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Reading Melissa Kwasny in Montana

Reading Novalis in Montana
Melissa Kwasny
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“**R**eading Novalis in Montana,” the opening poem of Melissa Kwasny’s new book, gives its name to this dynamic collection and immediately plunges the reader into the intricate play of her poetic concerns. As much as Kwasny luxuriates in the sublime beauty of the Western landscape, she is no cruise-control nature poet. The natural world for all its glories may be no more than an unreliable panacea in the struggle to make sense of an existence full of confusion, discomfort, and grief. Probably just as unreliable and equally as necessary to this poet and her poems are thinking and reading. For anyone seriously concerned with what poetry is and what it might do in the twenty-first century, these poems aren’t just emotionally and intellectually illuminating, they are really, really good.



Take “Reading Novalis in Montana,” for example, which opens with one of the hard realities of a Montana winter: “The dirt road is frozen.” While there is something enchanting about the idea of frozen dirt, the poem unnerves us in the following line, “I hear the geese first in my lungs.” Initially caught off balance—how do you hear in the lungs?—we begin to recognize Kwasny is asking us to consider the flight patterns of tundra geese sweeping across the sky as well as language and poetry. Poetry begins with the word, in the sound made through the breath. The word “geese” begins in the lungs.

When Kwasny asks “what it means/if first one bird swims the channel/across the classic V, the line flutters, and the formation dissolves,” she stretches language in at least two directions: toward the image of flying geese and toward the idea of form—form in nature, of course, but also form in poetry. It is Novalis, the poem suggests, who was able to “pick at the truth/and collect the fragments in an encyclopedia of knowledge.” Novalis, the pen name for the 18th century aristocratic German poet Friedrich Leopold, Freiherr von Hardenberg, represents both the nascent Romantic movement as well as an empirical confidence that truth could be collected in an “encyclopedia of knowledge.” For Kwasny, we are no doubt connected to this Romantic and Enlightenment flock, but we no longer possess its assurances or certainties: “They have left me behind like one of their lost,/scratching at gravel in the fields.” The poet is both the lost sister and the wild goose scratching for the new form, a new field of poetic action and spiritual truth for the 21st century. It is uncertain business. Particularly if “as the gnostics say, the world was a mistake/created by an evil demiurge, and I am trapped/ in my body, abandoned by a god whom I long for as my own.” It is both a precarious and uncertain human condition offering at least two opposing possibilities: either we are the unhappy creatures of a haphazard creation or we are the *nostos* itself, the essential home of all creatures: “as if I were the lost dwelling place of the flock.” As the postmodern inheritors of the Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement, we are creatures of utter paradox: weakly powerful, rationally spiritual, self-consciously natural.

While there are no solutions to our human dilemma, these poems record the poet's attempts to know, to understand, to love, to grieve, to make meaning. A few examples: "Redpolls" explores the doleful pull of loss, the attraction of elusive desire, and life as an "approximation" of our yearnings. Those we love depart—our lovers, our grandmothers, a flocks of finches—and we are left not with what we want, but with what we have: in this case, not the Redpolls, but "the chickadees/who will come to my hand,/who blacken the snow beneath them with husks." Are those that come in place of our desires consolations or disappointments? Perhaps both.

The controlling metaphor of the frozen pond in "Pond Ice" illuminates the shared suffering of the speaker and her young visitor, each afraid, each glaciated by the belief that "Need is embarrassing, something that seeps." Finding one's way out of grief is as treacherous as breaking through the ice. "Breakthrough is such a human wish/the surface pitted with the asterisks of our failed attempts."

"Reading a Biography of Ezra Pound in the Garden" will no doubt become essential end-of-summer reading. "Could it be that I have given another summer away" the speaker asks. This is perhaps one of the wittiest poems of the collection. What other poet has ever combined an eternally overbearing zucchini crop with Pound's Greek and Chinese translations, echoes of his "petals on a wet, black bough" and anxiety about one's productivity? Its ending is almost hopeful, almost consoling.

Pound knew that the days
would string together, that what isn't finished
today would have its bloom. Yet, *I cannot*
make it cohere, the poet wrote in his *Cantos*,
fruit coming so thick he couldn't possibly use it,
overflowing the tin bucket by the back door.

Whatever anxieties of overabundance here, in the triptych "Demeter," we have reached an end. The summer is over, "there will be no more planting" and the friend is dead: "My friend/who died just as spring sun hit the porch,/ who smelled the first rains but missed/the grasshoppers." Yet, in contrast to this heavy human loss is the garden which willingly surrenders to its ending: "open-faced to the coming/frost, raspberries crumbling at the touch,/continues to offer its daily sixteen beans." In the final elegiac strains the poem blossoms once again, rich with Kwasny's elemental concerns:

No truth,
but the heart aches for what it could not
tend to before, for the words said in summer
we cannot take back, for those identified
by their flowers amid the straw.

The truth eludes us, but not the pain. Nor the regret. Nor the loss. Yet, the memory remains and to our surprise the flower is made more beautiful by the modest straw that surrounds it.

Where ever you are, read these poems. They are complex and haunting and beautiful. And though they claim no hold on truth, they are true.