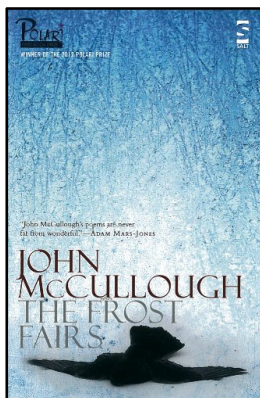


Dallas J. Baker

Cold Fusion and Cloud Sex: Review of John McCullough's *The Frost Fairs*



John McCullough
The Frost Fairs
Salt Publishing
ISBN: 9781844713981
Paperback, 53pp. 2010.

It isn't often that I truly love a collection of poems. Poetry is such a personal, sort of deeply idiosyncratic thing that it is rare that I find a poet who speaks directly to the heart of my own poetic sensibility. Not that my own poetic ear is very advanced. But I know what I like in poetry and I won't read more than a few pages of something that doesn't grab me straight away. There have been many flirtations with many books of poems, many momentary encounters, but rarely a fully-fledged embrace. To date, there are just a handful of poets who really "do it for me". Most of them are dead: Walt Whitman, Gertrud Stein, Federico García Lorca , Allen Ginsberg. The usual

(queer) criminals. I was pleasantly surprised then to discover that John McCullough's *The Frost Fairs* totally charmed me. I've read it not just once, but thrice; and each reading reveals more of the beauty and cleverness of these poems.

John McCullough has had two poetry chapbooks published: *Cloudfish* (Pighog 2007) and *The Lives of Ghosts* (Tall-Lighthouse 2008). Even though *The Frost Fairs* is McCullough's debut book-length collection of poems, he has already garnered a reputation as a poet with an exalted vision and a gift for the music of syntax. He is also known for a gift with poetic structure and the expressive qualities of language.

From the opening poem, 'Sleeping Hermaphrodite', it is clear that this is a poet who is formally deft and in command of his craft. Every line is perfectly balanced in terms of structure. More impressive still, the images evoked by each successive line draws the reader further and further into an intimate scene; but not as a voyeur, as a welcome witness to the mixed longing and satisfaction of two lovers entangled in bed sheets.

The Frost Fairs is a diverse range of poems with language that is vibrant and oftentimes musical. There is also a wry sense of humour that enlivens many of the poems. Some are a strange mixture of the mystical, the quirky and the erotic. Take this passage as an example:

I could trill like a starling myself, bless everything
outside and within this case of human fireworks:
the silver-chained lads probing Burger King bags
like lucky dips; the Tannoy woman who is Our Lady,
surely, with a mobile altar of Ribena and Coke;
the suits with Guardians hiding Heat magazine.¹

Many of the poems in *The Frost Fairs* explore love and desire. They vary in setting from ancient Alexandria to contemporary Britain yet always have a sense of the past, of history and the passage of time. There is also a sense of an enduring human presence in these places, which, for me, is often reflected in the image of the sea and the sky.

McCullough's treatment of the sky evoked for me that almost indescribable experience we have when we are deeply in love or enmeshed in desire. That experience in which all sense of separateness, of walls between us and the one we love or yearn for, dissolves only to suddenly reform again. He makes this quite explicit when he writes:

Cloud sex—or merging and changing—
complicates matters because it makes
it hard to remember who they are
or were. This is why clouds sound a low note
after birds plunge through them:
for that one moment they are distinct.²

One of the strengths of this collection is its immediacy. With practically every line there is an evocation of place, of sights and sounds. This evidences McCullough's great skill and attention to detail. Of course, many poets are skilled in evoking sensory experience, but where McCullough stands out from the crowd is his capacity to evoke feeling. Few poets have this ability. It requires more than skill, it requires a depth of understanding and an openness of heart that is uncommon, even among poets.

It is this very human or empathic quality that really gives life to the poems and creates points of access and understanding for readers. *The Frost Fairs* is a collection filled with beauty and humour from a poet whose poetic ear is equalled by his gift for empathy. Reading it once will not be enough.

For more information about John McCullough go to:

<http://www.johnmccullough.co.uk/>

Author Bio

Dallas J. Baker (also known as Dallas Angguish) is a writer and academic based in Australia. He has been published in a number of journals - *Lodestar Quarterly*, *Retort Magazine*, *Bukker Tillibul*, *TEXT* - as well as in a number of anthologies, including *Dumped* (1999), *Bend, Don't Shatter* (2004), *Sensual Travels* (2013) and the US edition of *Dumped* released in 2003. *America Divine: Travels in the Hidden South*, A collection of his travel pieces set in the South of the USA, was published in 2011 to very positive reviews. For more info: www.dallasangguish.com

Citation: Baker, D. J. 2012. 'Cold Fusion and Cloud Sex: Review of John McCullough's *The Frost Fairs*', *Polari Journal*, 6 (October 2012), www.polarijournal.com/resources/Baker-Cold-Fusion.pdf (accessed <insert date>).

¹ From 'Reading Frank O'Hara on the Brighton Express' page 4.

² From 'Tropospheric' page 45.