

Melody Wilson

Beautiful Everyday

Jane C. Miller. *Canticle for Remnant Days*. Pond Road Press 2023.

Danusha Laméris identifies poets with the ability to elevate life into art as Bards of the Everyday. Laméris includes in this classification poets such as Marie Howe, Ruth Stone, and Dorianne Laux. In her debut poetry collection, *Canticle for Remnant Days*, Jane C. Miller follows in their footsteps with effortless imagery and crisp detail that transforms life into poetry.

In four roughly chronological sections, *Canticle for Remnant Days* examines slices of life we recognize but don't often talk about. For example, in "Changing Room at Alexander's, 1964," Miller places us in a collective changing room, where women "struggled // in and out of clothes . . . boobs overflowing // cone brassieres." Time and place are set: a department store in middle class America before the sexual revolution. The speaker tries not to look, "but they were / everywhere in triplicate." The use of imagery is economical, exact, and enjoyable. But then the speaker wishes she had "chanced upon" these shoppers not as women but "Selkie seals unzipped," a breathtakingly beautiful turn. A heartbeat after the speaker identifies the "budget shoppers" (now selkies) to be "carefree as myth" she recognizes the truth of the situation. That they are "looking for glamour" in the dressing room, is true, but they do so using "the eyes / of men, the light harsh, unforgiving."

In these and other poems, Miller takes us into the past and lights it up with insightful imagery and a real penchant for extended metaphor. For example, "Rule of Jaw" establishes the speaker's relationship with her son, beginning, "Everyone hated Chloe, the terrier we bought / to teach you how to love." The dog eventually bites the child and must be rehomed, though it's hard to miss the speaker's alliance of the dog with the boy, who is also difficult to understand, a boy "who didn't yet speak / . . . [his] blunt pointer a question, an answer, / command, until five years in." She admits her fear of misunderstanding her son by highlighting the misunderstanding of the dog. "We failed to see [Chloe's] / spunk as runt anger the small/cannot live without." "Rule of Jaw" also tells us the speaker's son has chosen "a hermit/as [his] patron saint," indicating that the speaker is concerned about her son's loneliness.

"My Son Gone to War" addresses that loneliness, beginning "I fight your four-cornered screen . . ." and goes on to acknowledge

the evolution of the son's video game addiction from the benign *Super Mario* to "this *Call of Duty* where you die // and die again, when it's life / I want to keep you in" This life is tempered by his then-diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome and "My Son Gone to War" begins to illustrate it by contemplating her son's birth, his newborn hands "tight-fisted as fiddlehead ferns, / hung heavy as bell clappers // as you grew." Again, beautiful imagery, perfect use of metaphor, a subject many readers deal with daily.

Mothering permeates *Canticle for Remnant Days*, not only as it applies to the speaker's son but to her daughter as well. For example, in "Saving What Struggles from Sidewalk to Grass," when she observes a "snakelet," who despite being without "a mother / knows what to do." Once, again, Miller forges the gap between image and subject, tying the snake crossing the sidewalk alone to her daughter effortlessly asking, "Doesn't every mother / choose the one she can ignore?" Choices have been made raising these two children, and in the poem "Margot," the speaker demonstrates another bittersweet truth of motherhood. When her daughter decides to live abroad, she observes that "every breath [has been] a wave / goodbye." She uses the daughter's visit to the caves of Lascaux to wish that she herself "could visit the past," her uterus swelling to hold her daughter in utero "wav[ing] at us / from your pod in the ultrasound."

The final poem in the book, "Canticle for Remnant Days," is a meditation on time worthy of careful attention, but the most poignant treatment of time in the book might be "Weight Watchers on Tuesday." The speaker notices the topography of breakfast as she cooks for her husband who is leaving for Buenos Aires. She sees in her fry pan the shape of Africa, recalls the "Singapore orchid [that] survives / despite my negligence," and as her partner prepares to leave home, the speaker meditates on reminders of distance all over the house, then admits that she hopes her husband also "believe[s] we still live in wonder; / romance, a mirage so close we can / climb the stairs to reach it."

Canticle for Remnant Days elevates life into art using apt imagery and extended metaphors to transport the reader from their own reality into Jane Miller's. This collection gives voice to experience and memory all of us carry while engaging us with some we have not. It is a beautiful book of the everyday and a meaningful read.

