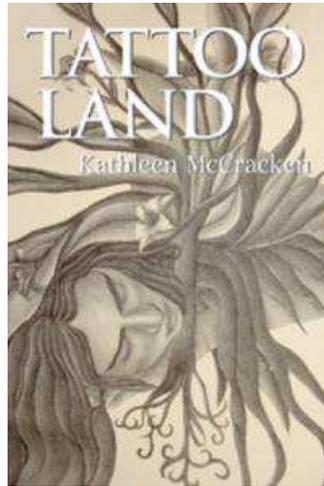


**KATHLEEN MCCrackEN'S TATTOO LAND:  
THE HUMAN MYSTERY**

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As the great convulsion known as the Romantic movement shifted, the gamut of cosmically melancholic gestures in poetry made way for what would become less theatrical, less accessible modernism, before melting almost entirely into amorphous post-modernism. Now that so much of it seems so far off from elemental, essential passions, poetry seems to have less of a serious hold on people's imaginations than it used to. Some twentieth-century poets did their best to adapt to the tightening restrictions on poetic seriousness, and assumed self-deprecating shapes: T.S. Eliot threw off the inky cloak à la Hamlet and donned instead the livery of an attendant lord; W.H. Auden's deadpan contention about poetry making nothing happen has been handled and passed around with some uncertainty since it rolled off the top-table at some Oxbridge banquet; and Seamus Heaney has since worried eloquently, and self-effacingly, about his time spent penning poems effete when he could have been using a spade and working the land like his farmer father.

But it is refreshing to return again to those rare poets who do not apologise at all for being poets. Shelley knew as well as anyone after him would that his soaring birds, blasting trumpets, surging and breaking waves, howling and driving storms, and erupting volcanoes would be, even to him sometimes, as well as to his harshest critics, questionable fragments, trickeries, fantasies and guesses leaving him bored, leaving him awake, and leaving him alone. He knew that an important part of what he wanted to say was neither resistant nor palpable, and that the unsettling absence of edges around it could push poets into insanity or send them back to the 'safer' regions of naturalistic description or correct politics. A totally committed poet, as Shelley was, and as Kathleen McCracken is, must tread a lonely path, and must witness life's most precious gems too 'often kicked away', as Coleridge would say, 'by the hurrying foot of the traveller on the dusty highroad of custom.'

I can imagine, say, the clever, hurrying steps of, say, Professor John Carey, the author of *What Good Are the Arts?* (2005), through McCracken's seventh collection, *Tattoo Land*, in which she sifts through many liminal experiences. Millers of public understanding like Carey are permanently on the lookout for the loosest grist, and only when it suits them are they responsive to the superior crackle of electricity from a waywardness as sensitised as McCracken's, which has

... something yet to say about the way  
fresh water finds a second life far underground  
or sea creatures routes to sanctuary  
without recourse to maps.

McCracken's cartographical otherness is characteristic of a platonic world-view for which the majority of any given generation since the

Enlightenment has always been keen to point out the absence of empirical evidence:

Here, give me a pencil, a brush.

Where in grey plumes it plummets I soar

into some god's gaping jaws, you will see. ('They Ask for  
Planes and Only Get Straw Wings')

Readers sympathetic to Charles Tomlinson's proverbial statement, 'seeing is believing', or Carlos Williams's 'no poetry but in things', will not experience the frisson substantiating the presence of poetry at its most essential in *Tattoo Land*, in which 'safety and risk, causes and effects / have abandoned to circumstance.' ('The Etymology of Animal')

In 'Flight', McCracken begins a hunt for openings through which she will be able to reveal being to consciousness. She does this by first aiming at a circumscription: '...body neither machine nor animal / nor sheer soul either'. Then she reaches for the fugitive essence of her tortured, fleeting, dreamlike existence, and somehow finds handholds to stay with it for a few lines:

rather a candent rain of molecules

oxidized, dextrous, wired, designed

for tracking roofbeams, skimming floorboards...

Since Plath, poets have been celebrated for their psychological acuity. Psychology is a scientific subject, and many readers feel more inclined to esteem writings (and themselves) when they are underpinned by science. Hence, much of the more recent wuthering done by emergent poetic writers has tended to take place on heights that may have been snow-capped once (like Shelley's Mont Blanc), but have long since been thawed through by psychology and psychiatry. The manically depressive Elizabeth Wurtzel

(*Prozac Nation*, 1996), or the obsessively compulsive Joanne Limburg (*The Woman Who Thought Too Much*, 2010), spring to mind. So too might Gresham's law.

More and more poetic writers have been insensitive to essential reality because it is intangible. Kathleen McCracken is emphatically not one of this vast majority. Her use of words amounts to the rough magic of an alienated mode of eloquence. Yes, her imagery is impressively up to date, and she is by no means lost in abstract realms, but her intelligent appreciation of the limbic system does not inhibit her pursuit of the marvellous. The 'note tapped fast in neon nerve text... ferrying the antidote of antidotes' ('Green Snake') is no less than the music of the spheres.

To borrow from the closing lines of 'Leaving Azure for Jasper', the poet is at work in the kingdom of her own bones. For McCracken, to work anywhere else would be tantamount to an unholy pact with the unimaginative, and the result would be the poet's absorption into the conventional arrangements of life and the collective acceptance of received materialism. In 'The Flying Bed', she keenly observes a metaphysical idea flourishing beyond transcribability, whereas a more typical contemporary writer would have withered such a thought within mundane, or even medical, dimensions. She envisions 'our lost children' and 'Their possible / selves dissolv[ing] in ether nets'.

In 'Burying the Raven', McCracken's openness to the flow of the unknown has a quality of daring and even a fierce independence about it:

Let him come back to me whole, in dreams stain  
my bleached mornings, undead familiar...

Let his scimitar beak inscribe on my emerging

skull the poetry of the stratosphere.

McCracken has travelled intuitively the dynamics of her 'irreducible heart' ('Burying the Raven'). She has kept the quintessence of the experiences.

In 'Snow Tea', the first, and longest, poem in the collection, matter and memory are insubstantial, yet fructifying, participants in life's pageant. The story of a daughter-father relationship could so easily have become personal and predictable, but from McCracken's 'tongue there [is] the aftertaste of some slow burn / a fuse rocketing off out into the dark, where the road is.'

Many of the images in *Tattoo Land* hang radiantly in the mind because McCracken deploys so instinctually what Thomas Traherne called 'the ministry of inner light', which is impossible to convert into discursive language without taking the invaluable unknown out of it. There is something about the lip-smacking texture of the language that makes the reader's journey through McCracken's metaphorical topography seem inevitable:

Rage nests in my lap, it has an obsidian beak  
and the wolf made of bone, convoluted pendant  
on a leather thong, leaps. ('Enter Tezcatlipoca')

The above lines, mumbo jumbo to a John Carey or a Charles Tomlinson, have something irresistible about them. Also, many readers will think they know already what McCracken has to say, but it is hard to think of a writer who can rehabilitate bedridden knowledge better:

Blade or card, justice conceals its actual shape  
it wears the shades of symmetry...

logical moons confound the simple

songlines laid in faith.

No language avails. I speak and undisguised

my figure cuts umbrae in dust. ('Leaving Azure for

Jasper')

*Tattoo Land* is, at the very least, lit up by a mode of wisdom that is fundamentally affectionate. However, there also appears in the collection, again and again, the trepidation around real revelation, and in each 'adrenalized flyby' ('Just the Sky') there are the authentic scorch-marks on each insight newly-won 'from the ghostbright rubble' ('Just the Sky').

Kathleen McCracken is an important poet because she is flaringly receptive to even the slightest possibility of the miraculous. With all its intellectuality, serenity and restlessness, *Tattoo Land* will kindle in readers an awed appreciation of the human mystery.