

Poetry

Upgraded to Serious

Heather McHugh

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Heather McHugh's reviews are swarmed by words like "clever," "play," and "language games." She puns, she's wry, and she foregrounds seriousness in the title of her latest collection. Still the wit, McHugh startles with a fusion of grief, petri dishes, custom, and webcams. She is a poet who can cast into many realms-philosophy, iconography, and theology-with poems unabashedly titled "Dodo's Caca" and "Philosopher Orders Crispy Pork."

In the midst of comedy, there is suffering: "The chain's too short: the dog's at pains / to reach a sheaf of shade. One half a squirrel's / whirling there, upon the interstate." God is implicated and perhaps in pain too: "he's deaf and blind. But he's not dumb." The result of this situation is the poem entitled "No Sex for Priests"-this mandate is God's way of answering for it all. Offering an idiosyncratic sense of sacredness, the book makes the earnest and the tongue-in-cheek almost indistinguishable.

McHugh begins with beginning-"Inside the zygote / something's simmering. / It's boiling up and boiling over // until suddenly a second one splits off." Her poems pursue the same course of development-percolating into rifts that are page turns. Fastening and splitting are the collection's central verbs.

The book points to hybridizing-we pull pieces from one source and hitch them to another. There's loss in this process, as McHugh illustrates in "For Want of Better Words." The speaker cannot recall the Biblical fruits of the spirit and, as if to make up for the forgetting, attaches them to other phrases of American lore:

*You are not faithful, hopeful, kind-
are those the three? (The only three? so many?)
Must one be greater, as the Scriptures say?*

*The buck cannot stop anywhere. Once gotten out of hand,
it goes on growing in the mind.*

Writing in her signature relaxed iambic line, McHugh flips and winds the language of American common wisdom. In *Upgraded to Serious* (along with her other twelve books), we encounter a poet who is listening assiduously. Her attention to language is visible in each poem's marked use of rhyme. The sustained outpouring of alliteration gives the sense that McHugh will never be out of breath.