

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

Evolution by Eileen Myles

Grove Press, New York, 222 pages, \$23.00.

Review By Ed Meek

Eileen Myles is the rarest of birds: a celebrity poet. She is well-known, partly by her associations. She hung out with Ginsberg and Berrigan back in the sixties, and in the recent past, she was girlfriends with Jill Soloway, the writer and producer of *Transparent* (a character on the show was modeled on Myles). A couple of her poems were quoted on the show. Myles wrote an essay about getting paid to write poetry in which she talks about having to ask for money for the poetry used on the show. She also talks about selling a poem in exchange for a room at an inn in North Carolina. Good deal.



Although Myles was born in Cambridge and went to Catholic school in Arlington, she is a New Yorker by temperament and she has that openness in her writing that you will experience if you happen to engage a New Yorker in conversation. A recent piece in the *New York Times* by Irish transplant Maeve Higgins lamented that in America, there's no small talk. What she meant was in New York. New Yorkers will jump right in and tell you anything. Myles' writing is like that. In some cases, this is good because the writer appears both vulnerable and likeable. In other case it can get self-indulgent and narcissistic.

I became an Eileen Myles fan when I read her poem "An American Poem" in which she responds to people in New York, who, upon learning she is from Boston, want to know if she is related to the Kennedys. In the poem, Myles writes as if she is indeed, a reluctant member of the Kennedy clan:

*I was born in Boston in
1949. I never wanted
this fact to be known, in
fact I've spent the better
half of my adult life
trying to sweep my early
years under the carpet
and have a life that
was clearly just mine
and independent of
the historic fate of
my family.*

She goes on from there and ends the poem like this:

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*It is not normal for
me to be a Kennedy.
But I am no longer
ashamed, no longer
alone. I am not
alone tonight because
we are all Kennedys.
And I am your President.*

So it is witty and very informal but fresh and inventive. If you haven't read the rest of the poem, it is available for free online at the Poetry Foundation site.

Chelsea Girls, a fiction/memoir by Myles is also worth reading, particularly if you are from the Boston area. She starts it with this story about her friend being arrested at a party. Myles chases the arresting officer out of the house and jumps on his back. When she is handcuffed, she tells the police, you can't arrest me, I'm a poet.

I have a copy of Myles' new book, *Evolution*, two hundred pages of mostly poems and a couple of essays. One of the fears of poets and I imagine, all writers, is that you'll reach a certain age and you'll run out of gas; like an athlete, you just won't have it anymore. Stephen King once said that the problem with being famous is that you'll drink your own Kool-Aid and believe everything you write is good because you wrote it. In *Evolution*, Myles suffers from both of these problems. Here's the beginning of the first poem in the book:

*Something
unearthly
about
today
so I buy
a diet coke &
a newspaper
a version of "me"
something
about me on the
earth & its sneakers
& feeling like
the earth's furniture*

Is this poetry or a journal entry? Is it interesting? She is writing about being famous I guess. Five pages later the poem ends:

*....And
something
new starts
up in
my building
a different
sound.*

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Myles is using the line breaks with one, or two word lines to create surprise but really there just isn't much going on here. I was looking forward to reading *Evolution* but I could have made better use of my time by say, cleaning my room or taking a nap. You just never know what you'll run into today when it comes to poetry. There is no reliable magazine or journal or website that you can go to and find good writing. I suppose it is like this in any given age. It is only after we're dead and our descendants have sifted through the rubble that they will figure out who the Emily D and Walt W of our age was.