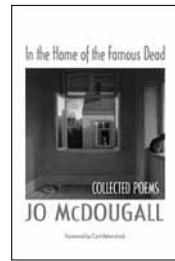


# Toward Peace

By Gary Dop

Book Review:

*In the Home of the Famous Dead: Collected Poems*, by Jo McDougall, University of Arkansas Press, 2015.



In the texture of a wooden goblet, you can feel the presence of the carver and the full weight of the original tree. In this way, Jo McDougall's poems are masterful carvings of narrative imagery, veining down to their deepest roots.

In her collected poems, *In the Home of the Famous Dead*, which spans five full-length collections of Southern and Midwestern life (1983–2010), McDougall displays her distinctive use of precision and simplicity. There isn't another poet writing today who produces this combination of narrative depth, imagistic punch, and compressed language.

In "A Picture" (*From Darkening Porches*, 1996), the speaker describes a photo in which her mother is "in the kitchen / singeing pin feathers over the gas range." This simple, clear image of the mother at work—the poem's most visually specific image—establishes the normal world, the domestic space. Then, as McDougall does in many poems, she moves beyond the mundane by revising the moment.

In the poem's second and final sentence, the speaker describes the other person in the photograph: "My brother is five and has not yet fallen / beneath the tractor." That quickly, we're told more than the photograph reveals. The boy will not be okay. Now the speaker of the poem matters; though absent from the photograph, she relays its prophetic depth.

No one is safe in McDougall's poems. Nearly every speaker and every character has encountered significant tragedy. In the collection's first poem, "On a Sunday Night in Hattiesburg" (*Women*

*Who Marry Houses*, 1983), a man flips through an address book, out of which “a woman half as tall as a thumbnail / hops out.” The man mistakes her for a silverfish and “scoots” her away; the next day, he learns that the woman, his friend, was killed by her husband. For the remainder of McDougall’s collection, it is as though the index file of suffering people stays open.

In the collection’s earliest poems, the suffering characters are rarely connected emotionally to the narrative presence; by the latter selections, the speaker, perhaps the poet, often writes of her own emotional suffering. Several of the collection’s most evocative poems center on the loss of an adult daughter. In “Visiting My Daughter” (*Satisfied with Havoc*, 2004), McDougall unfolds the fullness of a mother’s loss in a brief image:

For weeks  
I visited every day,  
drawn to that fresh rise,  
the blister of her grave.

These poems are not by any means morbid. McDougall’s poems become, instead, offerings of peace to our pain, her pain. While intimately acquainted with suffering, the poems are crafted to illustrate a kind of peace, a peace born of acceptance.

In “How We Live,” the poet presents one stanza of two sentences and two similes, all in 43 words:

Walking out of Food 4 Less,  
we see a car thrash over the curb,  
heading for us like a speedboat.  
The driver’s face  
is like the face of someone  
stepping back from a table saw,  
seeing that he has cut off his thumb.

Because the poem is so short, we never escape the guidance of the title, which drives our inquiry: How do we live? Do we live as the shoppers, those who are about to be hurt, or are we the driver, about to hurt others? We begin the poem, as in most of her poems,

in familiar, mundane territory, shopping at the local grocery; in an instant, the moment becomes elevated to the impending danger. With that, the poem is done. It is simple in language, no doubt, but not simple in its layered meanings, in its combination of imagery.

McDougall trusts her images, strips them of excess, and allows them their depth, which can spring upon the reader. The final simile implies that the driver, who is about to hurt others, is someone who has injured himself. *This*, all of it, is how we live, creatures exchanging hurt. For another poet, this would be a painful realization, but McDougall presents it without emotional judgement and without alluding to our frailty or our guilt. This is simply *how we live*.

In her consistency, McDougall guides us through *In the Home of the Famous Dead* toward acceptance of ourselves and our experiences—the poetry need not say this directly; it embodies it. These poems are at peace with the human paradigm. McDougall carves each poem into a new chalice from which we partake the fullness of both pain and peace.