have mapped out a second book, but I’ll have to see what direction the new poems take me.