Avery Slater

# On Heather McHugh's *Upgraded to Serious*

Copper Canyon Press: Port Townsend, WA, 2009. 120 pages. $22.00

This punch is packed by weight and not by volume. Contents are unlikely to have settled during shipping: in fact, they're much more likely to unsettle you. Heather McHugh's new collection, *Upgraded to Serious*, is Grade A *aletheia*. This truth is unafraid to strip itself down to bone, tissue by tissue, poem by suspenseful poem, like a worldly-wise and gravelly voiced Scheherazade whose life hangs in the balance of each new utterance. From hackers and dodos to web-cams and pipe-bombs, the multifariousness of McHugh's poetic occasions promises that, when the stories run out, it's the listeners who stand to lose their heads—if by "head" we mean that unwieldy "briefcase of cerebral dust," that "busy hermeneut, // so serious he's sour, intent on making / meaning of us all."

As though yarn-spinning urges of meaning-making were our species' definitively outmoded vestigial appendage, McHugh apostrophizes the Muses of worlds endowed with significantly more horse sense. "Teach us to bear life's senselessness" is this book's clarion call. In lieu of a ministering Muse, here, McHugh brilliantly and breathtakingly offers us a-Musement: necessary precondition to the

hard-knock epiphanies of her wry Socratic hemlock.

McHugh has never failed to needle us where we need it most. "Just a day-numbered ape / with a clue it was clay," these poems pun in order to pinpoint, quip to better equip us, and riddle to rattle our cages. What naïveté we stand to lose is nothing less than cogitation's more coddling brands of conceit. Against a millennium of philosophic pigheadedness, McHugh offers us revision, conjecturing that "our knowing is a feel / for the nuance: our sentience itself/ the whole séance." "Séance" maintains its original linguistic sense as McHugh (arguably Jean Follain's best translator from the French) refracts occult communion through the Gallic lens: film screenings, meetings, sessions of the *Congrès du Parlement francais* are all "*séances*" in French. Then, are we locked in an interminable conference call with mammalian sense-perception?

Not in McHugh's world, where language operates as the true quintessence of dust, so that "glowers / by glow are overcome, flowers by flow." "A mortally afflicted tree / will scatter seed," but don't anticipate any lugubrious affair. As blooming cherry trees are "charged into combustibility" with "paparazzi-flashes or perfumerics / of pink," we find their poet professing, "I can't regret the spank of life, its sparkling / more-or-less."

"Nature loves its laws above its instances," but McHugh loves excoriating, coruscating exceptions: "I'm speaking / Old Grammarian, you'll recognize, where something understood // is something missing." This You-understood, an apostrophic exception to its audience, names that presence haunting this poetic séance: the bittersweet imperative of life itself which somehow hopes to countenance "a countlessness the stars have stood for." Should we

ever send a soul to audit God, we'd best send McHugh, whose keen sense for age-old "accountlessness" insures she would have the nerve to declaim, a second time, on our behalf: "May he who writes the music soon arrange / to make the meaning clear—if not today / then (let us pray) // before the last musicians die." Amen.