



**WHAT I SAW**  
poems by Jack McCarthy  
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*Review by Michael Todd Steffen*

*The Value of Discouragement in  
WHAT I SAW, poems by Jack McCarthy*

Every now and then the question pops up: What's the difference between poetry and prose?

One answer has occurred to me: It's not rare for writers of prose to produce long narratives. Novel after novel appear regularly on the New Release shelves in the libraries and the bookstores.

Reading Jack McCarthy's poems from his new book *WHAT I SAW* raised that old elusive question for me, not that McCarthy has attempted a continuous long narrative poem. Yet the poems do show a primary interest on the poet's behalf in telling stories, in an impressive variety of narrative registers, from (*MAGNUM ITER*) the theme of the initiation of young men to manhood through the spiritual-demonic character of a never-to-please Latin teacher, to (*THE ACCOMODATION: ADAM'S RECOLLECTION*) the amplification of our Biblical etiological parents, Adam and Eve, discussing sexual desire with unexpected maturity and candor, poison to the Serpent absent in this version.

On opening McCarthy's book, the reader will recognize that this is different poetry, evidently in the allowance of the length of the poems, most of them running 3 to 5 pages, a tasking yet inviting challenge to readers of contemporary poetry whose expectations probably tend toward poems of half a page, if not shorter in our media-inundated culture. So in a very real sense, McCarthy is formally bold in his patience to use the undetermined paragraph strophe, foregoing obvious concentration on word play and arrangement, to set out in relatively simple language the elements of his narratives:

*We were ripe for intimidation  
and the more inimitable intimidator  
of all was Mister Hatch. He taught  
Latin and his classroom was right  
next to the marble portal inscribed –  
Huc venite pueri ut viri sitis  
"Come this way, boys, that you may be men."  
The road to manhood ran past Mister Hatch.*

Galway Kinnell in his master work of elegies, *THE BOOK OF NIGHT-*

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MARES, excused his composition, with a stroke of humility, as “cut-up prose.” While reading McCarthy’s narratives,

I could hear the acutely technical reader of poetry wonder, Why doesn’t he just write these anecdotes in prose paragraphs? (Though I’m 100% behind the poet’s answer: Because I conceived of writing this in lines of poetry.)

McCarthy’s lines do convey a sense of purpose: the delivery of one definite idea or image at a time, producing an overall clarity which many poets don’t so much strive for.

But these are not naïve poems. McCarthy bears a strong sense of the value of discouragement and everyday mishaps, failures and disappointments. Like Shakespeare, he is not about to vaunt the beauty of his mistress’s eyes as comparable to the brilliance of the sun. He uses ordinary instances in an unassuming way to relate elusive depths of wisdom, such as the peril of doubt and hesitation:

*I was heading south on Route 97  
and in the opposite lane I saw  
a chipmunk dart out in front  
of an oncoming car.*

*He had room to make it,  
and the pickup truck in front of me  
was already hitting his brakes  
to let him cross our lane*

*but when the chipmunk  
turned his head and saw the pickup  
he hesitated one fatal second,  
then spun and darted back toward home*

*right under the left front wheel of  
the northbound car. (CHIPMUNK BOOTY CALL)*

The subtle prosodic elements in the simple narrative make for great pleasure. The verb tenses in the first two lines, past progressive and past simple, depict a setting for the event and then the physical and psychological development of it. I like the equation of the victim and the agent of distraction, chipmunk and pickup, both spondees, words of dually stressed quantity, of syllabic identity *i* and *u*. And then the semiotic possibilities of the word of distraction, pickup. Was this just an ordinary four-wheeled pickup, or could it have been a different type of ‘pickup’ that brought about the scene? Is the simple story an allegory of some other sort of pickup?

The run-on line-breaks, or enjambments, moreover – out in front/of an oncoming car / under the left front wheel of/ the northbound car) aptly convey the suddenness of what happened.

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This little parable is at once terrible and trivial, poignant and passing, like life itself. McCarthy is masterful to be so undifficult in his manner with language and so profound in his suggestions of meaning. Like a wealthy man of fable in the disguise of a beggar testing passersby, these poems risk detaining you with their casual, gradual and quiet presentation, yet will reward handsomely for your patience and consideration.