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Dorothy Molloy: 'Hare Soup' (Faber, 2004)

Review by Katy Evans-Bush

Dorothy Molloy's first (and, sadly, posthumous) collection is well-titled — a rich and aromatic mix of high poetry, religion, sex, essence of femaleness and cool observation.

The strangeness and delight of this broth are apparent from the first poem, 'Conversation Class', whose wonderful music and wit, and final telling image of "the red flare of my skirt", set the tone for the collection:

'Encore une fois,' she zaps and taps her nails and sips
her Perrier. My tongue is jammed, my teeth are in a
brace. Her hands fly to her face. 'Mon Dieu,' she cries,

'Mon Dieu, qu'est-ce qu'on peut faire?'

The answer is: observe, describe, observe. And that she describes the inner life as intricately as the outer only makes her external observations more chilling, more powerful; sometimes what seems to be metaphorical suddenly reveals itself as possibly a literal experience, as in 'Burial': "I made a little coffin / for my womb..."

Electric fences hum in the forest of Fontainebleau,
disturb the twig and branch, the hand and hoof, the bristle,
and the silver-sickled tusk,

begins the dreamy 'A Walk in the Forest'. This is Perrault's forest, not the usual tourist one, as we know by line three. A couple more stanzas and the narrator is giving birth by herself in the night, surrounded by wolves and boars, and it is hard to believe it's not an enchanted cub she's giving birth to.

This is the first poem in the book to mention afterbirth. This reviewer would normally close a book of poetry on the appearance of this word, but wait! The icky too-earthiness is cut by the psychological complexity of this poem. In the other, 'Looking for Mother', she finds in her mother's wardrobe "...the scent // of oestrus, umbilicus, afterbirth, / eau-de-cologne..." The mother may be primordial, but she is also a woman who knows how to dress.

This book is full of sex. Molloy doesn't flinch from calling it as she sees it, through a prism of religion and family dynamics. Child abuse segues into bad adult sex and abusive relationships, and there are certainly knives, rapes and near-rapes. There is a poem that begins, "We got there through the blinding fields of rape". But throughout the collection her clear gaze and a deadpan survivalist humour (in the title poem: "...at the stroke of midi, we sit at the table, / Monsieur and Madame Vidal, the idiot / Didier and me. I force down / the pottage. The gun-dog salivas my knee") save us from the dangers of polemic and histrionics. There is real feeling here, based on hard experience, but there are also writerly detachment and intelligence at work, and absolutely no sentimentality.

Religion looms large and merges with the sexuality of the poems, underpinning everything,

with blood the dominant motif: saints bleed, women bleed, stigmata are the result of living one's life. Everything's red — or "scarlet and purple, vermilion, alizarin, / ruby, carmine and cerise." A poem about a violent relationship (specifically, the man is violent in reaction to the woman's sexuality) is called 'First Blood'. In 'Plaint':

The Virgin intercedes. She lets me stroke
Le Saint Prépuce. The marble bleeds.

In 'The Infant of Prague', a poem suffused with both religious iconographic and sexual imagery,

[I] brush the pale

of his cheek with my lips. Crimson embroideries
seep through his clothes; there is blood on my hands.
An ooze of vermilion

darkens the flax of his curls. Water flows
from the gash in his side. He is stiff as a statue,
his feet are stone cold.

In 'Postulant' the atmosphere is thick:

For morning Mass he chooses her
to vest him in the chasuble
and alb. He calls her
'Friend in Christ' and puts the host upon her tongue.
She grips her beads

and guards her eyes. He beckons her.

However, as well as a sacred element there is also a profane one: flowers are enlisted in large numbers, in almost every capacity except that of a normal everyday garden. In 'King's Paramour' they are used in a good old-fashioned witchy way ("...dittany, caper-spurge, marjoram, iris") for contraception and abortion; in 'I saved them in mid-winter' they are receptacles of knowledge; and in 'Burial' they officiate at the funeral like guardian angels.

In 'Postulant' the ingredients of the church incense take on the properties of a spell. In fact, the spells abound:

...if needs be, I provoke
the red gush with mandrake and scammony,

colocynth, lavender, gentian and thyme.

The effect of all this is rather like a mediaeval tapestry.

Molloy's "I" takes full responsibility for all her feelings, her reactions to events and for the significance things have to her. This is very grown-up poetry about the living of an intelligent, creative life.

This poetry is driven by a strong music, great big meaty mouthfuls of sound. 'Conversation Class' starts the collection with wonderful consonants: zuts, zaps, taps, sits, poof. The teacher "cocks her ear and smoothes her coif"; "I fiddle with my cuticles". Awkward lengths, enjambment and caesurae, alliteration, internal rhyme and assonance make the lines seem to hurtle into one another, then stop short perfectly — the sense of timing is exquisite.

Sometimes the enjambments pall a little, especially the enjambed stanzas, and the solitary lines which often portentously end poems. Many of Molloy's lines are halved iambic

pentameters broken by caesurae. While this sometimes helps to set up an air of dislocation and urgency, they can also, read aloud, gradually revert to the traditional form. However, these are small quibbles with a very exciting and demanding first collection. Some small poems, like 'Eternity Ring' and 'Stalemate', are gems of perfection, and many others remain glowing in the mind like hot red coals. If not for Molloy's recent death, just before this book's publication, we would now be waiting with baited breath for her next. As it is, "the Lady of Sorrows / glows in her niche," with panache.