

BOOKS AND ISSUES

J. D. McClatchy's Night Music

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Ten Commandments, by J. D. McClatchy, Alfred A. Knopf.

J. D. McCLATCHY is a poet of big emotions—feelings of outsized, operatic proportions. That he is recognized mostly as a clever poet—a poet of mordant wit and breezy decorum—says something about the circumscribed discourse of feeling in American poetry. In *Ten Commandments*, his darkest volume of poems, McClatchy invokes scenes of terrorist violence (“they flop/Around a lot when you shoot them in the head”), sexual depravity (“Dressed in wild animal skins,/He was released from a jeweled cage/And attacked the private parts/Of husbands and wives bound to stakes”), and infernal torture (“His lips cut off, and flames at work on his bubbling guts”). In the virtuosically patterned “Proust in Bed”—the most startling poem in this book of nightmares—a boy releases two starving rats on the novelist’s bed while *Maman*, preserved in a photograph, looks on.

He looks up at his mother—touches
Himself—at her photograph on the dresser,
His mother in her choker
And her heavy silver frame.
The tiny wire-mesh trapdoors
Slide open. At once the rats
Leap at each other,
Claws, teeth, the little

Shrieks, the flesh torn, torn desperately,
Blood spurting out everywhere, hair matted, eyes
Blinded with the blood. Whichever stops
To eat is further torn. The half-eaten rat
Left alive in the silver

Cage the boy—he keeps touching
 Himself—will stick over and
 Over with a long hatpin.
 Between his fingers
 He holds the pearl drop.

She leans down over the bed, her veil
 Half-lifted, the scent of lilac on her glove.
 His father hates her coming to him
 Like this, hates her kissing him at night like this.

The effect here, as throughout *Ten Commandments*, is operatic. The articulation is exquisitely artificial, the drama scarcely to be believed, yet we are tempted to see ourselves in the poem's lurid, over-the-top conclusion. "Opera," McClatchy once said, "—its ecstasies and deceptions, its transcendent fires and icy grandeurs—is above all a stylized dramatization of our inner lives, our forbidden desires and repressed fears."

McClatchy is the author of three earlier books of poems, two collections of essays, and four opera libretti. His recent libretto for Tobias Picker's *Emmeline* is—as it should be—nothing like his poems: rather than calling attention to itself as poetry, the libretto's job is to suggest a beautiful melody.

Aunt Hannah still tells me nothing
 About my baby girl.
 My daughter. Maryanne.
 Maryanne. Maryanne.
 There's no one I can tell,
 No one I can tell the name I've given her.
 Maryanne. Maryanne.

Missing here is all of the dazzle that characterizes the surface of McClatchy's poetry. The feeling conveyed by these lines is familiar, plain. And only when set to music does the emotion begin to seem complex: McClatchy gives his collaborator the opportunity to loiter over the simple repetition of three syllables—Maryanne—and the result is

an aria of wrenching beauty. The child is in fact not a girl named Maryanne but a boy named Matthew—a boy who, in a recapitulation of our most primal myth of origin, will one day return to marry his mother. Listening to *Emmeline*, we know this will happen, but the singer of the three syllables does not. And with every repetition (each more musically elaborate than the one before), these syllables become more ominously charged with the emotional catastrophe to come.

This effect is due neither to the libretto as such nor to the music as such but to their uneasy marriage—uneasy because in order to be moved by the aria, we need to feel that plain meaning and elaborate music have mingled without sacrificing their discrete identities. Organic metaphors will never describe the power of opera adequately, and neither will they do justice to the effect of McClatchy's poetry. As the title suggests, the poems of *Ten Commandments* are strung along the Decalogue, four poems to each commandment. So, like *Emmeline*, "Proust in Bed" is based on a text: "Honor thy father and thy mother." And like a great aria, "Proust in Bed" offers an overwhelming emotional experience, not in spite of its egregiously artificial articulation of familiar feeling, but because of it. The source of the poem's power is not the easy union of music and text but their disparity, their carefully calibrated distance from each other.

By taking strategic advantage of this distance, McClatchy is emphasizing an aspect of poetry that is more usually suppressed. The heresy of paraphrase—the notion that the poem's matter is indistinguishable from its manner—seems like common sense, however marked by New Critical heritage it remains. Yet this commandment has always been controversial. "Unity is not enough," protested Randall Jarrell in 1942. Many of Jarrell's poems troubled his New Critical mentors because the emotional grandeur of their content seemed to exceed the requirements of their form: "Come to me! Come to me! . . . How can I die without you?/Touch me and I won't die, I'll look at you/And I won't die, I'll look at you, I'll look at you." Justifying these lines from "The Christmas Roses," Jarrell said that the poem "needs a girl to do it." Jarrell came to favor female personae because he associated emotional excess, a strategic disparity between content and form,

with sexual ambiguity. Revising "The Face," he substituted feminine pronouns for masculine ones, replaced the word "handsome" with "beautiful," and added an epigraph from Richard Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, associating his utterance with the Marschallin's lament over her aging face.

Wayne Koestenbaum has argued in *The Queen's Throat* that the tension between music and words—the inevitably foiled dream of their union—has something to do with the association of opera with homosexuality. McClatchy has always written as an openly gay poet; his recent collection of essays, *Twenty Questions*, includes "My Fountain Pen," a poignant and hilarious account of his coming to terms with his desires. But it would be misleading, I think, to associate the operatic quality of his poems simply with his sexuality. McClatchy's earlier books of poems have been read (more than written) in the long shadow of James Merrill; *Twenty Questions* also includes a moving tribute to Merrill, who was McClatchy's close friend. But while Merrill also wrote as an openly gay poet, Merrill's poems are better served by metaphors of organic unity than McClatchy's are.

Because of the oppositions that continue to structure the world of American poetry, we understandably think of our more elegantly formal poets as members of one coherent group. In fact, there seem to me to be at least two distinct attitudes toward form among such poets. For poets from Robert Frost to Richard Wilbur, elaborate forms tend to serve as emblems of justice and balance. For poets from W. H. Auden to Richard Howard, elaborate forms seem more purposefully useless. "A society which really was like a poem and embodied all the esthetic values of beauty, order, economy, subordination of detail to the whole effort," said Auden, "would be a nightmare of horror, based on selective breeding, extermination of the physically or mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars." While Wilbur seems (as McClatchy himself has put it) "more comfortable at the balanced center of things," it is impossible to think of any of Howard's bravura performances as a momentary stay against confusion. And if Merrill seems (like Elizabeth Bishop) to float between the poles represented by Wilbur and Howard, McClatchy

more consistently embraces an antiorganic notion of formal practice. Since the beginning of his career, he has been fascinated by the idea of the separable content of a poem.

In “At a Reading” (from *Stars Principal*, his second book), McClatchy describes a poetry reading by Anthony Hecht. A young couple seems bizarrely preoccupied with its own front-row drama, and only gradually does McClatchy realize that the woman is reading her friend’s lips: the man translates “the poem for her into silence,/ Helping it out of its disguise of words.” McClatchy has said on more than one occasion that the most seductive phrase in the language is not “I love you” but “I understand you,” and in “At a Reading” the seduction takes place without words. In the poem’s final lines, McClatchy is seduced not by Hecht’s poem as such but by its translation into silence—into “words/Unuttered but mouthed in the mind.”

The words, as they came —
Came from you, from the woman, from the voice
In the trees—were his then, the poem came
From someone else’s lips, as it can.

Poetry, for McClatchy, is what is preserved in translation. The poem’s “disguise of words,” as he calls it, is of course beautiful and unavoidable, but the words must be recognized as a disguise—not the thing itself (to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens) but part of an ongoing transaction between audience, occasion, and its cry.

Disguising something, as McClatchy has emphasized, is the opposite of hiding something. And throughout the poems of his first book, *Scenes from Another Life*, McClatchy does occasionally appear to be hiding: the surface becomes so dazzling that, as can also happen in poems of apparently naked expression, the tension between manner and matter is suppressed. But in the book’s best poems (“A Winter without Snow,” “Late Autumn Walk,” “On Tour”), stylistic extravagance invokes a feeling as powerfully familiar as those expressed in McClatchy’s libretto for *Emmeline*. The result is that the poems feel like dramas of discovery rather than puzzles; common emotions feel unpredictably strange. In “Scenes from Another Life,” McClatchy

associates the mechanism of these poems with a plain text (the heart's "wingless verses") set to intricate music.

We had the body's *lingua franca* down by heart
 And tried to "learn each other's language,"
 Our private lists of irregular verbs for *Need*
 And *Must* and *Want*, and knew enough in time
 To gloss those terms, as if from rote to rhyme,
 By art's own listless foreign tongues: Hugo's
 Wingless verses set by Hahn, or the soft rock
 Of Schumann's hesitating waltz in flats,
 Even a scarab's goldgreen hieroglyph.

To understand our simple but overpowering desires, we require an artistry at odds with their simplicity. As in "At a Reading," McClatchy entertains here the notion of a subject matter distinguishable from the manner of the poem. But he falters (as he never does in later poems) when he suggests that manner necessarily occludes the matter—that he must eventually "see through the gauze" of his design: "Now and then how much is lost/In art." This wisdom could apply only to a poem with something to hide.

It's easy to imagine that autobiography would offer a way out of this cul-de-sac; *Stars Principal* includes a long poem ("First Steps") that tells many of the same tales that "My Fountain Pen" does. But personal subject matter as such was not to be the key to McClatchy's success—even though (like so many American poets) he has become increasingly frank as his career has moved forward. The poems of his third book, *The Rest of the Way*, feel more personal, more revealing, because they have more successfully disguised themselves. Syntax courses irrepressibly through a wide variety of metrical and syllabic stanzas, some invented, others received, and the book culminates in "Kilim," a crown of sonnets with overtly political rather than personal subject matter.

The poem's focal point, an elaborately woven prayer rug gracing the poet's floor, is itself an emblem for poetic order: what relationship, McClatchy asks, does such an emblem have to social order? He imag-

ines that the maker of the kilim, surrounded by “History’s figures of speech for randomness—/*Car-bomb, rape, skyjack, carcinogens*,” might have dreamed “of patterns the sky might yield” as she worked at her loom. But every terrorist might as well have a rug-maker for a mother, McClatchy suggests, for the order of art bears no relationship to the order of society—unless the rug’s intricate design comments ironically on the terrorist’s equally well-wrought plan.

Some light is on the mountains now. A plan
Of the city taped to her wall, the day’s targets
Marked, a red inaudible word on each . . .
A band of sun edges up on that paper too.
The grid of streets, the harbor’s salvage, the mosques
And prismatic parks, the quadrants colored by faction,
When brought to such a light take on a kilim’s
dispositions.

No art can stop the killings.

McClatchy’s own poem is as elaborately designed as the rug or the plan, the opening lines of the first fourteen sonnets woven together to make the fifteenth. But like Auden, McClatchy cannot congratulate himself for formal expertise as such; the social correlative for artistic order could easily be a nightmare. As in many of McClatchy’s best poems, form stands strategically at odds with theme in “Kilim.” The only word that rhymes with “kilim” in this intricately rhymed sequence is “killing.” And since the rhyme scheme of this sonnet is concentric (beginning with the first and last line and meeting at the middle), a great deal of pressure is placed on this central rhyme. Yet the similarity of the words “kilim” and “killing” is strategically weak because McClatchy doesn’t want to suggest that social disorder is any more inevitable a result of artistic extravagance than social order might be.

If there is no dream of escaping art’s design in “Kilim,” the poems of *Ten Commandments* suggest that such an escape would get us nowhere, even if it were possible. Following on the intricacies of “Kilim,” *Ten Commandments* is McClatchy’s most elaborately ordered book. As I began by suggesting, it is also his most moving book—his

darkest, strangest book. Its emotions are bigger than ever before, and the whole of *Ten Commandments* is (to borrow the title of one of its poems) a “Dialogue of Desire and Guilt.” At the same time, for all of its virtuosity, the book feels compellingly homemade; there is an oddly American feeling—both hubris and hodgepodge—to the way in which its poems are strung along the Decalogue. If the Ten Commandments constitute McClatchy’s libretto, then the music to which he has set them is eclectic: the language may be alternately stark, colloquial, lyrical, or grand, but the essence of the poem—“Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image”—is always witheringly primal. In *Ten Commandments* more than ever before, McClatchy relocates opera’s characteristic tension between manner and matter within the language of poetry.

What could such a poetry consist of besides “graven images”? In “My Mammogram” McClatchy tells the story of how, after years of leading the “unexamined life,” a swollen left breast necessitated a procedure thought to be gender-specific: “It happens more often than you’d think to men,” says the radiologist. “It” turns out to be not cancer but a problem with the liver (“Reeling from its millionth scotch on the rocks”). The deeper problem is the “unexamined life.” When McClatchy is left alone in the examination room, “My Mammogram” itself swells with contemplation. And a poem that began as a nervously casual narrative turns, as every poem in *Ten Commandments* sooner or later does, darkly grotesque.

So suppose the breasts fill out until I look
Like my own mother. . . ready to nurse a son,
A version of myself, the infant understood
In the end as the way my own death had come.

“Still,” McClatchy had asked earlier in the poem, “doesn’t everyone *long* to be changed?” Change seems like a ruefully mixed bag in “My Mammogram,” since what we dream of becoming is rarely what we become: “Each of us slowly turned into something that hurts.” But McClatchy is not interested in resisting fate. When his moment of con-

templation is interrupted, he quickly reenters the “waiting room,” the place where (as Elizabeth Bishop reminds us) we discover the mortal body all over again.

If soul is the final shape I shall assume,

(—*A knock at the door. Time to button my shirt
And head back out into the waiting room.*)

Which of my bodies will have been the best disguise?

“Their breasts were horrifying,” says the six-year-old “Elizabeth” in Bishop’s poem. Having seen his body change and change again, McClatchy recognizes pain as an essential component of metamorphosis. No image of the self is original or trouble-free. Just as poetry exists for McClatchy in the tension between music and meaning, life consists of a dialogue between body and soul. But unlike “Scenes from Another Life,” “My Mammogram” registers no longing for a disembodied condition: just as the poetry revels in artifice, McClatchy lives within the bodies—the disguises—available to him. “Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image,” says the commandment hanging over “My Mammogram”: according to the poem, we have no choice but to do so.

Over and over again, McClatchy’s commentary on the Decalogue suggests that the commandments can only be upheld when they are violated, that obedience is finally inseparable from revolt, desire from guilt, pleasure from pain. In “Auden’s OED,” spun around on the commandment against false witness, McClatchy explains how he has “counted on a lie”—language itself—in order to tell the truth. In “Betrayal,” an anatomy of a doomed love affair, he suggests that the injunction to “have none other Gods but me” is inevitably bound up with narcissism.

In the end you even came to believe in yourself,
your sensible advice and reasonable demands,
as the burning bush might have mistaken its flowers
for flames or the rustling in its spindly branches
for the indrawn, unreliable voice of God.

But if our obedience is inevitably compromised, if the burning bush can be an image of duplicity, we are also doomed in our depravity to obey. In "Proust in Bed," the injunction to "honor thy father and thy mother" is perversely fulfilled. And in the exquisitely creepy "Honest Iago," McClatchy rightly perceives that Shakespeare's most talented deceiver rarely tells lies. Spoken initially by Iago, the poem quickly swells to incorporate the speech of anyone who has ever tried to tell a truth by lying or inadvertently lied by telling the truth.

I cannot think he means to do you any harm.
The chemotherapy seems promising.
These latest figures will show you what I mean.
All I want to do is help.

I had not thought he was acquainted with her.
Yes, yes, this boxcar is returning to Poland.
Sure, I've already tested negative twice.
I am bound to every act of duty.

Your sins are forgiven. This is only a phase.
I could swear it was her handkerchief I saw.
Trust me. Everything is under control.
All I want to do is help.

I have said that the language of *Ten Commandments* is alternately stark or grand, lyrical or colloquial, and as these lines suggest, McClatchy's tone varies not simply from poem to poem but within the unfolding texture of an apparently single utterance. "Honest Iago" is a collage of different voices, each invoking a variety of possible narratives; its final lines force us to hear the dark, complicated overtones of the most familiar phrases. *Trust me. This is only a phase.* The virtuosity of this writing is not flagrant. But like the more obviously dazzling "Proust in Bed," "Honest Iago" is a high-wire performance, an aria that returns us to the familiar passions—what other kinds are there?—of the heart. "How long must we go without knowing," asks McClatchy in "Descartes' Dream," "Before we discover that everything leads back/To something as simple and dreadful as the night?"

The night is long and dark in *Ten Commandments*. “The world has no time for us,” says McClatchy in “Three Dreams about Elizabeth Bishop”: “The tree no questions of the flower,/One more day no help for all this night.” This poem, like “Honest Iago,” contains McClatchy’s most compelling writing. While other poems embody the wisdom that “I understand you” is the most seductive thing we can say, these poems entertain the idea that bewilderment has its seductions too: they are more starkly presentational, more visionary. In the first of the three dreams, Bishop rises out of her coffin to whisper sweet nothings in Robert Lowell’s ear; in the last dream, she appears, if at all, as the whisper itself. The poem’s power over us increases in proportion to its mysteriousness, and lines like these don’t ask merely to be understood.

Through the leaves, traffic patterns
 Bring the interstate to a light
 Whose gears a semi seems to shift
 With three knife-blade thrusts, angry
 To overtake what moves on ahead.
 This tree’s broken under the day.
 The red drips from stem to stem.
 That wasn’t the question. It was,
 Why did we forget to talk about love?
 We had all the time in the world.

“Three Dreams about Elizabeth Bishop” begins by describing a dream, and it ends by offering one, a seductive nighttime vision unlit by explanation.

McClatchy’s libretto for *Emmeline* also ends in darkness. “He’s there almost every night,” sings Emmeline about her lost son and lover, “Every night, every night, every night.” But while Emmeline believes that “Everything that I’ve loved is gone,” the music says otherwise: ghostly voices from her past swell around her, filling the emptiness. The conclusion of *Ten Commandments* is in a way similar, for even as McClatchy opens himself to darkness, he does not succumb. The book does not feel for one second as if it were—like so many other anatomies of the night—introducing us to horrors or languors that

only the author has had the fortitude to discover. Instead, our primary emotion is recognition, and McClatchy refuses to allow us to admire him for his verbal dexterity or emotional acuity. This lack of arrogance will probably allow certain kinds of readers to misread *Ten Commandments* as they misread McClatchy's earlier books. Because the poems so often disrupt received notions of poetic decorum, McClatchy makes himself vulnerable. Richly so. What other poet would be willing to write a sonnet sequence about his mammogram?

"It's over, love," begins "Late Night Ode," the brilliant updating of Horace that concludes *Ten Commandments*: "Look at me pushing fifty now,/ Hair like grave-grass growing in both ears,/ The piles and boggy prostate, the crooked penis." However stalwartly the text of "Late Night Ode" calls for an end to love, the poem's music—aggressively alive, surprisingly lyrical—suggests that the end is far from sight: like the Marschallin dismissing her young lover, McClatchy sings (as Strauss put it) with "one eye wet and the other dry."

Some nights I've laughed so hard the tears
 Won't stop. Look at me now. Why now?
 I long ago gave up pretending to believe
 Anyone's memory will give as good as it gets.

So why these stubborn tears? And why do I dream
 Almost every night of holding you again,
 Or at least of diving after you, my long-gone,
 Through the bruised unbalanced waves?

Ten Commandments is a grandly conceived book that feels sweet, a dark book that can't deny its affection for morning. It asks us to listen closely to what it does not say.

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