

## THE DISARMED HEART

Susan McCaslin  
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Susan McCaslin's *The Disarmed Heart* is a poetry collection in three parts, each distinct, yet importantly connected through resurfacing concerns expounded by her speakers. Each section offers intimate glimpses into the past and present lives of the speakers as well as their troubling dreams of eventualities. The "I" voice of the collection and its intimacy of experience remain consistently effective across all three sections, delivering a biting, often playfully insolent, and always eco-critical discussion of consumerism, capitalism, and the treatment of feminism in the contemporary West. Despite minor shortcomings and contrivances, McCaslin's poetry seamlessly weaves together numerous concerns to make a convincing argument for peace and environmental justice without resonating as didactic.

The first section, *Open Odes*, is a series of appreciations addressed to a curious variety of natural subjects. With the sparse inclusion of human subjects, the eloquent language and tone with which McCaslin addresses her animal subjects is defined as celebratory because her subjects exist, for the most part, outside humanity. Deeper levels of compassion, and in some ways humaneness, mark McCaslin's animals. This differentiates them from the poet-speaker and the reader, which proves effective in that it allows the reader to consider her own position in relation to these celebrated subjects that range from the lithe black panther to the oozing banana slug. At first, it is easy consider

an ode to a banana slug (to use one of many offbeat examples) as quirky or somewhat of a disincentive, yet McCaslin subtly demands why this is the case and, further, why the banana slug indeed deserves praise.

Within these unorthodox subjects, McCaslin's speakers find a way to transcend the boundaries and limitations that have been self-imposed by humanity: routine, the black panther existing outside his ecosystem; gender, in the case of the hermaphroditic banana slug; and religion, as in the "scape-goat-ed" Sam the Goat (McCaslin's wordplay is consistently enjoyable). Also worth noting is McCaslin's mixing of the ode form with hints of contemporaneity, both based in personal experience and pop culture iconography. Though clever, these references seem contrived and rather unnecessary at times.

The eponymous second section is rather shorter than the others yet incredibly compelling. A number of pieces, including "Dank Tureen," a dream of the effects of global warming, and "Xanadu Two," a reworking of Coleridge's opium induced "Kubla Khan," lend this section a distinct level of irreality and an attitude of disenchantment in imagining the impending consequences of climate change and international conflicts. Moving from the praise of the odes, McCaslin describes the dangers of greed, global warming, and the indifferent acceptance and internalization of violence. She conceptualizes a world of mechanization and destruction and subsequently proceeds to volunteer a remedy. The hope proffered by her poet-speaker comes through the deployment of words (rather than troops) and education. The strength of this section, and the collection as a whole, is that it does not rely on didacticism to accentuate its resolution. Rather, McCaslin structures the scene she uses to showcase the negative and in a few, short

pieces, offers a different, preferable vision of the world. These pieces read more personally than the earlier odes and showcase the vulnerability of the speaker when she stands alone. There is, however, power and defiance in her isolated stance which draws the reader in and achieves its purpose.

The third section, *Emparadised*, continues to build on the criticisms of the previous two sections while also offering a more substantiated solution, as illustrated in poems such as "The Possibilities of an Empty Page" and the final poem of the collection, "Re-firings." As the collection closes, the solution presented by the poet-persona is a cycle of imagining and re-imagining, a technique that McCaslin herself excels at. It is regrettable that this aptitude, the ability to reinterpret and rewrite, only surfaces for a few brief, shining moments. Noteworthy examples of this intertextuality are the aforementioned revisiting of "Kubla Khan" as well as a reworking of P.K. Page's "The Understatement" in McCaslin's "When the Stones Rise."

What remains so effective in these pieces, and in the collection as a whole, is the ability of the poet and her poetry to reignite or 're-fire' the flares of imagination. Indeed, the collection closes with a succinct summary of one of its central messages—that imagination and creativity must exist for the world of peace and justice that McCaslin envisions and only constant reimagining of established beliefs and understanding can allow that world to materialize. Overall, *The Disarmed Heart* is an intriguing and well-composed collection.

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