Return from Erebus
by Julia McCarthy

Reviewed by Kath MacLean

As I read Julia McCarthy’s second book of poetry, Return from Erebus, I am struck by how much it reminds me of Gwendolyn MacEwen’s The Shadow-Maker. Like MacEwen, McCarthy explores mythologies, dreams, and stories of the ancient world – moving “with a sense of déjà vu” (62), that mythic pushing towards a celebration of the self, that place where we simply exist, where shadows meet, the past and the present mingle,

and [turn]
into something else
movement
relentless shuffle of shadows
like cards with blank faces
surrounded
by the grass on its side (1)

“I will never understand time,” she writes, “despite the fact I get / older I also stay the same” (61). There is a nothingness in the silence that allows the narrator to connect to the natural world, to hear the “lullabies” or “faint lunar notes” of trees (19), “listening to the stillness / of the sparrow’s flight / the small hollowness of bones / scratching the sky” (16). There “at the far edge of Pegasus, / . . . the sound of horses running / and running, or birds flying and flying or maybe a poem / circling like a great silence” (61) the narrator relentlessly searches for meaning, asking over & again, what is life & how do I live it?

Moving in and out of time energizes these poems: they do not stand still long enough to become sentimental, or risk catching what McCarthy so aptly calls “a form of fatigue” (15). Instead, they allow her just enough space to engage with the mythic underworld. Turning her gaze to ants “pallbearing their dead” (51), chanting crickets, larvae, worms, earwigs, beetles, flies, spiders & tarantulas, McCarthy hopes these creatures might reveal some clue big enough to unlock the secrets of the universe. When this doesn’t work, she turns to birds: sparrows, pigeons, doves, but especially crows who, returning from Erebus, “[polish] the armour / of their eyes,” and, landing in fields, blacken the limbs of pines with their presence. Here there is

. . . violence in the air  a revolution
turning before me  dividing the worlds

a reconnaissance of crows
crosses over  they land in the trees
like stabs (57)
Despite this interaction with the natural world, McCarthy’s poems come dangerously close to feeling narrow and overly self-conscious. “[Pulling] on words like an extra layer / of clothing” (25), or living in a forest where “the poem doesn’t know / day from night so time blurs” (17), what saves poems like “Behind the Poem,” “Mitochondrial Whisper,” “This Side of the Poem,” “Poem in Black,” “The White Forest,” or “Beside the Poem” from falling into cliché or feeling like tired workshop exercises are McCarthy’s unusual images that take the poem blissfully to somewhere I do not expect, as is the case in the last poem:

It’s poemless after all – like the scarred chest of a breastless woman kissed, the smile on her lips a crescent

. . . It’s the poetry behind the poem, so many times removed, so many times diluted with words so that this is nothing at all like what it means to say, nothing at all like what started it in the first place: the waw of a breath all around, rising and falling like a chest scarred with kisses. (73)

But the poems I admire most in this collection are the meditations – quiet, small poems that don’t depend so heavily upon standing in that timeless grey spot, or connecting with the creatures of the universe, or moving toward the light violently or passionately. Instead, these poems, scattered throughout the book’s four sections, focus simply on the stilled emotion of the moment – a lick in time one might call the poetic instance. In “Meditations on Ephemera: Self,” one of the finest poems in the collection, it is the emptiness, the silence “that spills from all things moving / toward their death // . . . / the high dry sound of crumbling / as the wind rearranges the day” (55) that transforms these words as text to something alive that breathes between the world as we know it & the world as it is, and settles into a place where one might focus & feel for a moment, unrushed, unprovoked, unaffected by life. McCarthy’s poems, calming, colourful, “[spill] / through cracks and [seep] under doors.” They “bob across the river,” to “whisper / like the slow leak of a world where / everything is brilliant and pained” (93). Like the work of Gwendolyn MacEwen, to whom one of the poems is dedicated, McCarthy’s verse “moves through me like water / and the colour of my life is changed” (93).

Kath MacLean’s recent work includes Kat Among the Tigers (University of Alberta Press, 2011), poetry based on the journals and correspondence of modernist Katherine Mansfield; Seed Bone & Hammer, a CD of performance poetry with Lane Arndt (2009), and There Was A Young Man (2009/10), a videopoem with Oops Design. Her award-winning collection For a Cappuccino on Bloor was published by Broken Jaw Press in 1997.