

Disappearing Acts

Reginald Shepherd, *Otherhood*. University of Pittsburgh Press,
\$12.95 (pbk)

Heather McHugh, *Eyeshot*. Wesleyan University Press,
\$20 (hbk), \$14 (pbk)

Auden's lines, that "every lover has a wish to make/ Some other kind of otherness his own", might stand as an epigraph to Reginald Shepherd's intriguingly titled volume, *Otherhood*. This is Shepherd's fourth collection, and the poems in it open up perspectives of multiple "otherness", both other lovers and other selves. Not the rather ossified "Other" of literary theory's binary opposites, this is "otherhood"—a suggestive portmanteau which lets the "hood" of selfhood become "other" without telling who or what it is. And sure enough, this is a volume in which self, whether subject or object, is a shifting variable, not easily pinned down or identified. Only as "an absence at the edges/ of narration, mention me", the poet advises. By getting self out of the way, "some other kind of otherness" might speak of itself. The fact that Shepherd is a gay, black American, reared in the Bronx, and that these are mostly, for want of a better term, love poems, might have something, but not everything, to do with it.

Condensed, pungent, mysterious, these are arresting poems, shot through with a metaphysical charge which lifts them above the ground of personal concerns. The voice which emerges is tough-talking and lyrical, sexual and impersonal, erotic and elegiac. It's a powerful combination, mixing a vocabulary of anatomical explicitness with a plethora of biblical and classical references. Certainly the swank and grit of sex come without romantic courtesies in this verse, unapologetically up-front:

Well ordered this ardor
sweat seams tightening

scrotum to perineum, he bares
white buttocks to the page

Less an invitation than a destination, Shepherd writes the sexual act with exuberant energy, though with a touch of that writerly self-consciousness (the zoom-lens “to the page”), which here, as elsewhere, sounds suddenly distracted. Mostly, though, these are love poems which delight in the literal parts, and waste no time in Romantic invitations. Their come-on is brisk, and their words wittily, inventively erectile:

And then a stirring
at the other side of when,
complicit blood flows back
into the stem, in retrospect
unfinished: we stand up
erect as grass, xylem, parenchyma,
epidermis, leaf blade and sheath.

Here “grass” offers a neat image for that natural upwardness which makes sex come, in these poems, untrammelled by social convention, emotion, danger, guilt—until, that is, the last word, when everything the poem seemed so innocently to want to leave out, slips back in. The protective “sheath” brings the pastoral scene abruptly back to the contemporary world. Shepherd’s wish to root homosexual desire in a tradition of materialist-atheist love poetry, where the divide between men and nature is thin, is countered by a strain of elegiac anxiety which here, as elsewhere, draws on biblical warnings. That “all flesh is grass” suggests a perspective of apprehensive mortality, which worries at the poem’s carnal knowledge and whispers of a world, post-Aids.

Certainly biblical and classical echoes run through these poems. “Kingdom: An Epithalamium”, for instance, is entirely composed of fragments from the Song of Solomon, though the pronouns have been changed, and “Justice: An Ode” playfully rearranges quotations from the Book of Job. It may be that these older texts are better suited to the impersonal passion evoked by Shepherd than the romance tradition of circumlocutionary courtship. Coupling, rather than couples, is the subject of these poems; satisfaction rather than yearning. As a result, “I” is dispersed into multiple others, sometimes into mere landscape, or

grass. “*I* seems/ a ceremony of sums” Shepherd writes, attacking at the root that privileged gambit of lyric poetry. Not self, but “an appetite in place of self”, drives these poems. If Eros is a handy figure for that appetite, the real-life dangers of such self-dispersal are also never far away:

death-dealing Eros
extinguishes the torch
and I am disappearance

So one poem ends, unpunctuated. This is not just a textual game. Eros, the killer, is always lurking round the corner of Shepherd’s verbal disappearing acts.

At its best, this is poetry which celebrates “otherhood”, but without losing a sense of racial specificity and sexual risk. Thus, for instance, “Three Songs about Snow” quietly disclose something going on which is not just landscape and snow:

I hide myself, but am
no one, come into view
the same white

overpass, cars tossed
underhand across the lane
divider, line dividing gray

-brown field and gray
-white afternoon:
I am a dark

Some dividing line, that of the horizon, the busy overpass, as well as of the jolting line-breaks, also divides white and black. This might just be self typically disappearing into “no one”, or it might, more residually, be the division between two lovers, still somehow racially divided in the poem’s anonymous urban landscape. “Not I, but sometimes/ always *me*”, Shepherd writes elsewhere. Getting away from self into “otherhood” might not always succeed, just as the other’s (the overpass’s or the afternoon’s) “white” presence might remain cut off from “I”, who is “a dark”. This is poetry catching the ambiguities of “I”, its racial and emotional affiliations, with a fine subtlety. There is a drama going on

off-stage, which is not too self-important, but neither is it quite irrelevant.

Sometimes Shepherd's liking for abstractions sounds, however, more obtrusively self-conscious than impersonal. Phrases like "my grief's/ oligarchy of referential skin", "Stringent syntax of brick dust", "skin annotated by the wound" seem to strain for effect. This is flesh becoming unfleshly, becoming too easily *written* on, and thus losing the thing that marks out the best of Shepherd's verse: the green fuse of its erotic charge. Titles like "Syntax", "Iconography Says:" "Semantics at Four PM" risk turning the poem into its own textual-egotistical sublime—into a somehow too self-aware *language* poem. Mostly, however, these are passionate and strange poems, which are also, circumspectly, about pain, disease, blacks, whites, America, Europe, modern and ancient. They offer a new story of Eros in which the basic mechanics of being human (and male) can also appear startlingly, touchingly vulnerable: "Little bottle of him stoppered up,/ piss water, lymph, semen wash/ sealed in a copper flask". In his best work Shepherd relishes otherhood, not so much as social marginalisation or Romantic alienation, but rather as part of a long tradition of materialist thought, Rochesterian or Epicurean, which finds the pleasures of the flesh to be an altogether satisfying object of poetic desire.

Eyeshot is Heather McHugh's seventh volume, and it gives us a voice as idiosyncratic and original as it is sassy and daring. McHugh is visiting Professor at the Universities of Washington and Berkeley as well as Fellow of the American Academy of Arts. Although some of these poems are commissions for graduation ceremonies and colloquia, there is nothing subdued, polite or safe about them. Like Shepherd's, they are also refreshingly free of obtrusive self-confession. McHugh has no interest in telling us about herself, and has no recourse to the flag-waving credentials of nationality, class, gender or creed. Instead, this is poetry which gets the poet quickly out of the way, and leaves the reader with another object altogether:

The French horn has us
where she wants us—in a whirl.

We flew around her hem of gold
(a cone blown off a rod): our own 360

sped to one head-turner, sure to sharpen us,
to get the lead out—spin us inward,

get some endlessness involved. (With seven shaven sunshines,
four red top hats, scraps of our leftover everything, still

she cannot get her fill, left right, boy girl, no matter how
she turns herself into us, us into

her eyeshot's veered veneer.) She's only molten
earwear but she's changing

round from noun to adjective and back—
echo into dream-drink,

fixer into flower.

The opening poem, "World in a Skirt", reads like a manifesto for what is to come. Flirting briefly with its feminist title, it then quickly spins into another orbit of its own. This is a horn-blast of surprises, imagist in its vividness, but driven by a metaphysical wit which ensures that meaning is never squandered. It is characteristic of McHugh to take the reader into a "world" of words, in which the subject, both speaker and subject matter, quickly disappear. Whatever this poem is *about*—horn, skirt, girl, sun, eye, ear-ring, flower—it also makes sure that "*being about*" quickly gives way to "*going about*". Like a whisk (or indeed a world), the poem takes its readers up in one place and sets them down in another. The journey is not a narrative, certainly not a personal story, but an opening out into what words can do and be. On the way, they can sometimes spring unnervingly into double and triple meanings. This is a fairground poetry, brilliant with lights and thrills, but not for the weak-headed. Forget what it is about, and you get it—at least, you get a sense of rhythm, echo, drama, form, and of verbal invention at high altitude. If "World in a Skirt" is a figure for poetry, skirted but also skirting, it is a poetry in which boy becomes girl, she becomes us, noun becomes adjective, echo becomes dream, and eyeshot catches them all up into a look that belongs nowhere except where it is: in the poem. Brilliantly self-contained and musical, this is also jazzily free, funny, inventive and moving. One might even find "some endlessness involved"—the sunstruck "earwear" recalling perhaps, at

a distance, the whirling eternity of another poem: Henry Vaughan's "great *Ring* of pure and endless light".

Eyeshot makes few concessions to the reader, but it makes for a dancing collection. It's quirky, intelligent, always on the move, rarely offering a still-life view. As the title suggests, looking at these poems is likely to be one-in-the-eye for the reader. Whether it's "Far Sight" ("Along a shining baseline/ several mountains nurse a haze"), or "Mind's Eye" ("The moon zooms in/ on strands of negligee"), they play round the idea of seeing with virtuosic fun. A shot in the eye or else a photo-shoot by the eye—such give-and-take of subject and object characterises the way these poems ask to be seen, and not seen. The cover picture, with its wide-open eye afflicted by something like a mote or beam of light (a motif repeated through the volume, till the final pictured eye comes clear), seems like a challenge to the reader to see what can be seen, in spite of obstacles.

Indeed, the last poem in the volume, "The Looker", concludes with a kind of seeing to which women poets have returned at least since Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson:

I was as dead as I could be, and you
weren't there. They held a big glass
up to me; they blocked the world with
their lifelonging. What they wanted was

a cloud (the kind that tells the living of
themselves). But I was well past telling.
I was a looker at last...

Being thus "a looker at last", presumably with no shot in the eye, McHugh declares: "But then the æsthete knows—who cannot shut her mouth—/ she'd better find the finest words around". Between the French horn's "eyeshot" and the dead æsthete's wide-open eyes, the collection plays round a kind of looking which might come nearest to seeing what "the æsthete knows". It's a brave stance, invoking Donne, Dickinson, perhaps even Pater, in asserting the poet's right to be as dead to the world as she can be, in order to see and tell it better, in "the finest words around".

However, the airlessness invoked by "The Looker" might also become a fault. Occasionally McHugh's sheer verbal élan becomes the poem's only atmosphere, its only reason for being.

Such dexterity risks a kind of self-regard. To press the pun into service too often can make for a jumpiness in the verse, as if the poet were playing tricks on the reader. Then mere wit takes over, and breathlessness becomes a condition of the poem, a gasping for air in its own breathing tempo. In "Significant Suspensions", for instance, McHugh writes:

Kings and chairmen, ministers and presidents
contend for countrysides, one wonders
about all that one envisions:

all that one. One's hold on everything,
one's whole will-hold. Shrunk to a dot
in a field of dotted swiss,
or the pin-prick in a cheap
French letter, shot
of rue from Bourbon Street, or
ooze from Easy, you essay

to go on.

Double meanings here start to loom like mines as the whole sense of the passage depends on the reader's ability to decode them, quick. This is nervy rather than profound, I think. Although the poem ends with a moving meditation on how much, and how little, "one" matters, by the time we reach it a certain exhaustion has set in, and "one" wonders if it matters at all. Such density of verbal effects can make for a pyrotechnic display which might scatter into triviality if not rescued by, say, a pause, a variation in tempo, or sometimes just the perfectly simple phrase, that catches up into itself and rings beyond and after the poem. McHugh has the Metaphysicals' gift of brilliant verbal wizardry, but sometimes the magic of what words can do detracts from listening.

As if aware of this danger, as well as of the larger American dream of power and innocence which it evokes, "Fourth of July, B.C." makes a point of contrasting the brilliance of a firework display to the look of the Olympic mountains in their undisturbed distance:

(Did I imagine them?
Those flashy chemistries and colored concentrations
twenty miles across the sea, were they

just eye-salts, mind-motes, practice
for an aneurysm? Blink, and proud
America comes down

to dust and asterisks.)
But there, above
Port Angeles,
unmoved,

is sheer
Olympic imperturbability—a hundred
times a township's height, an impassivity attended by
impressive skies of its own manufacture. Men had best
beware...

This, with its quieter tone, its audible faltering and its fine condensation, in "dust and asterisks", of national power, leaves fireworks behind in order to attend to the cool, quiet object. Such stillness comes like a reminder of what poetry, as well as nations, might need. In the end, after the "flashy chemistries", it is McHugh's stiller voice, the one which can make a pause in space (and on the page), which comes through all the more powerfully and enduringly. The mix of song and wit, intelligence and invention, gives to this volume a rare distinction in the scene of contemporary poetry.