

Classic Poetry Series

Heather McHugh
- poems -

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Heather McHugh(20 August 1948)

Heather McHugh is an American poet

Life

Poet, translator, and educator, was born in San Diego, California, to Canadian parents, John Laurence, a marine biologist, and Eileen Francesca (Smallwood). They raised McHugh in Gloucester Point, Virginia. There, her father directed the marine biological laboratory on the York River. She began writing poetry at age five and claims to have become an expert "eavesdropper" by the age of twelve. At the age of seventeen, she entered Harvard University. Her most notable work was *Hinge & Sign: Poems 1968-1993*, which won the Bingham Poetry Prize of the Boston Book Review and the Pollack-Harvard Review Prize. The New York Times Book Review named this work the Notable Book of the Year.

McHugh was elected as Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1999. She teaches at the University of Washington and in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers.

In 2009, she was awarded the MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" for her work.

Biography

McHugh has published seven books of poetry, one collection of critical essays, and four books of translation. She has received numerous awards and critical recognition in all of these areas, including several Pushcart Prizes. Her poems resist contemporary identity politics. She also rejects categorization as a confessional poet, although she studied with [Robert Lowell](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-lowell/) during the time when that described his work.

Her primary education included parochial school, where she credits Sister Cletus's emphasis on grammar as an early influence. As a student at Yorktown High School in Arlington, Virginia, a teacher advised McHugh against applying to Radcliffe, making her determined to get in. She entered the college at age 16 and graduated with honors, receiving her B.A. from Harvard in 1970. She entered graduate school at the University of Denver in 1970, having already published a poem in *The New Yorker*. She began teaching in graduate school, was a Fellow at Cummington Community for the Arts in 1970, and received the Academy of American Poets prize in 1972. After earning her M.A. in 1972,

McHugh received MacDowell Colony fellowships in 1973, 1974, and 1976. In 1974, she also received her first of three National Endowment for the Arts grants in poetry. McHugh was the poet-in-residence at Stephens College in Missouri between 1974 and 1976; she worked as an associate professor of English at the State University of New York at Binghamton between 1976 and 1982.

At 29, she completed a manuscript of poems titled *Dangers* (1976), that was a winner of Houghton Mifflin Co.'s New Poetry Series Competition. McHugh's first book of poems was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1977. After a second National Endowment for the Arts grants in poetry in 1981 and a Yaddo Colony fellowship in 1980, her second book, titled "A World of Difference: Poems" (1981), was published by Houghton Mifflin. McHugh was 35. During this time, she was a visiting professor at Warren Wilson College in the M.F.A. Program for Writers in North Carolina between 1980 and 1985; at Columbia University in New York between 1980 and 1981; and at the University of California in Irvine in 1982. During 1987, she was the Holloway Lecturer at the University of California in Berkeley. While the top journals published her poetry, some poems were also anthologized in prestigious collections, and top critics called her observations astute and noteworthy as well as courageous.

That same year *World of Difference* came out, her first book of translations was published. Her poetry translation of Jean Follain's French work is titled *D'après tout: Poems by Jean Follain* (1981) for Lockhart Poetry in Translation. In 1984, she became the Milliman Writer-In-Residence at the University of Washington in Seattle. The residency was initiated that same year, and McHugh has filled the position since then. During the 1980s, McHugh worked a great deal on translation, partly due to her alliance with her co-translator and husband, who teaches at the University of Washington. Her translation work includes well-known international poets like [Valéry](http://www.poemhunter.com/paul-valery/) and [Rilke](http://www.poemhunter.com/rainer-maria-rilke/), as well as poets like Romanian Jewish poet of the Holocaust [Paul Antschel](http://www.poemhunter.com/paul-celan-paul-antschel/), who wrote under the pseudonym Paul Celan.

Her skill in translating literature by Slavic writers became even more evident with the publication of *Because the Sea Is Black: Poems of Blaga Dimitrova* (1989) featuring the work of a Bulgarian poet and novelist. Dimitrova, one of the best-loved writers in her homeland, became the first democratically elected vice-president of her country after the fall of communism. McHugh translated Dimitrova's poems for *Wesleyan Poetry in Translation* (published by the Wesleyan University Press) with her husband, Nikolai Popov, a scholar whom she married in 1987. (Her first marriage in 1967 ended in divorce.) McHugh sometimes uses the name Niko Boris Popov McHugh when writing about her

husband. Popov, an expert in Bulgarian and knowledgeable in the German and French languages, also helped to translate Celan's poetry, which was always written in German.

In 1986, McHugh received a Bellagio grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. She published two more books of poetry during the 1980s: *To the Quick* (1987) and *Shades* (1988). In the late '80s, she also participated in an art project with Tom Phillips, resulting in a collectible book *WHERE ARE THEY NOW?: The Class of Forty-Seven* (1990). It consists of thirty images by Phillips which are interpreted in poems by McHugh and then further modified by Phillips. One of Phillips's images, "A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel," from the collaboration is appropriately used on the cover of McHugh's essay collection *Broken English: Poetry and Partiality* (1993).

In 1994, *Hinge & Sign: Poems 1968-1993*, a collection of 24 new poems and selected poems from her five earlier books, was published by the Wesleyan University Press. The book won both the Harvard Review/Daniel Pollock Prize in 1995 and Boston Book Review's Bingham Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award. The New York Times Book Review chose this poetry collection as its "Notable Book of the Year." In 1996, after the book's publication, she received a Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Writing Award.

In 1998 McHugh received the Folger Library's O.B. Hardison Prize for a poet who excels in teaching. In 1999 she was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and received the PEN/Voelker Award. During this year, her poetry was anthologized in *The New Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*. McHugh also began to serve as a judge for numerous poetry competitions, including the National Poetry Series and the Laughlin Prize. She was a member of the Board of Directors for the Associated Writing Programs between 1981 and 1983. She served on the Literature Panel for the National Endowment for the Arts during 1983 and 1986. In 1991, she was the Coal-Royalty Chair at the University of Alabama. In 1992, McHugh was the Elliston Poet at the University of Cincinnati. In 1991, she was the visiting professor at the University of Iowa and, in 1994, at the University of California at Los Angeles.

She takes editing collections of younger poets seriously, and helped to select poems for *Hammer and Blaze: a Gathering of Contemporary American Poets* (2001), published by the University of Georgia Press, which she co-edited. About her job guest editing *Ploughshares* in Spring 2001, McHugh writes, "The sheer syntactical elegance of many of these new poems suggests an instrumental refinement for which I'm grateful: I'm an old Richard Wilbur /<a

<http://www.poemhunter.com/anthony-evan-hecht/>>Anthony Hecht fan, and have had reason now and then to regret, during my quarter century of teaching in M.F.A. programs, the relative unfashionability of rhetorical flourish." At the end of 2001, McHugh's sixth collection of poetry, *The Father of the Predicaments*, was published by the Wesleyan University Press. That same year, McHugh, with Nikolai Popov, received the first International Griffin Poetry Prize in translation for *Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan*. Her next poetry collection, *Eyeshot*, was published in (2003), and her latest collection, *Upgraded to Serious*, was released in 2009.

McHugh is a judge for the 2012 Griffin Poetry Prize.

Awards and honors

Two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts

Griffin Poetry Prize

Fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation

Milliman Distinguished Writer-in-Residence, University of Washington

Finalist for the National Book Award

Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize

Witter Bynner Fellowship

PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry

O. B. Hardison, Jr. Poetry Prize

MacArthur Fellowship

After Su Tung P'O

ON THE BIRTH OF A SON

When a child is born, the parents say
they hope it's healthy and intelligent. But as for me—

well, vigor and intelligence have wrecked my life. I pray
this baby we are seeing walloped, wiped and winningly anointed,

turns out dumb as oakum—and more sinister. That way
he can crown a tranquil life by being

appointed a cabinet minister.

Heather McHugh

Amenities

I owe you an explanation.
My first memory isn't your own
of an empty box. My babyhood cabinets held
a countlessness of cakes, my backyard
rotted into apple glut, windfalls of
money-tree, mouthfuls of fib.

At puberty I liked the locks,
I was the one who made them fast.
The yelling in our hallways was about
lost money, or lost love, but not
lost life. Or so I see it now:
in those days I romanticized
a risk (I thought I'd die
in the alcoholic automobile, die
at the hands of nerveless dentistry). Small hearts
were printed in the checkbook; when my parents called me
dear, they meant expensive.

Where were you in all that time? Out looking for
your father's body? Making for your mother's room?
I got my A's in English, civics,
sweetness and light; you got black eyes, and F's,
and nowhere fast. By 1967 when we met
(if you could call it making an acquaintance,
rape) I was a mal-adjusted gush, a sucker for
placebos. Walking home from Central Square, I came to have
the good girl's petty dread: the woman

to whose yard you dragged me might
detect us, and be furious. More than anything else
I wanted no one mad at me. (Propriety,
or was it property, I thought
to guard: myself I gave away.)

And as for you, you had the shakes,
were barely seventeen yourself, too raw
to get it up (I said don't be afraid,
afraid of what might happen if you failed).

And afterwards, in one of those moments
it's hard to tell (funny from fatal) you did
a terrible civility: you told me

thanks. I'll never forget
that moment all my life.
It wasn't until then, as you
were sheathing it to run,

I saw the knife.

Heather McHugh

Better Or Worse

I.

Daily, the kindergarteners
passed my porch. I loved
their likeness and variety,
their selves in line like little
monosyllables, but huggable—
I wasn't meant

to grab them, ever,
up into actual besmooches or down
into grubbiest tumbles, my lot was not
to have them, in the flesh.
Was it better or worse to let
their lovability go by untouched, and just
watch over their river of ever-
inbraiding relations? I wouldn't
mother them or teach. We couldn't be
each other's others; maybe,
at removes, each other's each.

II.

Each toddler had a hand-hold on
a loop of rope, designed to haul
the whole school onward
in the sidewalk stream—
like pickerel through freshets,
at the pull of something else's will, the children
spun and bobbed, three years old and four
(or were they little drunken Buddhas,
buoyant, plump?). They looked
now to the right, now to the sky, and now
toward nothing (nothing was too small)—
they followed a thread of destination,
chain of command, order of actual rope that led

to what? Who knew?

For here and now in one child's eye there was a yellow truck,
and in another's was a burning star; but from my own perspective,
overhead, adult, where trucks and suns had lost their luster,
they were one whole baby-rush toward
a target, toward the law
of targets, fledge
in the wake of an arrowhead;

a bull's-eye bloomed, a red
eight-sided sign. What
did I wish them?
Nothing I foresaw.

Heather McHugh

Constructive

You take a rock, your hand is hard.
You raise your eyes, and there's a pair
of small beloveds, caught in pails.
The monocle and eyepatch correspond.

You take a glove, your hand is soft.
The ocean floor was done
in lizardskin. Around a log or snag
the surface currents run

like lumber about a knot. A boat
is bent to sea—we favor the medium
we're in, our shape's
around us. It takes time.

At night, the bed alive, what
teller of truth could tell
the two apart? Lover, beloved,
hope is command. Your hand

is given, when you take a hand.

Heather McHugh

Dark View

The sun that puts its spokes in every
Wheel of manhandle and tree

Derives its path of seashines
(Sheer centrifugality) from my

Regards. I send it
My regards. Some yards

Of lumen from the fabrika
Have come unbolted from the look

Of it (or likes of me), a long
Unweaving or recarding I

Cannot recall begun, and there
Before my eyes a palm

Puts lashes round the sun.

Heather McHugh

Debtor's Prison Road

I.

They let me go
at night, minus my timepiece, lighter,
personal effects. The air is always shaking
the same jars of safety pins: cicadas.
Song is my recidivism: always
I'm abandoning the road to stand
(unwatched, unseconded) in someone's
field. The stars (that are not mine)

tick fitfully, they always have
appointments. Punctual, six-sharp,
they are David's; they have lodged in his
death tent, have stuck in his mud sleep. Bad luck

leaves me a loan: no company, no katy-
did or promissory
note or night
can last.
The air
loses its nerve,
the old saw its eyeteeth and I
my words—my alwaysing and my.

II.

In hush the repossessioners reach
the edges of the field. They pass

for shadows, sheep of ambush, animals of
permanence. They turn a black beyond returning

and they haunt the sleepless. I don't count,
who cannot earn my keep.

Heather McHugh

Elevated

Fifty years the butcher shop
has hung these animals on hooks
to cure. The stationery store
dispenses the same old news,
same change, a little less silver;
ladies in a beauty shop desire
the perfect permanent.
Mornings this bright
cast the deepest shade;
everything seems to come
from memory. The subway's elevated.

Down the block toward the river Bronx
each yard has a chain-link fence, a dog
attracted to the random noise.
The woman no one knows is dead is still
in the chair by the bedroom plant.
Stripes advance from the blind
to her lap, slower than the human
eye can see. Above the accidents
of traffic you can hear
her clock and clean refrigerator hum.

Heather McHugh

Etymological Dirge

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear.

Calm comes from burning.

Tall comes from fast.

Comely doesn't come from come.

Person comes from mask.

The kin of charity is whore,

the root of charity is dear.

Incentive has its source in song

and winning in the sufferer.

Afford yourself what you can carry out.

A coward and a coda share a word.

We get our ugliness from fear.

We get our danger from the lord.

Heather McHugh

From The Tower

Insanity is not a want of reason.
It is reason's overgrowth, a calculating kudzu.

Explaining why, in two-ton manifesti, thinkers sally forth
with testaments and pipe bombs. Heaven help us:

spare us all your meaningful designs. Shine down or
shower forth, but (for the earthling's sake) ignore
all prayers followed by against, or for. Teach us to bear

life's senselessness, our insignificance, and more;
let's call that sanity. The terrifying prospect isn't some
escapist with old-fangled novels, fond of comfort, munching sweets—

it is the busy hermeneut, so serious
he's sour, intent on making
meaning of us all, and bursting
from the tower to the street.

Heather McHugh

Ghazal Of The Better-Unbegun

Too volatile, am I?too voluble?too much a word-person?
I blame the soup:I'm a primordially
stirred person.

Two pronouns and a vehicle was Icarus with wings.
The apparatus of his selves made an ab-
surd person.

The sound I make is sympathy's:sad dogs are tied afar.
But howling I become an ever more un-
heard person.

I need a hundred more of you to make a likelihood.
The mirror's not convincing-- that at-best in-
ferred person.

As time's revealing gets revolting, I start looking out.
Look in and what you see is one unholy
blurred person.

The only cure for birth one doesn't love to contemplate.
Better to be an unsung song, an unoc-
curred person.

McHugh, you'll be the death of me -- each self and second studied!
Addressing you like this, I'm halfway to the
third person.

Heather McHugh

Ghoti

The gh comes from rough, the o from women's,
and the ti from unmentionables--presto:
there's the perfect English instance of
unlovability--complete

with fish. Our wish was for a better
revelation: for a correspondence--
if not lexical, at least
phonetic; if not with Madonna

then at least with Mary Magdalene.
Instead we get the sheer
opacity of things: an accident
of incident, a tracery of history: the dung

inside the dungarees, the jock strap for a codpiece, and
the ruined patches bordering the lip. One boot (high-heeled) could make
Sorrento sorry, Capri corny, even little Italy
a little ill. Low-cased, a lover looks

one over--eggs without ease, semen without oars--
and there, on board, tricked out in fur and fin,
the landlubber who wound up captain. Where's it going,
this our (H)MS? More west? More forth? The quest

itself is at a long and short behest: it's wound
in winds. (Take rough from seas, and women from the shore,
unmentionables out of mind). We're here
for something rich, beyond

appearances. What do I mean? (What can one say?)
A minute of millenium, unculminating
stint, a stonishment: my god, what's
utterable? Gargah, gatto, goat. Us animals is made

to seine and trawl and drag and gaff
our way across the earth. The earth, it rolls.
We dig, lay lines, book arguably
perfect passages. But earth remains untranslated,

unplumbed. A million herring run where we
catch here a freckle, there a pock; the depths to which things live
words only glint at. Terns in flight work up
what fond minds might

call syntax. As for that
semantic antic in the distance, is it
whiskered fish, finned cat? Don't settle
just for two. Some bottomographies are

brooded over, and some skies swum through. . .

Heather McHugh

Glass House

Everything obeyed our laws and
we just went on self-improving
till a window gave us pause and
there the outside world was, moving.

Five apartment blocks swept by,
the trees and ironwork and headstones
of the next town's cemetery.
Auto lots. Golf courses. Rest homes.
Blue-green fields and perishable vistas
wars had underscored in red
were sweeping past,
with cloudscapes, just

as if the living room were dead.
Which way to look? Nonnegative?
Nonplussed? (Unkilled? Unkissed?)
Look out, you said; the sight's on us:

If we don't move, we can't be missed.

Heather McHugh

Half Border, Half Lab

Customs and chemistry
made a name for themselves
and it was Spot. He's gone to some
utopos now, the dirty dog, doctor of
crotches, digger of holes. Your airy clarities be damned,
he loved our must and our mistakes—why hit him, then,
who did us good? He's dead, he ought
to be at home. He's damned
put out, and so am I.

* * *

When blue is carried out, the law is red.
When noon is said and done, it's dusk again.
The greed for table makes the greed for bed.
So cave canem, even stars have litters—little
lookers, cacklers, killers . . . Morning raises up
the hackled men. (What's
milk, among our ilk, but
opportunity for spillers?)

* * *

He saved our sorry
highfalutin souls—the heavens haven't saved a fly. Orion's
canniness who can condone?—that starring story, strapping blade!—?
and Sirius is just a Fido joke—no laughter shakes the firmament.
But O the family dog, the Buddha-dog—son of a bitch!
he had a funny bone—

Heather McHugh

In Praise Of Pain

A brilliance takes up residence in flaws—
a brilliance all the unchipped faces of design
refuse. The wine collects its starlets
at a lip's fault, sunlight where the nicked
glass angles, and affection where the eye
is least correctable, where arrows of
unquivered light are lodged, where someone
else's eyes have come to be concerned.

For beauty's sake, assault and drive and burn
the devil from the simply perfect sun.
Demand a birthmark on the skin of love,
a tremble in the touch, in come a cry,
and let the silverware of nights be flecked,
the moon pocked to distribute more or less
indwelling alloys of its dim and shine
by nip and tuck, by chance's dance of laws.

The brightness drawn and quartered on a sheet,
the moment cracked upon a bed, will last
as if you soldered them with moon and flux.
And break the bottle of the eye to see
what lights are spun of accident and glass.

Heather McHugh

Inside

In the field is a house
of wood. A window of the house
contains the field.

You can't see far
with a sun in the sky,
with a living-room lamp

at night. Locality is all
you light, and you, as single
as a bed. But there's

no end to dark. The bed is in the clearing
and the clearing's in the wind; the world
is a world among others. Now your cell-stars split.

Heather McHugh

Leaf Litter On Rock Face

Things are not
unmoving (or else what

is ing inside them for?)
The things once-living

fall on the never-living all
the more movingly for the eye

that passes over them.
The wind wells up

to spill a trail
of onces off the nevers,

take opaque from eye
to mind, or near it—

every rocking takes
some leaving to

a stonish spirit.

Heather McHugh

Man In The Street Or Hand Over Mouth

He claps a hand
Across the gaping hole—

Or else the sight might
Well inside to

Melt the mind—if any
Thinking spoke

Were in the wheel,
Or any real

Fright-fragments broke
Out of the gorge to

Soak the breast, the meaning
Might incite a stroke—best

Press against it, close
The clawhole, stand

In stupor, petrified. The dream
Be damned, the deeps defied.

The hand's to keep
The scream inside.

Heather McHugh

Myrrha To The Source

O fluent one, o muscle full of hydrogen,
o stuff of grief, whom the Greeks
accuse of spoiling souls,

whose destiny is downward,
whose reflecting's up—I think
I must have come from you.

Just one more cup.

Heather McHugh

Nano-Knowledge

There, a little right
of Ursus Major, is
the Milky Way:
a man can point it out,
the biggest billionfold of all
predicaments he's in:
his planet's street address.

What gives? What looks
a stripe a hundred million
miles away from here

is where we live.

*

Let's keep it clear. The Northern Lights
are not the North Star. Being but
a blur, they cannot reassure us.
They keep moving - I think far
too easily. September spills

some glimmers of
the boreals to come:
they're modest pools
of horizontal haze, where later

they'll appear as foldings in the vertical,
a work of curtains, throbbing dim
or bright. (One wonders at
one's eyes.) The very sight
will angle off in glances or in shoots
of something brilliant, something

bigger than we know, its hints uncatchable
in shifts of mind ... So there

it is again, the mind, with its
old bluster, its self-centered

question: what

is dimming, what is bright?

The spirit sinks and swells, which cannot tell
itself from any little luster.

Heather McHugh

No Sex For Priests

The horse in harness suffers;
he's not feeling up to snuff.
The feeler's sensate but the cook
pronounces lobsters tough.
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. That rough around
the monkey's eye is cancer. Only God's
impervious—he's deaf and blind. But he's
not dumb: to answer for it all, his spokesmen
aren't allowed to come.

Heather McHugh

Not Over It

In sympathy with Gaspara Stampa

By woman so touched, so pressed,
detachment being thought
achievable at all

is boggling in itself. Its being
thought achievable by love—but love
for only all (not someone's single) sentience—

appears the precept of too cold
a form of flame. How much
of a hand in things

relinquishes the hold
of things-at-hand?
What kiss might such

a mind reclaim? A swirl of dust
in Buddhist schools, perhaps.
A view of several solar

systems from above.
Not love.
The thought

appeals as it appals:
Slow learners, we must spurn
the selving sensualities, to feel

for feelers of this kind,
unfasten passion's burner
to identify what's under it—

in short, must court
dispassion just
to be compassionate.

Not To Be Dwelled On

Self-interest cropped up even there,
the day I hoisted three instead of the
called-for two
spadefuls of loam onto
the coffin of my friend.

Why shovel more than anybody else?
What did I think I'd prove? More love
(mud in her eye)? More will to work
(her father what, a shirker?) Christ,
I'd give an arm or leg
to get that spoonful back.

She cannot die again; and I
do nothing but relive.

Heather McHugh

Philosopher Orders Crispy Pork

I love him so, this creature I pray
was treated kindly. I will pay
as much as pig-lovers see fit

to guarantee him that. As for his fat,
I'd give up years yes years of my
own life for such

a gulpable semblable.
(My life! Such as it is! This
liberality of leaves! The world

won't need those seventeen more
poems, after all, there being
so few subjects to be treated. Three

if by subject we mean anyone
submitted to another's
will. Two if by subject we mean

topic. One if by death we wind up
meaning love. And none if a subject
must entail

the curlicue's indulgence of itself.)

Heather McHugh

Remains To Be Seen

We dress the boy in an orange cap
and show him how the gun is held.
He looks at his hand.

He likes five women, one in black
and one in yellow, whitey,
pinky, and the naked one.

In all his stories he loses his heart.
We do not tell him that the truth
is just the future, that he's born

to die, and the love of the lovely
can kill. But we believe it;
he is beautiful, and at the movies

he is what we watch. His eyes
are fixed, his hair still
smoking; his whole face is blue.

Heather McHugh

Space Bar

Lined up behind the space bartender
is the meaning of it all, the vessels
marked with letters, numbers,
signs. Beyond the flats

the monitor looms, for all the world
like the world. Images and
motions, weeping women,
men in hats. I have killed

many happy hours here,
with my bare hands,
where TV passes for IV, among
the space cadets and dingbats.

Heather McHugh

Stroke

The literate are ill-prepared for this
snap in the line of life:
the day turns a trick
of twisted tongues and is
untiable, the month by no mere root
moon-ridden, and the yearly eloquences yielding more
than summer's part of speech times four. We better learn

the buried meaning in the grave: here
all we see of its alphabet is tracks
of predators, all we know of its tense
the slow seconds and quick centuries
of sex. Unletter the past and then
the future comes to terms. One late fall day
I stumbled from the study and I found
the easy symbols of the living room revised:

my shocked senses flocked to the window's reference
where now all backyard attitudes were deep
in memory: the landscapes I had known too well-
the picnic table and the hoe, the tricycle, the stubborn
shrub-the homegrown syllables
of shapely living-all

lay sanded and camelled by foreign snow...

Heather McHugh

The Father Of The Predicaments

He came at night to each of us asleep
And trained us in the virtues we most lacked.
Me he admonished to return his stare
Correctly, without s I could,
Unblinking, more and more incline
Toward a deep unblinkingness of his,
He would not let me de
In the dark of the world, at the foot
Of the library steps, there lurked
A Mercury of rust, its cab half-lit.
(Two worldly forms who huddled there
Knew what they meant. I had no business

With the things they did I feel myself
Drawn back through Circulation into Reference,
Until I saw how blue I had become, by virtue
Of its five TVs, their monitors abuzz with is's

Etymologies...)

Heather McHugh

The Oven Loves The Tv Set

Stuck on the fridge, our favorite pin-up girl
is anorexic. On the radio we have a riff

of Muzak sax, and on the mind
a self-help book. We sprawl all evening, all

alone, in the unraised ranch;
all day the company we kept

kept on incorporating. As for the world
of poverty, we did our best, thanks

to a fund of Christian feeling
and mementos from

Amelia, the foster child, who has
the rags and seven photogenic sisters we prefer

in someone to be saved. She's proof
Americans have got a heart

to go with all that happy
acumen you read about. We're known to love

a million little prettinesses,
decency, and ribbons on

the cockapoo. (But who
will study alphabets for hands? Who gives

a damn what patience goes into
a good wheelchair? Who lugs the rice

from its umpteen stores
to the ends of the earth, to even

one dead-end? Not we.)
Our constitutional pursuit

is happiness, i.e.
somebody nice, and not

too fat, we can have
for our personal friend.

Heather McHugh

The Woman Who Laughed On Calvary

I.

Smilers, smirkers, chucklers, grinners,
platitudinizers, euphemists: it wasn't you

I emulated there, in that
Godawful place. What kind
of face

to put on it? How simple
is a simon's sign? To my mind
laughter's not the mark of pleasure, not
a pleasantry that spread; instead

it's intimate with sheer
delirium: spilt brain
on split lip, uncontainable
interiority—
(make no mistake, it is a horror, this

inmated, intimated
self, revealed as your
material: red smear,
white swipe). It's said the brain
stinks first, then organworks of art and eatery,
and then—what's left? a little cartilage for

ambiguity? a little tendon's B&D? At last, the least
ephemeral of evidences: nuggetworks (discrete, and
indiscreet) of teeth, bone-bits, odd scraps
of a delapidated strut—and this is just
the sort of stuff, insensate,
to which life (which comes again

as slime) has always
loved adhering. Life! Who wouldn't
laugh? Your inner life! Your pet
pretense! It can't be kept up, can't
be kept clean,

even in a thought,
except a good
bloodworks or shitpump keeps it so.

II.

Out of the mouth comes a tongue,
it calls itself linguistic and it
never quite effects
the cover-up (good
Lord, there's much to
cover up: so many belches, outcries,
upchucks, sneezes, puffings, hiccups, osculations, hawks and
coughs)—

so laughter (which, among the noises, prides itself
on being the most intellectual) can't help
but come out, snorting. Nothing

smiled or mild or meanwhiling—a laugh's
got teeth to send it off,
and spit to keep it company, and rot
to end up with. Its closest kin is grimace, it's
a grimacing with wind.
It will (the will
be damned)
burst out

in bad cacaphonies of
brouhaha and borborygma—it's the
stockbroker of mockeries, a trachea rake—
the vent of rage and irony, and right
there in the very
shrine of signs. A laugh, I mean,
is sorrow's

archery and signature,
while flesh is being
hoisted and arrayed

on roosts of skeleton.

III.

I saw what good

comes to; I saw the figure
human being cuts, upon its frame.
The laugh was a cry from my own

perscrewed, misnailed, cross-crafted
armature. Despite

your consternations, oh you
meekened warners and polite
conventioners, the thieves were better
served upon that day. For the heart

is a muscle, where cruelty's humored.
The tooth of moral rectitude's
a fang. What I gave

at the sight of him there

was up. What I got
of humanity there
was the hang . . .

Heather McHugh

U-District Incident Report

Apparently they want your body parts. They frisk you for

Your handset, earbud, bluetooth, cellphone, iPad, thumb drive, memory stick

And laptop. You won't need any of it soon. Give them

The finger too.

Heather McHugh

What He Thought

We were supposed to do a job in Italy
and, full of our feeling for
ourselves (our sense of being
Poets from America) we went
from Rome to Fano, met
the Mayor, mulled a couple
matters over. The Italian literati seemed
bewildered by the language of America: they asked us
what does "flat drink" mean? and the mysterious
"cheap date" (no explanation lessened
this one's mystery). Among Italian writers we

could recognize our counterparts: the academic,
the apologist, the arrogant, the amorous,
the brazen and the glib. And there was one
administrator (The Conservative), in suit
of regulation gray, who like a good tour guide
with measured pace and uninflected tone
narrated sights and histories
the hired van hauled us past.
Of all he was most politic--
and least poetic-- so
it seemed. Our last
few days in Rome
I found a book of poems this
unprepossessing one had written: it was there
in the pensione room (a room he'd recommended)
where it must have been abandoned by
the German visitor (was there a bus of them?) to whom
he had inscribed and dated it a month before. I couldn't
read Italian either, so I put the book
back in the wardrobe's dark. We last Americans

were due to leave
tomorrow. For our parting evening then
our host chose something in a family restaurant,
and there we sat and chatted, sat and chewed, till,
sensible it was our last big chance to be Poetic, make
our mark, one of us asked

"What's poetry?
Is it the fruits and vegetables
and marketplace at Campo dei Fiori

or the statue there?" Because I was
the glib one, I identified the answer
instantly, I didn't have to think-- "The truth
is both, it's both!" I blurted out. But that
was easy. That was easiest
to say. What followed taught me something
about difficulty,

for our underestimated host spoke out
all of a sudden, with a rising passion, and he said:

The statue represents
Giordano Bruno, brought
to be burned in the public square
because of his offence against authority, which was to say
the Church. His crime was his belief
the universe does not revolve around
the human being: God is no
fixed point or central government
but rather is poured in waves, through
all things: all things
move. "If God is not the soul itself,
he is the soul OF THE SOUL of the world." Such was
his heresy. The day they brought him forth to die

they feared he might incite the crowd (the man
was famous for his eloquence). And so his captors
placed upon his face
an iron mask
in which he could not speak.

That is how they burned him.
That is how he died,
without a word,
in front of everyone. And poetry--

(we'd all put down our forks by now, to listen to

the man in gray; he went on softly)-- poetry

is what he thought, but did not say.

Heather McHugh

With Due Respect To Thor

The dog has shrunk between the brake and clutch. His shaking shakes a two-ton truck. From a God

Heather McHugh