

AN INTERVIEW WITH KERRIN MCCADDEN: Hungry to Flip the World
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Kerrin McCadden, *Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes*
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In her poem “Burial,” published in this issue, Kerrin McCadden juxtaposes an indoor scene of mourning with an outdoor scene of work that must be done despite, and to move through, that mourning. The poem enacts a mash-up of song where human, machine, and bird voices combine, and these sorts of intersections of scenes and music are emblematic of McCadden’s work. The poems in her first book, *Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes*, are wide and wise enough to encompass that which is brusque as well as gentle, the methodical *and* the ambiguous. McCadden’s work seeks, delicately yet steadfastly, to illuminate complex mysteries that nevertheless remain partly in shadow. Through her poems we learn truths about our shadowy, mashed-up world; in “Burial,” not only do we come to understand something of the way a woodcock makes its song, but about how to grieve in a world that moves on, keeps digging.

Kerrin McCadden’s *Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes* won the 2015 Vermont Book Award from Vermont College of Fine Arts and the 2013 New Issues Poetry Prize. McCadden has also won fellowships and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Vermont Studio Center, and The Sustainable Arts Foundation, among other honors. A graduate of The MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, she lives in Vermont and teaches at Montpelier High School.

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BPJ: From the outset of *Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes*, it’s clear that the speaker has been struck lonely, stunned by heartbreak “after the marriage, the long marriage, the forty / open acres of marriage,” and the collection proceeds to acknowledge, wrestle with, and seek to reconcile the loneliness. Your work displays time and again a refreshing *restraint* in tone in deeply felt poems such as “Mostly, She Practices Falling” in which the speaker admits, “What is true is that I have figured out / how to do it, how to live alone. I sponge off / the table, wash the plates, and go to bed.” Could you talk about the poems in the first part of the book that proceed with emotional restraint

by adopting a “how-to” mechanism (for example in “Safety Instructions” and “How to Miss a Man”)?

McCadden: A restrained tone in poems about heartbreak can function as a kind of dissonance, providing tension. Poems send a reader to solve, or reconcile, the world of a poem—not as if there is a correct answer, but as if there is something to construct, some work to do. If a poem wells up from flailing emotions born of grief and loneliness and sings its song through a restrained tone, I hope it sends a reader reckoning. In grief we both wallow and set our shoulders to move forward. Somewhere between wallowing and setting our shoulders, we tell ourselves how to do it; we look for instructions.

Yet this is an impossible task—finding instructions for how to live. We don’t know anything. I know that, but I’m always hopeful, hunting to see, and a piece of the first section’s how-to poems comes from this appetite. Finding instructions in all the wrong places—in a tattoo, in the anatomy of a bird’s wing, driving through the Midwest, in the making of tea—this is a prayerful act. The poems deal in sets of instructions as if these imperatives are real and actual means, as if they could transact magical answers, could manifest a new life. “How to Miss a Man” makes use of Regina Spektor’s song lyrics as well as various figures (for example, “You are a needle just then, / darning holes in things”) as a pretense of providing comfort. The poem ends, though, with the flatly stated truth: “You can draw two / lines on a graph that can never touch. This is what you are building.” These lines undercut the magical earlier figures; the restraint, the flatness of the ending is meant to be blunt and a little cruel.

The same is true of “Safety Instructions,” where what is offered is what *not* to do. The poem essentially offers nothing—a set of instructions for how to live once the plane has landed, as if a flight attendant or the relationship with one’s anonymous seatmate could provide Truth, but the speaker is earnest in decoding the instructions. In these poems, the speaker imagines she can decipher how to move forward. That’s a lonely, rueful place—dealing in magical thinking—but it’s simultaneously lovely to believe what is not possible: a “how-to” mechanism can help structure and complicate an exploration of loneliness.

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BPJ: “How to Miss a Man” also establishes early the speaker’s affection for mathematical accuracy, straight lines, reliable calculations of all kinds, inventories, and graphs: “You need to be a graph. A grid. Numbers are perfect.” Near the end of the book, in “UVB-76,” the speaker writes a letter to the world across the night sky and requests, “*Write back to me with every kind / of regularity—because, really, I am in love / with regularity—the regularity / of every kind of thing.*” Tell us more about your poetry’s affection for the regularity found in math, grids, and maps.

McCadden: Inside the concerns of loneliness and grief, very little is regular or consistent, and these poems reach for consistency as antidote. I’ve always loved the puzzles of mathematics—how one can “solve for x ,” matrices, not knowing how much or how big or how hot, then adding, subtracting, converting, and arriving at an answer. I find the images and language of mathematics clean and beautiful and strange, and to use them for illogical purposes in poems with a searching speaker seems both sad and lovely. Such use of math, grids, maps, and other logical means combines impossibility with blind optimism, much like the “how-to” poems. This speaker is tentatively seeking joy across the collection, too, and the language of calculation in this context is a way to begin asking questions about possibility, to try to solve for x .

BPJ: In her essay “The Sound of It,” Marianne Boruch discusses the pleasure of poems that move between two dimensions: public (reasonable, emphatic, witty) and private (quirky, delicate, sorrowful). The intersection of these modes of voice and stance in a poem enriches the work with complications, acting as a means to “mess it up a bit.” When a poem shifts to private, intimate impulses, Boruch notes, “What might have gone on as plain story is abruptly altered . . . We’ve gone inward to the unexpected, the broken off.” These observations aptly describe what goes on, I think, in many of *Landscape’s* poems. They’re funny, efficient, narrative, and then they veer into dream, surreal inner worlds, or disorientation, imbuing the poem with the quirky, delicate sorrowing Boruch describes. Could you talk about combining public and private moods and the shifts (or

leaps) between them in poems such as “Saint Albans” and “My Brother Sits for a Life Drawing Class”?

McCadden: When I was very young, I would lie on the bed with my head upside down until the ceiling was the floor—light fixtures coming up from the floor, little walls between rooms. Poets have certain appetites, and I am hungry to flip the world. In writing poems that go “inward” or that become surreal, I’m interested in trying to keep the materials—the narrative information—of the poem largely of the perceived world. While there is often an impossible element—various transformations, a ghost, *Meteora*—most of the rest of the poem keeps playing with what is “real,” but flipping it. Many of my poems come from this drive to re-perceive the quotidian.

I find that wholly interior poems can become oddments, and, conversely, poems wholly situated in the social, tangible world can become documents. There is nothing wrong with either, but a reader can read such poems at arm’s length, as an observer. What I mean is that if I write a mostly interior poem that says rather plainly, “I am lonely,” the reader may well experience the poem as a kind of voyeur and think, “That person in that poem is lonely.” And a door closes there. How much better the poem could be if I could make that reader *feel* lonely, too.

Somehow, when a poem has collisions in it, a reader’s apple cart gets upset enough that the poem hoodwinks the reader into feeling, rather than observing feeling. Regarding the shifts themselves, I think these need to be swift—a rapidity we engage with in films—rather than labored in any way. There is authority in swiftness. I want the reader to come with me when the poem leaps, not hang back and have time to build doubt.

In “Saint Albans,” in order to render a speaker who has come a bit unhinged from the world—except for when she feels connected to her beloved—I had her look at everything as if through a lens of comparison, through the eyes of an angler fish distracted by the bioluminescence it can’t ditch. Of course the distraction is really the thought of the beloved, but who hasn’t felt under water in love? So the poem continued from that conceit. In the moments when the speaker is steady, she is

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“algebraic” and “increasingly alphanumeric.” And while these descriptions are a means to “mess it up a bit,” they are also mechanisms to locate the speaker in a world that makes sense, before she goes “under water.”

In a poem like “My Brother Sits for a Life Drawing Class,” I think it’s almost required that the poem veer inward, go strange; otherwise it would assume too much authority to remain credible. This poem is a reconnaissance mission, sending a speaker to reckon with a drug-addicted brother. The short, declarative sentences in the first three or four stanzas of this poem are a stab at narrative authority, but they really are a sham, as truth slips into a clear fiction. Brothers and sisters can’t turn into art objects, just as one person can’t narrate into understanding another’s mind, let alone an addict’s. The “reasonable, empathic” speaker boldly attempts to establish authority over a story when no authority can actually be had. All there is, then, is a kind of giving up, or giving over, or, as Marianne Boruch writes, going “inward to the unexpected, the broken off.”

BPJ: A gentle but dark humor buoys several of the poems in your book, from the skeleton friends chatting in a light but macabre manner in “Skeletons” (“Your flap jaw kept moving in that fetching way, / its hinge clicking in that way it will when a man ages some”) to the frustrated courtship of two cut-out lawn sculptures in “Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes.” Please comment on the role of humor in your poems.

McCadden: In general, I’d say humor is a hiding place, and a fabulous one, its job being to obscure some kind of truth, then mete it back out. Humor, then, is also a way of moderating and controlling truth; it’s a pretense, a slip of the tongue, a series of lies and stories and doublings. Humor is also an apt release for tension. We become unsure or confused, or tension builds, and then the punch line arrives, and we laugh or sigh or groan—we are released. As readers, when we “get the joke,” we’ve broken a code, solved a puzzle, discovered an answer. I hope to use humor to all these ends: manipulating truth, providing release, and suggesting answers.

I love how humor facilitates surprise. I can't arrive at the serious ending of "Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes" with the same impact if the rest of the poem is not trippingly light-hearted, if we haven't gone on and on with these two in their impossible plywood courtship. In "Skeletons," humor is useful in complicating the situation of the poem. The two people have, in "real life," stayed up until two in the morning talking in a truck in the cold. We don't know why, but we do know the speaker then dreams about the two as skeletons, and only in this dream does she reveal any desire for, or reach out to touch, the other person. So in this poem, humor is a veil, allowing the transformation of the humans to release the desire of the speaker, and it's also a reminder that, dammit, we *are* skeletons. Those people in the truck can worry about whatever they want, but they are headed to being only bones, ridiculous bones.

BPJ: A recurring image in *Landscape* is one of hands held out in supplication or an imploring gesture, but forgiveness, apology, and sincerity are slippery and suspect notions in these poems, especially in the final section. What are your thoughts on this book's perspective on contrition, particularly in the poems "Jake" and "Apology, Its Absence"?

McCadden: In keeping with the book's interest in calculations, contrition is an attempt to subtract one's actions; the root of the word is "to grind down." This book's interest in *contrition* is a way of digging (grinding down) at the ghost of the book—the wreckage of the marriage.

"Jake" is a poem written about a painting of the same name by Alison Goodwin, an artist whose work I'd fill my house with if I could. What struck me about the painting was the look of pure generosity—almost supplication—in the man's face. He holds out a fish and wears a halo and a baseball cap. He both looks like a man seeking forgiveness and like one who has no need to, and this struck me. When I saw that painting, I wanted to be loved by a man who could make that face. The poem is written as a direct address, and, coming later in the collection, is a return to the "how-to" poems from the first section, essentially telling the speaker she wants this, and how to have this, how to see what is

beautiful in that frozen moment—which is the essential lesson, how being loved can happen.

“Apology, Its Absence” is an exhibit of apologies as well as their absences. I found myself fascinated by “official apologies” and how long countries and organized religions often take to make them for wrongs they have committed. The poem examines a world that requires apologies and a world that requires none, ultimately imagining an existence where conflict is not a daily navigation but something to go see in a museum.

These poems ask, “What will become of me?” The image of hands held out is a gesture that means both “I have no idea” and “please.” It is both resigned and imploring, and somewhere between the two is vulnerability finer than simple loneliness. You ask, too, about forgiveness. I don’t think this is a speaker who deals much in forgiveness, rather wonders *how* to forgive as she wonders how to move forward. If forgiveness, apology, and sincerity are slippery, especially toward the end, I think it’s because the book is still contemplating their arrival.

BPJ: In the preface to her first book, *To the Place of Trumpets*, Brigit Pegeen Kelly writes of her profound attachment to poetry’s music, and although her influences are varied, she states that “because sound is related to nurturance for me . . . it is finally with the music of poetry that I am most concerned. When I write I am trying quite simply, as my father did before me, to sing.” Your work, for me, shares qualities with Kelly’s poetry: an attention to precise imagery, imaginative scope, and most powerfully, an ability to render seemingly effortless, natural sounds and cadences. Would you talk about the importance of music in your work, especially in the second poem published in this issue, “Passerines”?

McCadden: I’ve always been interested in how language makes music—the way words make the mouth move, how they taste, the quality of noise each one makes, how changing out one sound for another can act like gears in a poem, shifting everything. I read once that Yeats organized the vowel sounds in the last line of “Lake Isle of Innisfree” so that they were made, sequentially, from the front to the back of the mouth, so that by

“core,” the throat is open. Patterning like this happens throughout language, and I think we hardly notice it, but we are moved by it when we hear it, when it is just so. The sentence, too, is an instrument for music—phrases in tension, pacing controlled by punctuation and groupings, the order of words—as if it is really all a song.

I envy musicians and wish I could answer this question by saying music is just in me, but it's not. If I come to music at all in poetry, it's through a hunger to make music—in the absence of the ability to sit with a guitar in my lap at a campfire, or even to sing a song all the way through. I want it, so I look for it. I make a sound, and then I make it again, move away from it and then back to it. I revise purposefully and constantly and playfully, as often for sound as for meaning. I lean, too, on the weight of a lifetime of reading poetry. I think back, even, to weekly mass growing up: its wildly varied poetry, its varying metrical cadences, the call and response, the repetition. I still call on these tools in my poems. I think, too, about the language of my immigrant grandparents and the way they prized stories and sayings and invented language.

In writing a poem, I often begin to find music through repetition and through a pattern I enjoy unfolding. You asked about “Passerines.” I think music began in this poem through syntactical patterning. Though some sentences are grammatical fragments, they are mostly hypotactic throughout, beginning with the subject and verb, which works to lend a pattern to the poem. The speaker is working something out, weighing, sorting, making sense—discovering, which is what the sentences do, too, as they unfold. The sentences are also parsing widely varied materials: a bird hitting a window, a trip to France, a chat with a scientist about evolution, a man teaching the speaker to hand-feed birds, and, ultimately, a daughter leaving home, and keeping the sentences in an approximation of such a “structure” helps the leaps cohere. The syntax in this poem helps build the poem's music perhaps as a bass line would. Beyond that, I'm attracted to sound play—introducing a certain sound, and then continuing to bring it around, like keeping a note alive in a song—as with “we are kneeling on the wet decking” and “prying back the vinyl siding / to find.” Overall, “Passerines” makes bold

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play with *w* and *o* sounds and other sounds that open the throat. If a poem is about sadness, the sounds should do some wailing, should make the body do some wailing. I like to think poems are songs we play on the body.

BPJ: What's next? As we correspond, you're traveling abroad. What plans do you have for poetry and other pursuits during this trip?

McCadden: As I write, I'm in Ireland, here to visit family. When I come here, they say I am "home on holiday," which is ineffably beautiful to me. I'm staying with my cousin at the farm my grandfather left to come to America. It's at the end of a very long lane outside of Laghey, Donegal, not far at all from the border with Northern Ireland—about two hundred acres, a hundred sheep, two border collies, and one man who farms and then runs a taxi company in Donegal Town at night. My grandmother's homeplace is just over the hill, and the valley is full of cousins. My family tree feels latitudinal, not longitudinal, if that makes sense. It doesn't go back in time; it stretches out across this place.

I have recently begun writing poems half rooted here. They pepper the manuscript I'm working on and are central to its concerns. If I can say anything definitive yet about my second book, it's that it's telescopic. *Landscape with Plywood Silhouettes* investigates a somewhat microscopic set of concerns: how to move through wreckage and loss to find peace. This next collection, currently titled *Street View*, looks backward and takes a longer view. The poems center on constructions of home, locations of home, the building and wrecking of homes, safety and threats in homes. The title poem is a love poem to the little orange Google Maps man and comes out in *The American Poetry Review* this winter. Being here in Ireland puts, for instance, my family's ghosts in front of me. It feels like a focusing mechanism to be here, where I'm always asking myself, "How was that home? What is home?" and, "Where is home?"