

Laura McCullough

IN THE CHURCH OF UNIVERSAL ANGUISH, ALL ARE WELCOME

When the congregation files in on Tuesday night or Thursday morning (never on Sunday, but on the days they have lost, like Monday, when they had to call in sick because they were so ill used in spirit and drunk with expectations they just had to sleep in on Sunday and call out on Monday and now drag themselves to church) they carry the one language they know in the fingers of a song, or the butterflies they attract to pitiful and magnificent gardens, or in the good hem (it is hard to sew a good hem by hand; it demands consistency), or the knowledge of the beauty of breasts or the small indentations behind knees. Whatever their language, they bring it in paper bags or paint cans or in their calluses or rough tongues or swollen feet. There will be no sermon and no choir. The doors will close. It will start. Biting their nails, someone will speak around nubbed fingers, and though no one will understand, they will all understand and begin to dance in place, and then the noise will start. Outside, trees will bend toward the door. Inside, wooden walls and pews will vibrate with the memories of having once been alive. No one will notice. No one will care. They are busy forgetting why they are there.

IN THE CURVE OF A FORK, VIOLENCE

"Hatred is something peculiar. You will always find it strongest and most violent where there is the lowest degree of culture." **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

The fish is already dead, so there is no reason not to eat it. At the counter, the woman stands in her apron. It is a handsome apron made by her son because she likes to cook and he wished to honor this. It was better than a lanyard or a mug, but it does say MOM across it. He did not embroider that. That would be too much. The father hugs her from behind. He squeezes one breast. She is annoyed, but also likes it. The fish is ready, she says. I hope you like it. He doesn't like fish. None of them do. They want to eat fish though because everyone says eating fish is good for you. This is a fancy fish, fancily prepared: there are thin cucumber slices stuck all over it like scales. They are all disgusted by the smell in the house, but the family gathers around the fabulous fish. They will take a picture of it. They will call the neighbors. Later, their best friends will have a fight: why don't you cook a meal like that, someone will say. It will not be a question. That night a small anger will take root, and soon the whole neighborhood will be riddled with it like vines taking over a tree. Someone will forget to take out the trash for several days, someone will ignore their lawn until it grows up enough to raise eyebrows. Someone's toilet paper roller will go unfilled for a week. This will be good for the children, though. One of them will discover mudpies. In the dirt under their fingernails, they will bring home a million unseeable beings. In a bedroom, a spider will make a deal: it will happily kill in order to be let live.

THE USELESSNESS OF WORSHIP

A bench. Two people. A woman and a man. Two men, two women, it doesn't matter; they are just two people. Their knees touch. Their knees ache. Their knees are full of water affected by the moon's cycles. Something is leaching out of their bones. Their joints are swelling. If you squint your eyes, you will see the two people's bodies begin to blur. They are like one soft canvas with two pictures painted on it that has been left in the rain in the park by an anonymous painter. The colors are running. Run by these people. Your eyes will be filled with moving light and grace. This is why people jog in parks, you know, to fill up their empty joints, but why would the painter abandon them? Sacrifice them to us this way? If someone doesn't determine the exact moment when the canvas should be brought back inside, it is possible the paint will be washed away and nothing will be left. Who should intervene?

Brief Bio:

Laura McCullough holds an MFA in Writing and Literature from Goddard College. She has been a New Jersey State Arts Council Fellow, won a Geraldine R. Dodge Scholarship to attend the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and was the 2005 Prairie Schooner Merit Scholar in Poetry at the Nebraska Summer Writers Workshop. She attended the 2005 Bread Loaf writers conference as a contributor. She has published poems widely in literary magazines and journals such as *Nimrod*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Gulf Coast*, *Nightsun*, *Iron Horse Quarterly*, *Boulevard*, *The God Particle*, *Poetry East*, *Confluence*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Word Riot*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, and others. Her first collection of poems, *The Dancing Bear*, was published in February, 2006 by Open Book Press with jacket blurbs by Stephen Dunn, Li-young Lee, and BJ Ward. She delivered a paper, "In Defence of Shelley: the New Science of Mirror Neurons and its Implications for a Theory of Poetics" at The Mid American's 2005 Winter Wheat Writing Festival in Bowling Green. She teaches full time at Brookdale Community College in NJ where she chairs the Visiting Writers Series.