

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



In 1924, the [Virginia State] Colony became formally enmeshed with the Eugenics movement and began sterilizing, without their consent, patients it deemed “defectives.” When, in 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Virginia sterilization laws in Buck v. Bell, eugenic sterilizations became an even more common practice. From the mid-1920s through the mid-1950s, more than 7,000 people were sterilized in Virginia, often without their knowledge.

—foreword, *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*

After All (Everything)

this morning I wake up and for a moment I think
the visions have vanished

then I realize everything is shaded green the visions have alit
like luna moths

around the dormitory on the doorframe and the table and the face

of every sleeping girl when I blow out my breath they travel
noiselessly into the air

I pass an hour like this this is what no one tells you about suffering

sometimes you would not give it up for all the world

Molly McCully Brown¹

☞ Reflections

Molly McCully Brown will visit St. Stephen's this Thursday to read from her award-winning collection, *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*, which has garnered praise and attention from across the nation. (Brown was featured recently on NPR's *Fresh Air* in an interview with Terry Gross which you can listen to [here](#).²) Part of what makes the subject of

¹ “After All (*Everything*)” by Molly McCully Brown from *The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded*, Persea Books. Used by permission.

² www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/08/14/543362834/poet-imagines-life-inside-a-1910-institution-that-eugenics-built

the book so compelling is its geographic proximity to Richmond—a couple hours on the road will lead you right to what is now named the Central Virginia Training Center in Amherst County, Virginia, which serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It opened in 1910 as a government-run residential hospital employing eugenicist-doctors; it will close in 2020 as part of a settlement agreement with the Department of Justice. In short, Brown’s collection of poems is a harrowing and intimate exploration of that place—the estrangement, the isolation, the cruelty, and, as Laura Eve Engel of the Oxford American writes, “the ugliness in our identity...the lives upon which our lives were built.”

I had a difficult time choosing only one poem to highlight in anticipation of Molly McCully Brown’s visit; but the poem printed here, the final poem of the book, speaks to what I have come to admire most about her work: an unflinching stare-down into the heart of pain in order that we might be redeemed by it. It is not as simple as making something beautiful out of suffering or finding hope in wreckage—though that is certainly part of it—rather, the ability of a poem to restore dignity to voiceless victims feels like not only an artistic gift, but a gift of human decency, too. I especially love the spaciousness of this poem—it seems to echo in form that image on the page of visions vanishing and alighting “like luna moths.”

Born with cerebral palsy and raised but a few miles from the Colony, Brown has written about her life and about the personal and political complexities of this country’s attitude toward disability. She is able to imagine the lives of the Colony’s victims with a particularly haunting intimacy and empathy, recognizing that had she been born 50 years earlier, she too may have been a resident. In her essay, “Something’s Wrong With Me,” Brown writes, “Each child with a disability will always know too early the dictionary of defects and treatments essential to her life. But I want for them all to have, too, another language with which to talk about their bodies and their lives: one of pride and complexity, intimacy and particularity, survival and triumph.” It is through this lens, I think, and with this kind of humanity, humility, and generosity, that Brown is able to, as one critic writes, “listen to the callers from a dark past and take on their anguish.”

I can’t help but comment, too, on the coincidence (if that is the right word) of the timing of this poem during Lent—a season associated with sacrifice, with “giving up,” with wilderness, denial, steadfastness, faith. That last line, “sometimes you would not give it up for all the world” has literally kept me up at night. The “it” in this line refers to suffering and when one part of me thinks, *wouldn’t we give up our suffering if we could?*, another part of me answers, *it’s true; I would not give up my suffering*. It is our suffering, I realize—our desires, our fears, our doubts, our moments of mercy and grace—that affirms our *being*. Of course I would not “give up” my feelings, even if they are sometimes tormented, nor would I sacrifice my continued being, my very existence, for anything. This poem reminds me that it is through suffering we learn and from which we heal. I recall what Linda Gregg, a poet I admire, once wrote: “we would not sacrifice so much for love if love were only about pleasure.”

But how complicated this gets! The connotations of “giving up” have as much to do with sacrifice as with resignation. To remember that the victims of the Colony gave nothing up willingly or even knowingly, were *forced* into a kind of sacrifice, is nearly an unbearable fact. I

find myself clinging to the moments of grace that Brown is able to imagine, perhaps the single merciful thing to come out of these horrific sterilization surgeries: “At first, / all hands become / suddenly gentle. // More people touch you /in a single day than have touched you /in all the hours of the last, dry year” (from her poem, “The Cleaving”). Indeed, the speakers of these poems are estranged not only from their own bodies—their own decision-making, their own identities, their futures—but also from the entire outside world.

I close with this excerpt from an interview published in *The Adroit Journal*, which I think speaks not only to art’s possibility, but also to its necessity, perfectly articulated by Molly McCully Brown: “The best poems...are acts of discovery, and we never discover anything if we aren’t willing to wander toward what seems difficult, or unknown, or fraught, or tangled, the edges of the map where there might be dragons.”

I hope you’ll join us on Thursday to hear for yourself the unique power of these poems.

✧ About the poet

Molly McCully Brown lives in Little Rock, Arkansas, and is the 2017-2018 Jeff Baskin Writers Fellow at The Oxford American magazine. She is, in her own words, “...at work on a collection of essays about disability, poetry, religion, and the American South that explores the relationship between the body and that intangible other we sometimes call the soul.” She grew up in Central Virginia, only a few miles from the grounds of the Virginia State Colony, and lives with a neurological disorder, cerebral palsy. Had she been born just 50 years earlier, Brown may very well have been one of the residents of the Colony but, “by some accident of luck or grace / some window less than half a century wide, / it is my backyard but not what happened / to my body—” (from Brown’s poem, “The Central Virginia Training Center, formerly The Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded”). She is a graduate of Bard College at Simon’s Rock, Stanford University, and the University of Mississippi, where she received her MFA in poetry. Her work has appeared in such literary journals as *Gulf Coast*, *Ninth Letter*, *Pleiades*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Colorado Review*; her essay “Bent Body, Lamb,” which appeared in the journal *Image*, discusses her life with cerebral palsy, her conversion to Catholicism, and the death of her twin sister at birth. In 2016, that essay became the journal’s most widely read piece.

Molly McCully Brown will read at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church on Thursday, March 15, at 7 p.m. Her reading is free and open to the public and will be followed by a reception and book signing.



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