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Chaos Ex Machina: On the Plays of Joyelle McSweeney

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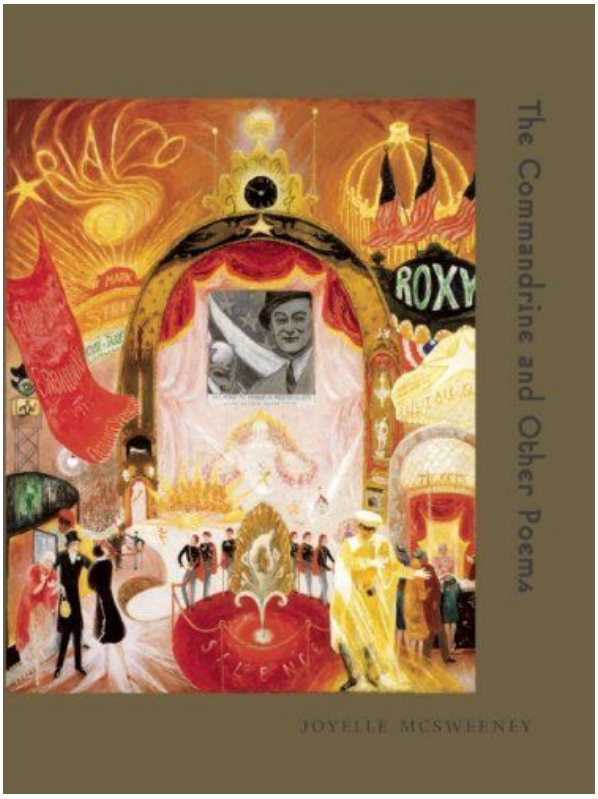
By Matthew Buckley Smith • February 6, 2016

POETRY



Dead Youth, or, The Leaks by Joyelle McSweeney. Litmus Press. 90 pages.

Percussion Grenade by Joyelle McSweeney. Fence Books. 96 pages.

Salamandrine: 8 Gothics by Joyelle McSweeney. Tarpaulin Sky Books. 188 pages.

The Commandrine and Other Poems by Joyelle McSweeney. Fence Books. 61 pages.

The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults by Joyelle McSweeney. University of Michigan Press. 198 pages.

NOT YET 40 with 10 books already to her name, Joyelle McSweeney is a celebrated poet, essayist, novelist, playwright, and academic. But no subgenre better approximates the impact of her oeuvre than the midnight horror movie double feature.

Two things distinguish great horror movies from those that are merely passable. First, the object of fear is dimly recognizable as something from our daily lives. Second, there is no escape. The stoic hero of *Night of the Living Dead* survives the devastation of the long night in the farmhouse only to be shot dead at daybreak by the all-too-human rescue party. At the close of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, the still-unexplained Leatherface is alive and furiously carving up the night air with his instrument, as the blood-covered blond survivor shows every sign of irreparable psychic damage. More recently, *Let the Right One In*, *It Follows*, and *The Babadook* all leave the central threats of their stories intact — perhaps thwarted or deferred, but just as deadly and as ultimately inescapable. These films play on our fears of alienation, injustice, injury, disease, disgrace, guilt, loss of youth, and death. We know we'll never truly be rid of such fears. McSweeney's best work, like a great horror film, calls that knowledge up from the depths to the shuddering, twilit surface. This is the monster her marsh-black plays drag gibbering onto the stage.

Selecting a passage to introduce the choked howl that fills most of McSweeney's plays is like searching for a needle in a stack of used syringes. Her stage directions offer a sense of the difficulty these plays present — dramaturgically, theatrically, and emotionally. Here's a short sample from "The Warm Mouth":

> (All make a sound like an upended graveyard or a circular blade.)

And here's another from *Dead Youth, or, The Leaks*:

> *[Dead packaging. Dead devices. For example: dead monitors, dead keyboards, dead external disk drives, dead 'car phones,' dead memory cards, thumb drives, clam shells, walkmen, dvds, vhs, cds, wires, airphones, head phones, walky talkies, ceebees, two way radio devices.*

Possibly also dead seabirds. When the deluge has subsided to a light patter Julian ASSANGE rushes in and begins to dig his boys free from the rubble …]

The speaking roles in McSweeney's plays — and the voice of much of her poetry — sound a little like the textbook-hopping jabber of Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, a little like Harryette Mullen's heart-stung, Keatonesque logorrhea, and more than a little like a certain flavor of salty '90s rap. Take the following passage from "The Contagious Knives," in which a dead, transgender Louis Braille addresses the audience:

> That's right, Kid Hades, me, like a King Rat
> that can subdivide into a pack. But for now I'm still a girlboyteen.
> With my swart rat eyes and my little rat teeth.
>
> Whores, I was meant for something better, by which I mean worse,
> more lowdown than lockerroom gossip, though I did adore those locks
> with their clock face dials that spun and clicked like bombs.
> Forty suspended detonations, dangling.
> I couldn't handle the waiting, so niggling and naggling
> Incarceration in youth's static country, a never occurring event.
> I had to force a crisis.

The language is rapid, rabid, filthy, and hard to follow. The poetry here doesn't live so much in feet, lines, and stanzas as in consonance, assonance, and beats; it's less about drama than prosody. Heard this way, the words recall some of the bellicose taunts and litanies of Anglo-Saxon verse, which was largely a series of two-beat, half-line surges, linked by semi-regular alliteration ("sinews unsprang, / Bone-locks burst" and so forth).

Again, a certain kind of rap — dexterous, "gangsta" — comes to mind, because of its jaunty nihilism as much as its grandiloquence. (This should not really be surprising. Hip-hop has for some time now been the last American cultural scene in which raw verbal agility is still sharpened on the Darwinian strop of popular approval. When was the last time you heard someone other than a rapper boasting about how good he is at rhyming?) And like McSweeney's dialogue, rap takes bitter delight in holding a mic to the mouth of a culture reared on suffering, as OutKast does in their 1994 hit "Ain't No Thang": "One is in the air and one is the chamber, / Y'all ask me what the fuck I'm doin, I'm releasin anger. / Quick to dodge danger, I'm takin it one day / At a time …"

For her part, McSweeney composes in a brutally subtractive, deconstructive mode. She seems at times to be attempting to paint the known world entirely by negation. Her plays are filled with harrowing speeches and horrifying spectacles, and she seems to hold precious little faith in the world as we know it. In the short play "The Warm Mouth," a Beckettian retelling of "The Bremen Town Musicians," the main characters are identified as "some roadkill, a starving boy, a murdered girl, a shot-up dog, the suppurating shinbone and the impaled egg all tucked up inside the Warm Mouth." These discarded, maimed, or overlooked specters reach their narrative climax simply by making themselves visible, while the character of the poor young man who sees them is transfixed with horror and eventually transformed. One needn't reach too far to imagine McSweeney wishes something like his experience for us.

Properly speaking, McSweeney's plays don't have plots. Things happen and characters voice desires, but the two are seldom bound together — and certainly not in any long, shapely chains of action. Structurally, the plays most resemble Aeschylean tragedies and medieval morality plays. Much of the dialogue comes in long expository or lyric speeches, and the characters seem less like psyche-possessing individual beings than gestures, figures, or rhetorical devices.

In *Dead Youth, or, The Leaks*, a full-length play and McSweeney's best-known (for which she won the 2013 Leslie Scalapino Award for Innovative Women Performance Writers), the characters include Henrietta Lacks, unwilling originator of the HeLa cell line, Julian Assange, founder of the website Wikileaks, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of the novella *The Little Prince*, and Abdi Wali Abdulqadir Muse, sole survivor of the pirate crew that hijacked the merchant vessel *Maersk Alabama* in 2009.

The play takes place on a damaged, rogue incarnation of the *Maersk* (rechristened the *Smirk*, in keeping with McSweeney's sweet tooth for wordplay), and it features a chorus of eponymous dead youth, who take turns explaining their gruesome ends to the audience and one another. Some stories are recognizable from recent history — those of Aaron Schwartz and Emmett Till, in particular — while others are more broadly suggestive of horror. All make visible — or audible — some hidden ugliness, and all are deeply sad:

> For me school was a breezey dream. Lit up with puff paint and smelly stickers. My friends, the girls, were budding cosmeticians … How they made a doll of me with the

> Sun-in and tweezers … Unfortunately I got dragged behind a three-wheeler at a post-prom party in the woods with a length of chain around my lissome neck. That was not such a friendly party as at first it seemed …

In the cosmos of McSweeney's plays, *Law and Order*–style reconstructions of news items and popular political arguments assert a consistent gravitational tug, In a 2014 post for *Harriet* (the Poetry Foundation's literary blog), however, McSweeney addressed criticism of her seeming lack of political engagement, and in so doing articulated the true object of her work. Like Seneca, another spleenish playwright fond of gore and accused of civic irresponsibility, McSweeney acknowledges her complicity with her nation's indulgences. But also like Seneca, she locates these sins within the human condition itself. As with much of her prose, the statement is broken into numbered sections:

1.
2. After my first *Harriet* post, in which I rejected the 'Future of Poetry', I saw some commentators dismiss my perspective as lacking political awareness; their comments construed me as denying my own historical contingency, as if I believed myself not to be a figure of human political history but an absolute being outside of time.
3.

2.
3. In fact, "contingency" is too weak a word for the degree to which I consider myself slammed, pierced and annihilated by historical fact, by a single eviscerating historical fact, the millennia-long political and ecological catastrophe whose name has been lately (Adamically) formulated: the Anthropocene …
4.

An increasingly popular neologism that seems to — but doesn't quite — mean "age of man," the Anthropocene refers to the period in terrestrial history during which human activity has been the major force affecting climatological and geological conditions. Modeled after existing terms for geological epochs such as Miocene, Pliocene, and Pleistocene, the recently coined "Anthropocene" borrows a suffix that derives from the Greek word for "new." Miocene means "less new," Pliocene means "more new," and Pleistocene means "most new." Along these lines, Anthropocene actually translates to something like "human new." (The

geological term for the last 12,000 years of the human epoch is Holocene, or "whole new.") The use of the term Anthropocene implies a view of human existence as both secondary and temporary in the scale of geological time. McSweeney's emphasis on the concept, though, goes beyond environmentalist ideals or planetary humility. Her goal is not only to make us more aware of the nature of our presence but also to make us more aware of all the shadowy processes that underlie our presence. She doesn't just want to pull back the veil, she wants to flay the hand that pulled it back and crack open the metacarpals so we can all suck out the marrow.

McSweeney's plays are sculpted from this rich marrow: proteinaceous, hot, and dripping with connotation. When the gods walk, it looks like dancing. When they speak, it sounds like verse. And when they send email spam, it reads like McSweeney's short play "Hanniography":

> I turned my chin to the spirit picture, spoonshovelmoon-wide, to the stirrup picture, needlespittleleanside and then I cut to the chase meanwhile back at the ranch I didacted, auto retracted. It's exhausting, licking these stamps, sitting at my escritoire with my serotype without a secretary in sight and can't keep a secret to save my life. Keep it from who. Spilled it silent. Just surviving this was a chitlin circuit flangebanged worth staggering the ranch. Friends, I was laced, then disbarred.

Her approach to exorcising our worldview — in order to expose the Anthropocene — resembles a kind of literary cubism, whereby all the sides — and insides — of a subject are turned outward and made accessible all at once, even at the expense of coherence. McSweeney picks out the most unsavory realities and makes them integral to her stories. She holds our faces right up to the prepubescent sweatshop worker's ruined spinal column and insists we not stop playing *Angry Birds*. In "The Contagious Knives," she makes us spend extended time in the company of Lynndie England, the former Army Specialist once infamous (if now ignored) for her participation in torture at Abu Ghraib prison. At the end of her final speech, she turns directly to the audience, revising Shakespeare cruelly to evoke the mercy that she failed to show and which she was not shown. England takes her exit, like the rest of us, alone:

> I know you loathed me for my stunted looks
> And ugly haircut, confirming your worst dread.
> Would you have loved me more if I were a novel's

Invention, straddling a motorcycle and shooting my gun
For personal revenge? Then I'd be beach reading.
But as a murderer once said, violence is violence,
Runs its own farm team and births its own twin
& droppeth like the acid rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath — *Upon the place beneath*, that's me —
It marketh he that gives and she that takes;
Refolds itself like a livid protein in new damaging shapes.
It offers a member's discount for bulk purchases
And lays its larval files in the eyes
& multiplies like money, debt or lice.

And now I must depart & have a baby in jail
And there's an end.

As with England's valediction, much of the effect produced by McSweeney's plays is transmitted through theatrically simple, lyrical speech. Some of her scripts have few or no literal stage directions, but in most she offers directors rich visual suggestions. Notable among these are the passages in *Dead Youth* wherein the chorus play out dumbshows of "Collateral Murder," the gunsight video released in 2010 by Wikileaks in which US soldiers in Apache helicopters gun down unarmed journalists and other civilians in Iraq:

[For this short night ballet, the light on the stage shifts to suggest night vision. The DEAD YOUTH shroud themselves in black robes like burkas. The vision should be grainy like radioactive grains; action should leave green lines on the air like vines in the work of Aubrey Beardsley. A portion of the audio to the famous 'Collateral Murder' video should play, while the DEAD YOUTH play the part of the bodies in the videos, walking, taking shelter, being shot, arriving in the van, being shot, being pulled into the van, being shot …]

Such spectacles are potentially gripping, but in few cases are they integral to any larger dramatic unity. For that matter, dramatic unity does not even seem to be part of McSweeney's agenda. Overall, her plays are works of expressive but undramatic speech, and even in a relatively transparent work like *Dead Youth*, these soliloquies, jokes, and choral odes stand together uneasily under the stage lights.

Given the power of stand-alone sections of these plays, one feels that, left in a box for long enough, her scripts might start to give off gamma rays. Why not let them simply live as collections of poems? Her book *Percussion Grenade* is made up mostly of poems, and even here McSweeney provides "indications" for consumption: "The pieces in this volume were written for performance and should be read aloud — a-LOUD!" A qualitative difference stands between a play and any work written chiefly for the page: a play is not really a play until it's given body and life in performance. So what motivates McSweeney to carry her words from the bookstore reading to the metaphysical DMZ of theater?

In answer, one might point first to a fixation on bodily confrontation in her work. Many of the plays incorporate gender and sex as harsh, explicit, protean performances. Nearly all involve characters who are undead, mutilated, or in some other way deformed. Toward the end of "The Contagious Knives," Louis Braille offers this benediction in the midst of a sexual consummation with a swan — which is also a ritual butchery:

> I'm charmed by this fetid reverie, but time is wasting, time is, precisely, revealed as waste, shat from the Big Bang, God's asshole, by-product of some bio-celestial function well hidden from our ken; foul, foul is the face he turns to earth, foul, and like our own, an image we recognize; for our brains, too, shit time, and call it consciousness, delectable as champagne on a tart's tart tongue doth roll, or on a queen's; it tastes light gold, like laughter, and like teeth. And now before we untimely roll beneath time's sceptic tank and have our two mouths stopped forever in that kiss, let us float to safety, Swan, upon your carapace.
>
> *(He climbs between her wings and rides her back with a rocking motion as if fucking her.)*

Violence and sex can touch an audience far more forcefully from a stage than from a movie screen. In a Lucy Thurber play at a small Greenwich Village theater a couple years ago, I watched a well-muscled actor catch a petite actress by the hair and bounce her head with a crack off the back wall. I've been to a lot of plays, but I jumped halfway out of my seat. For just a moment I was shot through with the need to stand up and do something, anything, other than sit and watch this crime play out. The screen may have squandered the power to shock, but for now at least, the stage retains it. And McSweeney is plainly interested in shocking.

I think, however, there's a deeper reason that theatrical performance might suit her peculiar designs. For centuries, the expression "a play in verse" would have raised eyebrows for sheer redundancy. What exactly, one might have asked, is a play *not* in verse? Yet today the phrase may as well be an oxymoron. There's Broadway-style musical theater or opera, but one would seldom if ever refer to them as verse. As things stand, what is called poetry and what is called theater exist today almost entirely as *separately* declining forms. From time to time, playwrights produce theatrically competent plays with dialogue broken into lines and poets produce prosodically competent poems with lines broken into dialogue. But, excepting the brave efforts of Michael Frayn, Glyn Maxwell, David Yezzi, and a few others, the former tend toward metrical indifference and the latter toward dramatic inertia. McSweeney has elected neither of these options, exactly. Despite her wild range, McSweeney is not merely experimenting in genres. Nor is she honing one creative knife against another. The more accurate account, I think, is simply that she's spreading like water. As she encounters genre after genre, she isn't changing to meet the constraints of the form. She's filling formal constraint until it gives way like a plate glass window.

In perhaps the most memorable scene of John Carpenter's 1987 movie, *Prince of Darkness*, a figure standing in the shadows outside a church addresses the characters holed up inside, calling to them in a rattly, inhuman voice, "I've got a message for you, and you're not going to like it … Pray for death." His body then collapses and spills out of his clothes into a swarm of hissing beetles. I thought of this scene upon reading McSweeney's bleakly moving essay on impermanence, entitled "Bug Time." The essay takes as its fulcrum a study of insect evolution in modern Japan. As McSweeney notes, the slow work of natural selection involves not just the gradual perfection of adaptive traits but also the titanic extermination of non-adaptive ones. Nature looks like a never-ending massacre on a scale beyond all imagining, with a near-negligible cluster of exquisitely refined survivors. Behind every organ, every species, every era of development, hides an incomparably vaster shadow-world of rejected organs, species, and eras. And for insects, whose lives are so much shorter than our own, these cycles of destruction and adaptation occur with a terrible frequency. A lifetime for us spans an eon for them.

McSweeney writes vividly about these evolutionary processes and shadow-processes, and then she brings the implications viciously to bear on our own social and economic existence, noting that our selections, our competitive endeavors, produce a global aftermath of losses, bankruptcies, and endless trash. Invoking a world of waste and shadows and denouncing civilized modernity, she grants us a vivid, furious statement of her purpose as an artist:

> … I reject the so-called economy of corporate time, capitalist time, so-called "linear" time, triumphalist time, which is a golden lie anyway, and instead I recognize this tide of shit and waste, I recognize that that is where I live, if I live, on bug time, on bug time; in Indiana, in the necropastoral; I have no interest in myths of posterity, in a secured future, in the supposed future of literature or humans or anything else; the way I'm writing now is disposable; in disposable media and unsturdy genres; but it's the most important thing in my millisecond life …

She declares herself to be what Camus calls "the absurd creator," an author whose life work is written on the wind.

In the extensive stage directions that begin Act Four of *Dead Youth*, McSweeney notes that the arrangement of the set should be "a bit Elizabethan masque." The masque was, of course, a hybrid genre in its own right, a pageant-cum-poetry-reading-cum-romance-cum-music-hall-closing-number, often performed for guests of the monarch with unrepeatably opulent production values. Most celebrated among the English masque writers was Ben Jonson, a contemporary of Shakespeare and a poet of enduring achievement. Despite the temporal and economic constraints of their curious form, Jonson's masques survive in diminished condition through the scripts he recorded, complete with painstaking descriptions of the sets, costumes, and dazzling spectacles. But Jonson's introductory note to *The Masque of Blackness* (which was, yes, a Jacobean masque and not technically Elizabethan) could have come out of an essay by McSweeney, so starkly does it frame the ephemeral quality of the art:

> The honor and splendor of these spectacles was such in the performance as, could those hours have lasted, this of mine now had been a most unprofitable work. But, when it is the fate even of the greatest and most absolute births to need and borrow a life of posterity, little had been done to the study of magnificence in these if presently with the rage of the people, who, as a part of greatness, are privileged by custom to deface their carcases, the spirits had also perished.

If only the show could have been made to last forever, any description now would be of little use. But the blocking, the effects, the music, the excitement, all passed away forever with that glorious concluding dance.

And afterward, even the masque's elaborate properties were torn down, repurposed, or carted off as souvenirs. So now there are only the words. But lest someone read Jonson's descriptions of the performance as instructions for revival, he writes them — unlike traditional stage directions — in the past tense. The masque is gone. The script is at best a historical document.

Reading McSweeney's own documents, I've come to think she favors theater precisely because it isn't meant to last. Poets can soothe themselves with daydreams of posthumous fame. But a playwright's work is alive only so long as someone is drawing breath to stage it. And no single staging, no matter how perfect, survives its own curtain. McSweeney, one feels, would have us recognize the same about ourselves. She herself has rejected any promise of the future, committing herself wholly to the millisecond she can name. This is the millisecond for which her plays are written. Not for tomorrow, not for any dreamt-of posterity. The future of even a beautiful sound is silence. And as the singing sailor in "The Commandrine" tells us:

> silence!
> silence!
> silence!
> silence
>
> is almost always an overstatement!

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