A ROVING SEARCH FOR PROVISIONS OF ANY KIND

a review by Kathryn Kirkpatrick

Rose McLarney. *Forage*. Penguin Books, 2019.

Rose McLarney frames the poems in her new collection with references to Virgil's agricultural hymn, *The Georgics* (29 BCE). It's a bold and evocative gesture, a choice, I'd argue, informed by McLarney's own rural origins in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. Yet, while her first collection, *The Always Broken Plates of Mountains* (2012), addresses the life and land of her homeplace, her second, *Its Day Being Gone* (2014), a National Poetry Award winner, explores subjects beyond Appalachia, including settings in Central America. *Forage*, as the roving search in the title suggests, is even less specifically place-based – ranging through suburbs and across state lines – even as its poems ruminate on the *idea* of place. In this larger context, McLarney's work might be said to display an Appalachian perspective, a standpoint informed by a regional culture independent enough to allow her narrators to assess the often rapacious values and practices of modernity. As McLarney herself has put the case, "Someone with the close focus of a local, who has loved a place intimately, should be able to take that way of looking wherever they want to."*

Georgics translates as "the facts of farming," and McLarney's opening and closing allusions alert us that the poems in this volume will engage with the complex history of the pastoral. Virgil's question (and by extension McLarney's) – "What need have I for loftier song to sing?" – addresses his decision to take as his poem's subjects the nurturing of olive and fruit trees, the tending of bees, the growing of grapes, the care of livestock, and the praise of what the earth provides. Though the pastoral came to be known in the west in the early modern period as an idealization of the rural with an emphasis on the care of flocks and herds, Virgil, as the son of farmers, gives us a more nuanced text with an up-close and detailed view of human labor on the land. Millennia later, McLarney ironically negotiates the accreted layers of the pastoral mode in "Seasonal," where "Neighbors have erected an inflatable pumpkin / out of which arises an inflatable dog." Rather than reading the stars to know when to sow and when to harvest, inhabitants of this suburban landscape know the change of seasons by "lawn decorations, the lawn mowers / trimming the football field." Yet the poem refuses nostalgia. Unapologetically equivocal, McLarney questions even Virgil's question by naming the racism of the agrarian Southern United States: "Why not such a field as subject for study, / rather than a farm's, which was never pastoral / for many, not in the land of cotton, not for those // who hoed and picked it?"

"Pastoral" examines head-on the question of who benefits from the romanticization of rural life by exposing what holds in place modernity's constructed version of the good life. Here, two of the main drivers of climate crisis – cattle and fossil fuel – appear anything but natural, the cattle represented, for example, as "black weight" holding in place land from which they've eaten away the native grasses. McLarney makes a point to show how the scene might be misread as bucolic: "Perhaps the impression is scenic because their necks are bent // with the downward stroke of feeding." The rest of the short poem draws attention metatextually to the poet's own constructions: "I could say the oil derricks / too are feeding, with enormous avian pecks." The poem lands with the combined voices of cattle and oil derricks – "Let us strike, again, the pose of plenty" – McLarney's language suggesting the violence inherent in striking this particular pastoral pose.

Elsewhere in *Forage*, McLarney takes on Virgil's attitude of instruction. The book's opening vignette of five lines unfolds in imperative voice: "In the subdivision, walk looking at the pavement / for spatterings and pits." The first half of the passage contains images of a wasted harvest, the squandered resources of a modern culture: "These from falling plums / no one will pick, not in this setting." With the mirroring and repetition of "this setting," the lines recommence with what the reader must do instead: "Walk looking down so as to know when to look up." The command manages to reground the sacred in the earth by suggesting that up above can only be known through intimate contact with what's below. And what is to be found when looking up in this passage is literally ripe fruit. Just so, in "American Persimmon," the narrator calls attention to another neglected harvest, ripe persimmons "[t]oo fragile" to transport, the speaker herself transported by eating them "right / on the roadside." In the context of poems bearing witness to the devastations of climate crisis, these squandered harvests become productively didactic, an element of Virgil's pastoral McLarney retains.

This language of instruction continues, aptly, in a poem

PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDY CARAWAN

ABOVE **A field viewed from a North Carolina highway near Wesser Bald**

KATHRYN KIRKPATRICK is Professor of English at Appalachian State University where she teaches creative writing, environmental literature, and Irish studies. She is the author of seven books of poetry, including *Unaccountable Weather* (Press 53, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013), *Our Held Animal Breath* (WordTech Editions, 2012), and *The Fisher Queen: New and Selected Poems* (Salmon Poetry, 2019), which received the Roanoke Chowan Poetry Prize from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Society.

ROSE MCLARNEY grew up in western North Carolina. Her poetry has appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Southern Review*, *New England Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Missouri Review*, and many other journals. She is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Auburn University and Co-Editor-in-Chief and Poetry Editor of the *Southern Humanities Review*.

* Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "A Conversation with Rose McLarney," *Cold Mountain Review* 45.2 (2017): web.