

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

**Mark Decarteret, lesser case.**  
**Nixes Mate Books. 2021. 86pp. \$18.00**

*Review by Ruth Hoberman*

The bio in lesser case tells us little about Mark Decarteret: only that he “has appeared next to Charles Bukowski in a lo-fi fold out, Pope John Paul II in a high-test collection of Catholic poetry, Billy Collins in an Italian fashion coffee table book, and Mary Oliver in a 3785 page pirated lit-trap.” More traditional accounts online note that Decarteret has been the poet laureate of Portsmouth New Hampshire (2009-2011), has worked at Water Street Books in Exeter, and is widely published—in anthologies; in journals such as AGNI, Boston Review, Chicago Review, Poetry East, and Third Coast; and in six previous collections.



But Decarteret’s elusive “About the Author” is revealing in its way, evoking him through juxtaposition rather than as a biographical self. The poems in lesser case push against any easy distillation of meaning or authorial presence. In Decarteret’s previous book, For Lack of a Calling, punctuation, capital letters, and syntax operated more or less conventionally. Here, in contrast, the upper case is reserved for “I” and Jesus, there are no periods, and the syntax is sometimes difficult to parse—as in the book’s title: lesser than what? should it be “lower case”? if not, what kind of case?

The book’s first poem, “front,” while providing no answers to these questions, invites the reader in, to a place

*where my shaking finds company  
more light has gone bad  
& yet the weary recognitions  
always happily remain*

If I take the title as continuous with the first line, the poem situates me at the front of this book, keeping the speaker company as he shakes—whether from age, illness, or uncertainty—a shaking that has replaced an earlier more “resolute” self:

*first we had bed creaks  
& all sorts of hunger  
then reality sat in even  
more radiant aberrations.*

I love those oxymoronic “radiant aberrations,” with their celebration of weirdnesses and mistakes which, given the poem’s positioning, we then expect to encounter in the poems that follow. Indeed, the phrase “reality sat in” (not “set in” as we might expect) hints at strangenesses to come.

One strangeness is the poems’ relation to the natural world. In a 2018 interview, Decarteret described the nature-poems in For Lack of a Calling as “eco-laments” about “living in a time and place where [nature

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has] almost run its course in some way.” In lesser case he rejects the poetic praise of nature as self-serving. Take, for example, “I have a minor in visual arts,” which ridicules his own past use of imagery:

*now those starlings I once rated  
an 8 are not even worth  
throwing one’s latest voice—  
that shock of hearing one  
making a lesser case for oneself*

Perhaps the “lesser case” is their and our inevitable stance in a fallen world, where manufacturing tropes (“what’s not to liken to anything else?” he asks) brings us no closer to anything and leaves the poet “wobbly as a calf/licked well past relevance.” As the speaker notes in “inhabitants,” the poem that follows, “we won’t ever be/worthy of this house.”

When Decarteret allows himself to indulge in descriptive language, it’s wonderful: in “some say (seed),” for example, a cardinal comes “crashing the scrub/singing & stammering/cross-tongued” amid “branches signing/their iciest of scripts—/a blanket of wet/& then chatter, exaltation.” But the exaltation is dashed in the next stanza: “this response to be cashed in—/an image in shambles again/like a berry’s taxed memory.” Decarteret undercuts easy pleasures, opting always for the “lesser case.”

A related strangeness is Decarteret’s harsh stance toward his own role as poet. In “the last ever ode to one’s pencil” the speaker lambastes himself:

*even w/the sky full of sun, unflawed  
I’ll waffle or low-ball, tell you lies*

*go what you’ve come to call  
post-modernist on you*

*try to sell you on the same sparrow  
I saw yesterday atop the potted flowers*

Like the “berry’s taxed memory” in “some say (seed),” the sparrow has been compromised by human greed, and the poet’s words are complicit. Indeed, with his “lab coat & paper hat,” balling up “more poems into asterisks\*,” the poet sounds downright ludicrous.

That asterisk\*, though, is a key pivot, as it sends us to an actual footnote: “please know if I’m lost on you, stolen & sold-off-in-lots, that my line about love was about a lot more than just votes.” Asterisk: a quasi-star that sends us toward additional annotations and qualifications—away from, rather than toward the source of light. Or love.

There is a presence here that counterbalances the poet’s “lesser case”: the subtle, complicated invocation of Christianity as a source of transcendence. Various poem titles—missal, host, lord god bird—invite us to think in these terms. And various poems not only suggest that humanity on its own is a sorry thing but hint at an alternative. In “rather,” for example, the speaker has come to hate “the velvety kings/we’d become/thinking ourselves/all but invisible/as our hair was combed/back in the

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mirror/by yet another." Another what? Some presence we've preferred to ignore?

I'll conclude with a final strangeness, Decarteret's poem "the kingfisher," with its homage to Charles Olson's 1949 poem "Kingfishers." Critics argue over what Olson was getting at in his poem. Olson himself, in his 1950 essay on "projective verse" argued for a poetry that was kinetic, more speech act than discourse, and thus resistant to paraphrase: "the conventions which logic has forced on syntax must be broken open as quietly as must the too set feet of the old line." Decarteret's poems have a similar resistance to being pinned down, a similar pressure on the reader to follow their short lines and uncertain syntax into self-questioning and suspense. "What does not change/is the will to change," Olson's poem opens, a line equally relevant to lesser case. But even as Decarteret quotes Olson several times in "the kingfisher," he does so with a difference—shifting from several to a single kingfisher in his title, and extending his poem beyond Olson's final, inconclusive line, "I hunt among stones." Decarteret concludes:

*I hunt among stones  
where the shadows have long been  
trying to enter their side of our story*

Or, as the speaker says in "lord god bird," "if one holds their/place long enough/one will begin/to see the ghosts/burning their way/back into things."