Demeter Goes Skydiving
by Susan McCaslin

Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

The myth of Demeter spins a simple tale of mother-sorrow and rebirth. Demeter, the goddess of fertility, loses her daughter, Persephone, to Hades, who spirits her away to the underworld while her mother goes half crazy trying to find her. Demeter appeals to Zeus, who instructs his brother (Hades) to be reasonable and return the girl to her mother. Zeus’s powerful influence only half works, since Persephone unites with Demeter but must return to the underworld four months each year, leaving our world a cold and dark place from Demeter’s curse.

Susan McCaslin’s eleventh volume of poetry, Demeter Goes Skydiving, comes with a neat premise: a 21st-century Demeter-Persephone relationship.

She is not young or old, familiar or unfamiliar,
but has the timbre of one who had been my mother,
one long thought dead. (27)

To contextualize those lines, they come from the mind of Persephone, who is describing a woman she’s watching playing a piano and singing – someone who might be her estranged mother.

My most grievous criticism about this volume originates in the how of those lines, not the who or even why. McCaslin stretches to create suspense instead of allowing Demeter’s allure to issue forth from herself. “She is not young or old” of course sounds better than “She’s middle-aged”; “I think I’ve seen her before” sounds trite compared to “familiar or unfamiliar,” but these formulations sound a false note to my ear. I desire the mother-daughter divide to be drawn more starkly here to allow for subtlety later. That timeless tension must be pushed out the door, or screamed from the top of the stairs: “Mother, what the flip have you done to my life?”

McCaslin admirably covers a lot in this sequence, and fearlessly takes on our two-bit culture – the one starring the economics of greed – but the main event here, the love/hate, she/me dispute doesn’t have the intensity it needs to drive the poems deep into the reader’s mind.

In “Demeter’s Rage” McCaslin acknowledges the trembling sore spot – “a vast progress of rage” (35) – but it sounds journalistically like the fate of all women in all their relationships, rather than of a particular mother/daughter with whom we can grow empathetic. Give us that naked pair and the reader will leap where the poet points.

I do appreciate her word choice of “progress,” which conveys motion in a basically stagnant condition: women sucked under, women paralyzed, chained, debased, and not honoured for being the bearers of humankind. That Hades rapes Persephone should be more than a bone of contention. It is what we have slogged through ever since. Women have a right over their own bodies – yes, but more importantly, women need to have control over when sex happens. It should be based on a woman’s choice, not a man’s urge.
The remainder of the book returns adroitly to an investigation of the female/male relationship, and the myriad forms of love. “How to Love an Old Dog Without Anthropomorphism or Sentimentality” ends with these burning lines:

Honour Pavlov’s dogs

whose tests proved (as if we did not know it before),
how easily we can make mechanisms of ourselves. (77)

Or, from “The Loneliness of Old Women”:

Their quick snatch-and-grab,
the moments of dignified silence or dark humming

when we wonder whether they are studying infinity,
or maybe absolute nothingness. (85)

The last half of the book unleashes the push and pull of a poet engaged with consequence, and the results gleam with her confidence.

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