

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Heather McHugh**

**- 32 poems -**

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## **Heather McHugh (20 August 1948)**

Heather McHugh is an American poet

### Life

Poet, translator, and educator, was born in San Diego, California, to Canadian parents, John Laurence, a marine biologist, and Eileen Francesca (Smallwood). They raised McHugh in Gloucester Point, Virginia. There, her father directed the marine biological laboratory on the York River. She began writing poetry at age five and claims to have become an expert "eavesdropper" by the age of twelve. At the age of seventeen, she entered Harvard University. Her most notable work was *Hinge & Sign: Poems 1968-1993*, which won the Bingham Poetry Prize of the Boston Book Review and the Pollack-Harvard Review Prize. The New York Times Book Review named this work the Notable Book of the Year.

McHugh was elected as Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1999. She teaches at the University of Washington and in the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers.

In 2009, she was awarded the MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" for her work.

### Biography

McHugh has published seven books of poetry, one collection of critical essays, and four books of translation. She has received numerous awards and critical recognition in all of these areas, including several Pushcart Prizes. Her poems resist contemporary identity politics. She also rejects categorization as a confessional poet, although she studied with [Robert Lowell](http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-lowell/) during the time when that described his work.

Her primary education included parochial school, where she credits Sister Cletus's emphasis on grammar as an early influence. As a student at Yorktown High School in Arlington, Virginia, a teacher advised McHugh against applying to Radcliffe, making her determined to get in. She entered the college at age 16 and graduated with honors, receiving her B.A. from Harvard in 1970. She entered graduate school at the University of Denver in 1970, having already published a poem in *The New Yorker*. She began teaching in graduate school, was a Fellow at Cummington Community for the Arts in 1970, and received the Academy of American Poets prize in 1972. After earning her M.A. in 1972, McHugh received MacDowell Colony fellowships in 1973, 1974, and 1976. In 1974, she also received her first of three National Endowment for the Arts grants in poetry. McHugh was the

poet-in-residence at Stephens College in Missouri between 1974 and 1976; she worked as an associate professor of English at the State University of New York at Binghamton between 1976 and 1982.

At 29, she completed a manuscript of poems titled *Dangers* (1976), that was a winner of Houghton Mifflin Co.'s New Poetry Series Competition. McHugh's first book of poems was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1977. After a second National Endowment for the Arts grants in poetry in 1981 and a Yaddo Colony fellowship in 1980, her second book, titled *"A World of Difference: Poems"* (1981), was published by Houghton Mifflin. McHugh was 35. During this time, she was a visiting professor at Warren Wilson College in the M.F.A. Program for Writers in North Carolina between 1980 and 1985; at Columbia University in New York between 1980 and 1981; and at the University of California in Irvine in 1982. During 1987, she was the Holloway Lecturer at the University of California in Berkeley. While the top journals published her poetry, some poems were also anthologized in prestigious collections, and top critics called her observations astute and noteworthy as well as courageous.

That same year *World of Difference* came out, her first book of translations was published. Her poetry translation of Jean Follain's French work is titled *D'après tout: Poems by Jean Follain* (1981) for *Lockhart Poetry in Translation*. In 1984, she became the Milliman Writer-In-Residence at the University of Washington in Seattle. The residency was initiated that same year, and McHugh has filled the position since then. During the 1980s, McHugh worked a great deal on translation, partly due to her alliance with her co-translator and husband, who teaches at the University of Washington. Her translation work includes well-known international poets like [Valéry](http://www.poemhunter.com/paul-valery/) and [Rilke](http://www.poemhunter.com/rainer-maria-rilke/), as well as poets like Romanian Jewish poet of the Holocaust [Paul Antschel](http://www.poemhunter.com/paul-celan-paul-antschel/), who wrote under the pseudonym Paul Celan.

Her skill in translating literature by Slavic writers became even more evident with the publication of *Because the Sea Is Black: Poems of Blaga Dimitrova* (1989) featuring the work of a Bulgarian poet and novelist. Dimitrova, one of the best-loved writers in her homeland, became the first democratically elected vice-president of her country after the fall of communism. McHugh translated Dimitrova's poems for *Wesleyan Poetry in Translation* (published by the Wesleyan University Press) with her husband, Nikolai Popov, a scholar whom she married in 1987. (Her first marriage in 1967 ended in divorce.) McHugh sometimes uses the name Niko Boris Popov McHugh when writing about her husband. Popov, an expert in Bulgarian and knowledgeable in the German and French languages, also helped to translate Celan's poetry, which was always written in German.

In 1986, McHugh received a Bellagio grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. She published two more books of poetry during the 1980s: *To the Quick* (1987) and *Shades* (1988). In the late '80s, she also participated in an art project with Tom Phillips, resulting in a collectible book *WHERE ARE THEY NOW?: The Class of Forty-Seven* (1990). It consists of thirty images by Phillips which are interpreted in poems by McHugh and then further modified by Phillips. One of Phillips's images, "A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel," from the collaboration is appropriately used on the cover of McHugh's essay collection *Broken English: Poetry and Partiality* (1993).

In 1994, *Hinge & Sign: Poems 1968-1993*, a collection of 24 new poems and selected poems from her five earlier books, was published by the Wesleyan University Press. The book won both the Harvard Review/Daniel Pollock Prize in 1995 and Boston Book Review's Bingham Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award. The New York Times Book Review chose this poetry collection as its "Notable Book of the Year." In 1996, after the book's publication, she received a Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Writing Award.

In 1998 McHugh received the Folger Library's O.B. Hardison Prize for a poet who excels in teaching. In 1999 she was elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and received the PEN/Voelker Award. During this year, her

poetry was anthologized in The New Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry. McHugh also began to serve as a judge for numerous poetry competitions, including the National Poetry Series and the Laughlin Prize. She was a member of the Board of Directors for the Associated Writing Programs between 1981 and 1983. She served on the Literature Panel for the National Endowment for the Arts during 1983 and 1986. In 1991, she was the Coal-Royalty Chair at the University of Alabama. In 1992, McHugh was the Elliston Poet at the University of Cincinnati. In 1991, she was the visiting professor at the University of Iowa and, in 1994, at the University of California at Los Angeles.

She takes editing collections of younger poets seriously, and helped to select poems for Hammer and Blaze: a Gathering of Contemporary American Poets (2001), published by the University of Georgia Press, which she co-edited. About her job guest editing Ploughshares in Spring 2001, McHugh writes, "The sheer syntactical elegance of many of these new poems suggests an instrumental refinement for which I'm grateful: I'm an old <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/richard-wilbur/">Richard Wilbur</a> /<a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/anthony-evan-hecht/">Anthony Hecht</a> fan, and have had reason now and then to regret, during my quarter century of teaching in M.F.A. programs, the relative unfashionability of rhetorical flourish."

At the end of 2001, McHugh's sixth collection of poetry, The Father of the Predicaments, was published by the Wesleyan University Press. That same year, McHugh, with Nikolai Popov, received the first International Griffin Poetry Prize in translation for Glottal Stop: 101 Poems by Paul Celan. Her next poetry collection, Eyeshot, was published in (2003), and her latest collection, Upgraded to Serious, was released in 2009. McHugh is a judge for the 2012 Griffin Poetry Prize.

#### Awards and honors

Two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts  
Griffin Poetry Prize  
Fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation  
Milliman Distinguished Writer-in-Residence, University of Washington  
Finalist for the National Book Award  
Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize  
Witter Bynner Fellowship  
PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry  
O. B. Hardison, Jr. Poetry Prize  
MacArthur Fellowship

#### Works:

##### Poetry collections

Dangers (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1977)  
A World of Difference (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981)  
To the Quick (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987)  
Shades (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988)  
Hinge & Sign: Poems 1968-1993 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994)  
The Father of the Predicaments (Middletown Wesleyan University Press, 1999)  
Eyeshot (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003)  
Upgraded to Serious (Copper Canyon Press, 2009)

##### Editor

The Best American Poetry 2007, Guest editor (2007)

##### Essays

Broken English: Poetry and Partiality (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1992)

## Translations

D'Apres Tout—Poems by Jean Follain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981)  
Because the Sea is Black: Poems by Blaga Dimitrova, by McHugh and Nikolai Popov, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989)  
107 Poems by Paul Celan, by McHugh and Popov (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000)  
Euripides: Cyclops, by McHugh and David Konstan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)

## **After Su Tung P'o**

### ON THE BIRTH OF A SON

When a child is born, the parents say  
they hope it's healthy and intelligent. But as for me—

well, vigor and intelligence have wrecked my life. I pray  
this baby we are seeing walloped, wiped and winningly anointed,

turns out dumb as oakum—and more sinister. That way  
he can crown a tranquil life by being

appointed a cabinet minister.

Heather McHugh

## Amenities

I owe you an explanation.  
My first memory isn't your own  
of an empty box. My babyhood cabinets held  
a countlessness of cakes, my backyard  
rotted into apple glut, windfalls of  
money-tree, mouthfuls of fib.

At puberty I liked the locks,  
I was the one who made them fast.  
The yelling in our hallways was about  
lost money, or lost love, but not  
lost life. Or so I see it now:  
in those days I romanticized  
a risk (I thought I'd die  
in the alcoholic automobile, die  
at the hands of nerveless dentistry). Small hearts  
were printed in the checkbook; when my parents called me  
dear, they meant expensive.

Where were you in all that time? Out looking for  
your father's body? Making for your mother's room?  
I got my A's in English, civics,  
sweetness and light; you got black eyes, and F's,  
and nowhere fast. By 1967 when we met  
(if you could call it making an acquaintance,  
rape) I was a mal-adjusted gush, a sucker for  
placebos. Walking home from Central Square, I came to have  
the good girl's petty dread: the woman

to whose yard you dragged me might  
detect us, and be furious. More than anything else  
I wanted no one mad at me. (Propriety,  
or was it property, I thought  
to guard: myself I gave away.)

And as for you, you had the shakes,  
were barely seventeen yourself, too raw  
to get it up (I said don't be afraid,  
afraid of what might happen if you failed).  
And afterwards, in one of those moments  
it's hard to tell (funny from fatal) you did  
a terrible civility: you told me

thanks. I'll never forget  
that moment all my life.  
It wasn't until then, as you  
were sheathing it to run,

I saw the knife.

Heather McHugh

## Better or Worse

I.

Daily, the kindergarteners  
passed my porch. I loved  
their likeness and variety,  
their selves in line like little  
monosyllables, but huggable—  
I wasn't meant

to grab them, ever,  
up into actual besmooches or down  
into grubbiest tumbles, my lot was not  
to have them, in the flesh.  
Was it better or worse to let  
their lovability go by untouched, and just  
watch over their river of ever-  
inbraiding relations? I wouldn't  
mother them or teach. We couldn't be  
each other's others; maybe,  
at removes, each other's each.

II.

Each toddler had a hand-hold on  
a loop of rope, designed to haul  
the whole school onward  
in the sidewalk stream—  
like pickerel through freshets,  
at the pull of something else's will, the children  
spun and bobbed, three years old and four  
(or were they little drunken Buddhas,  
buoyant, plump?). They looked  
now to the right, now to the sky, and now  
toward nothing (nothing was too small)—  
they followed a thread of destination,  
chain of command, order of actual rope that led

to what? Who knew?

For here and now in one child's eye there was a yellow truck,  
and in another's was a burning star; but from my own perspective,  
overhead, adult, where trucks and suns had lost their luster,  
they were one whole baby-rush toward  
a target, toward the law  
of targets, fledge  
in the wake of an arrowhead;

a bull's-eye bloomed, a red  
eight-sided sign. What  
did I wish them?  
Nothing I foresaw.

Heather McHugh

## Constructive

You take a rock, your hand is hard.  
You raise your eyes, and there's a pair  
of small beloveds, caught in pails.  
The monocle and eyepatch correspond.

You take a glove, your hand is soft.  
The ocean floor was done  
in lizardskin. Around a log or snag  
the surface currents run

like lumber about a knot. A boat  
is bent to sea—we favor the medium  
we're in, our shape's  
around us. It takes time.

At night, the bed alive, what  
teller of truth could tell  
the two apart? Lover, beloved,  
hope is command. Your hand

is given, when you take a hand.

Heather McHugh

## **Dark View**

The sun that puts its spokes in every  
Wheel of manhandle and tree

Derives its path of seashines  
(Sheer centrifugality) from my

Regards. I send it  
My regards. Some yards

Of lumen from the fabrika  
Have come unbolted from the look

Of it (or likes of me), a long  
Unweaving or recarding I

Cannot recall begun, and there  
Before my eyes a palm

Puts lashes round the sun.

Heather McHugh

## Debtor's Prison Road

I.

They let me go  
at night, minus my timepiece, lighter,  
personal effects. The air is always shaking  
the same jars of safety pins: cicadas.  
Song is my recidivism: always  
I'm abandoning the road to stand  
(unwatched, unseconded) in someone's  
field. The stars (that are not mine)

tick fitfully, they always have  
appointments. Punctual, six-sharp,  
they are David's; they have lodged in his  
death tent, have stuck in his mud sleep. Bad luck

leaves me a loan: no company, no katy-  
did or promissory  
note or night  
can last.  
The air  
loses its nerve,  
the old saw its eyeteeth and I  
my words—my alwaysing and my.

II.

In hush the repossessioners reach  
the edges of the field. They pass

for shadows, sheep of ambush, animals of  
permanence. They turn a black beyond returning

and they haunt the sleepless. I don't count,  
who cannot earn my keep.

Heather McHugh

## **Elevated**

Fifty years the butcher shop  
has hung these animals on hooks  
to cure. The stationery store  
dispenses the same old news,  
same change, a little less silver;  
ladies in a beauty shop desire  
the perfect permanent.  
Mornings this bright  
cast the deepest shade;  
everything seems to come  
from memory. The subway's elevated.

Down the block toward the river Bronx  
each yard has a chain-link fence, a dog  
attracted to the random noise.  
The woman no one knows is dead is still  
in the chair by the bedroom plant.  
Stripes advance from the blind  
to her lap, slower than the human  
eye can see. Above the accidents  
of traffic you can hear  
her clock and clean refrigerator hum.

Heather McHugh

## **Etymological Dirge**

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear.

Calm comes from burning.  
Tall comes from fast.  
Comely doesn't come from come.  
Person comes from mask.

The kin of charity is whore,  
the root of charity is dear.  
Incentive has its source in song  
and winning in the sufferer.

Afford yourself what you can carry out.  
A coward and a coda share a word.  
We get our ugliness from fear.  
We get our danger from the lord.

Heather McHugh

## **From the Tower**

Insanity is not a want of reason.  
It is reason's overgrowth, a calculating kudzu.

Explaining why, in two-ton manifesti, thinkers sally forth  
with testaments and pipe bombs. Heaven help us:

spare us all your meaningful designs. Shine down or  
shower forth, but (for the earthling's sake) ignore  
all prayers followed by against, or for. Teach us to bear

life's senselessness, our insignificance, and more;  
let's call that sanity. The terrifying prospect isn't some  
escapist with old-fangled novels, fond of comfort, munching sweets—

it is the busy hermeneut, so serious  
he's sour, intent on making  
meaning of us all, and bursting  
from the tower to the street.

Heather McHugh

## **Ghazal of the Better-Unbegun**

Too volatile, am I? too voluble? too much a word-person?  
I blame the soup: I'm a primordially  
stirred person.

Two pronouns and a vehicle was Icarus with wings.  
The apparatus of his selves made an ab-  
surd person.

The sound I make is sympathy's: sad dogs are tied afar.  
But howling I become an ever more un-  
heard person.

I need a hundred more of you to make a likelihood.  
The mirror's not convincing-- that at-best in-  
ferred person.

As time's revealing gets revolting, I start looking out.  
Look in and what you see is one unholy  
blurred person.

The only cure for birth one doesn't love to contemplate.  
Better to be an unsung song, an unoc-  
curred person.

McHugh, you'll be the death of me -- each self and second studied!  
Addressing you like this, I'm halfway to the  
third person.

Heather McHugh

## Ghoti

The gh comes from rough, the o from women's,  
and the ti from unmentionables--presto:  
there's the perfect English instance of  
unlovability--complete

with fish. Our wish was for a better  
revelation: for a correspondence--  
if not lexical, at least  
phonetic; if not with Madonna

then at least with Mary Magdalene.  
Instead we get the sheer  
opacity of things: an accident  
of incident, a tracery of history: the dung

inside the dungarees, the jock strap for a codpiece, and  
the ruined patches bordering the lip. One boot (high-heeled) could make  
Sorrento sorry, Capri corny, even little Italy  
a little ill. Low-cased, a lover looks

one over--eggs without ease, semen without oars--  
and there, on board, tricked out in fur and fin,  
the landlubber who wound up captain. Where's it going,  
this our (H)MS? More west? More forth? The quest

itself is at a long and short behest: it's wound  
in winds. (Take rough from seas, and women from the shore,  
unmentionables out of mind). We're here  
for something rich, beyond

appearances. What do I mean? (What can one say?)  
A minute of millenium, unculminating  
stint, a stonishment: my god, what's  
utterable? Gargah, gatto, goat. Us animals is made

to seine and trawl and drag and gaff  
our way across the earth. The earth, it rolls.  
We dig, lay lines, book arguably  
perfect passages. But earth remains untranslated,

unplumbed. A million herring run where we  
catch here a freckle, there a pock; the depths to which things live  
words only glint at. Terns in flight work up  
what fond minds might

call syntax. As for that  
semantic antic in the distance, is it  
whiskered fish, finned cat? Don't settle  
just for two. Some bottomographies are

brooded over, and some skies swum through.. .

Heather McHugh

## **Glass House**

Everything obeyed our laws and  
we just went on self-improving  
till a window gave us pause and  
there the outside world was, moving.

Five apartment blocks swept by,  
the trees and ironwork and headstones  
of the next town's cemetery.  
Auto lots. Golf courses. Rest homes.  
Blue-green fields and perishable vistas  
wars had underscored in red  
were sweeping past,  
with cloudscapes, just

as if the living room were dead.  
Which way to look? Nonnegative?  
Nonplussed? (Unkilled? Unkissed?)  
Look out, you said; the sight's on us:

If we don't move, we can't be missed.

Heather McHugh

## Half Border, Half Lab

Customs and chemistry  
made a name for themselves  
and it was Spot. He's gone to some  
utopos now, the dirty dog, doctor of  
crotches, digger of holes. Your airy clarities be damned,  
he loved our must and our mistakes—why hit him, then,  
who did us good? He's dead, he ought  
to be at home. He's damned  
put out, and so am I.

\* \* \*

When blue is carried out, the law is red.  
When noon is said and done, it's dusk again.  
The greed for table makes the greed for bed.  
So cave canem, even stars have litters—little  
lookers, cacklers, killers . . . Morning raises up  
the hackled men. (What's  
milk, among our ilk, but  
opportunity for spillers?)

\* \* \*

He saved our sorry  
highfalutin souls—the heavens haven't saved a fly. Orion's  
canniness who can condone?—that starring story, strapping blade!—□  
and Sirius is just a Fido joke—no laughter shakes the firmament.  
But O the family dog, the Buddha-dog—son of a bitch!  
he had a funny bone—

Heather McHugh

## **In Praise of Pain**

A brilliance takes up residence in flaws—  
a brilliance all the unchipped faces of design  
refuse. The wine collects its starlets  
at a lip's fault, sunlight where the nicked  
glass angles, and affection where the eye  
is least correctable, where arrows of  
unquivered light are lodged, where someone  
else's eyes have come to be concerned.

For beauty's sake, assault and drive and burn  
the devil from the simply perfect sun.  
Demand a birthmark on the skin of love,  
a tremble in the touch, in come a cry,  
and let the silverware of nights be flecked,  
the moon pocked to distribute more or less  
indwelling alloys of its dim and shine  
by nip and tuck, by chance's dance of laws.

The brightness drawn and quartered on a sheet,  
the moment cracked upon a bed, will last  
as if you soldered them with moon and flux.  
And break the bottle of the eye to see  
what lights are spun of accident and glass.

Heather McHugh

## **Inside**

In the field is a house  
of wood. A window of the house  
contains the field.

You can't see far  
with a sun in the sky,  
with a living-room lamp

at night. Locality is all  
you light, and you, as single  
as a bed. But there's

no end to dark. The bed is in the clearing  
and the clearing's in the wind; the world  
is a world among others. Now your cell-stars split.

Heather McHugh

## LEAF LITTER ON ROCK FACE

Things are not  
unmoving (or else what

is ing inside them for?)  
The things once-living

fall on the never-living all  
the more movingly for the eye

that passes over them.  
The wind wells up

to spill a trail  
of onces off the nevers,

take opaque from eye  
to mind, or near it—

every rocking takes  
some leaving to

a stonish spirit.

Heather McHugh

## **Man in the Street or Hand Over Mouth**

He claps a hand  
Across the gaping hole—

Or else the sight might  
Well inside to

Melt the mind—if any  
Thinking spoke

Were in the wheel,  
Or any real

Fright-fragments broke  
Out of the gorge to

Soak the breast, the meaning  
Might incite a stroke—best

Press against it, close  
The clawhole, stand

In stupor, petrified. The dream  
Be damned, the deeps defied.

The hand's to keep  
The scream inside.

Heather McHugh

## **Myrrha to the Source**

O fluent one, o muscle full of hydrogen,  
o stuff of grief, whom the Greeks  
accuse of spoiling souls,

whose destiny is downward,  
whose reflecting's up—I think  
I must have come from you.

Just one more cup.

Heather McHugh

## Nano-Knowledge

There, a little right  
of Ursus Major, is  
the Milky Way:  
a man can point it out,  
the biggest billionfold of all  
predicaments he's in:  
his planet's street address.

What gives? What looks  
a stripe a hundred million  
miles away from here

is where we live.

\*

Let's keep it clear. The Northern Lights  
are not the North Star. Being but  
a blur, they cannot reassure us.  
They keep moving - I think far  
too easily. September spills

some glimmers of  
the boreals to come:  
they're modest pools  
of horizontal haze, where later

they'll appear as foldings in the vertical,  
a work of curtains, throbbing dim  
or bright. (One wonders at  
one's eyes.) The very sight  
will angle off in glances or in shoots  
of something brilliant, something

bigger than we know, its hints uncatchable  
in shifts of mind ... So there

it is again, the mind, with its  
old bluster, its self-centered  
question: what

is dimming, what is bright?  
The spirit sinks and swells, which cannot tell  
itself from any little luster.

Heather McHugh

## **No Sex for Priests**

The horse in harness suffers;  
he's not feeling up to snuff.  
The feeler's sensate but the cook  
pronounces lobsters tough.  
The chain's too short: The dog's at pains  
to reach a sheaf of shade. One half a squirrel's whirling there  
upon the interstate. That rough around  
the monkey's eye is cancer. Only God's  
impervious—he's deaf and blind. But he's  
not dumb: to answer for it all, his spokesmen  
aren't allowed to come.

Heather McHugh

## Not Over it

In sympathy with Gaspara Stampa

By woman so touched, so pressed,  
detachment being thought  
achievable at all

is boggling in itself. Its being  
thought achievable by love—but love  
for only all (not someone's single) sentience—

appears the precept of too cold  
a form of flame. How much  
of a hand in things

relinquishes the hold  
of things-at-hand?  
What kiss might such

a mind reclaim? A swirl of dust  
in Buddhist schools, perhaps.  
A view of several solar

systems from above.  
Not love.  
The thought

appeals as it appals:  
Slow learners, we must spurn  
the selving sensualities, to feel

for feelers of this kind,  
unfasten passion's burner  
to identify what's under it—

in short, must court  
dispassion just  
to be compassionate.

Heather McHugh

## **Not to be Dwelled on**

Self-interest cropped up even there,  
the day I hoisted three instead of the  
called-for two  
spadefuls of loam onto  
the coffin of my friend.

Why shovel more than anybody else?  
What did I think I'd prove? More love  
(mud in her eye)? More will to work  
(her father what, a shirker?) Christ,  
I'd give an arm or leg  
to get that spoonful back.

She cannot die again; and I  
do nothing but relive.

Heather McHugh

## **Philosopher Orders Crispy Pork**

I love him so, this creature I pray  
was treated kindly. I will pay  
as much as pig-lovers see fit

to guarantee him that. As for his fat,  
I'd give up years yes years of my  
own life for such

a gulpable semblable.  
(My life! Such as it is! This  
liberality of leaves! The world

won't need those seventeen more  
poems, after all, there being  
so few subjects to be treated. Three

if by subject we mean anyone  
submitted to another's  
will. Two if by subject we mean

topic. One if by death we wind up  
meaning love. And none if a subject  
must entail

the curlicue's indulgence of itself.)

Heather McHugh

## **Remains to be Seen**

We dress the boy in an orange cap  
and show him how the gun is held.  
He looks at his hand.

He likes five women, one in black  
and one in yellow, whitey,  
pinky, and the naked one.

In all his stories he loses his heart.  
We do not tell him that the truth  
is just the future, that he's born

to die, and the love of the lovely  
can kill. But we believe it;  
he is beautiful, and at the movies

he is what we watch. His eyes  
are fixed, his hair still  
smoking; his whole face is blue.

Heather McHugh

## **Space Bar**

Lined up behind the space bartender  
is the meaning of it all, the vessels  
marked with letters, numbers,  
signs. Beyond the flats

the monitor looms, for all the world  
like the world. Images and  
motions, weeping women,  
men in hats. I have killed

many happy hours here,  
with my bare hands,  
where TV passes for IV, among  
the space cadets and dingbats.

Heather McHugh

## Stroke

The literate are ill-prepared for this  
snap in the line of life:  
the day turns a trick  
of twisted tongues and is  
untiable, the month by no mere root  
moon-ridden, and the yearly eloquences yielding more  
than summer's part of speech times four. We better learn

the buried meaning in the grave: here  
all we see of its alphabet is tracks  
of predators, all we know of its tense  
the slow seconds and quick centuries  
of sex. Unletter the past and then  
the future comes to terms. One late fall day  
I stumbled from the study and I found  
the easy symbols of the living room revised:

my shocked senses flocked to the window's reference  
where now all backyard attitudes were deep  
in memory: the landscapes I had known too well-  
the picnic table and the hoe, the tricycle, the stubborn  
shrub-the homegrown syllables  
of shapely living-all

lay sanded and camelled by foreign snow...

Heather McHugh

## **The Father of the Predicaments**

He came at night to each of us asleep  
And trained us in the virtues we most lacked.  
Me he admonished to return his stare  
Correctly, without fear. Unless I could,  
Unblinking, more and more incline  
Toward a deep unblinkingness of his,  
He would not let me rest. Outside  
In the dark of the world, at the foot  
Of the library steps, there lurked  
A Mercury of rust, its cab half-lit.  
(Two worldly forms who huddled there  
Knew what they meant. I had no business

With the things they knew. Nor did I feel myself  
Drawn back through Circulation into Reference,  
Until I saw how blue I had become, by virtue  
Of its five TVs, their monitors abuzz with is's

Etymologies...)

Heather McHugh

## **The Oven loves the TV Set**

Stuck on the fridge, our favorite pin-up girl  
is anorexic. On the radio we have a riff  
of Muzak sax, and on the mind  
a self-help book. We sprawl all evening, all  
alone, in the unraised ranch;  
all day the company we kept  
kept on incorporating. As for the world  
of poverty, we did our best, thanks  
to a fund of Christian feeling  
and mementos from  
Amelia, the foster child, who has  
the rags and seven photogenic sisters we prefer  
in someone to be saved. She's proof  
Americans have got a heart  
to go with all that happy  
acumen you read about. We're known to love  
a million little prettinesses,  
decency, and ribbons on  
the cockapoo. (But who  
will study alphabets for hands? Who gives  
a damn what patience goes into  
a good wheelchair? Who lugs the rice  
from its umpteen stores  
to the ends of the earth, to even  
one dead-end? Not we.)  
Our constitutional pursuit  
is happiness, i.e.  
somebody nice, and not  
too fat, we can have  
for our personal friend.

Heather McHugh

## The Woman who Laughed on Calvary

I.

Smilers, smirkers, chucklers, grinners,  
platitudinizers, euphemists: it wasn't you

I emulated there, in that  
Godawful place. What kind  
of face

to put on it? How simple  
is a simon's sign? To my mind  
laughter's not the mark of pleasure, not  
a pleasantry that spread; instead

it's intimate with sheer  
delirium: spilt brain  
on split lip, uncontainable  
interiority—  
(make no mistake, it is a horror, this

inmated, intimated  
self, revealed as your  
material: red smear,  
white swipe). It's said the brain  
stinks first, then organworks of art and eatery,  
and then—what's left? a little cartilage for

ambiguity? a little tendon's B&D? At last, the least  
ephemeral of evidences: nuggetworks (discrete, and  
indiscreet) of teeth, bone-bits, odd scraps  
of a delapidated strut—and this is just  
the sort of stuff, insensate,  
to which life (which comes again

as slime) has always  
loved adhering. Life! Who wouldn't  
laugh? Your inner life! Your pet  
pretense! It can't be kept up, can't  
be kept clean,  
even in a thought,  
except a good  
bloodworks or shitpump keeps it so.

II.

Out of the mouth comes a tongue,  
it calls itself linguistic and it  
never quite effects  
the cover-up (good  
Lord, there's much to  
cover up: so many belches, outcries,  
upchucks, sneezes, puffings, hiccups, osculations, hawks and

coughs)—

so laughter (which, among the noises, prides itself  
on being the most intellectual) can't help  
but come out, snorting. Nothing

smiled or mild or meanwhiling—a laugh's  
got teeth to send it off,  
and spit to keep it company, and rot  
to end up with. Its closest kin is grimace, it's  
a grimacing with wind.  
It will (the will  
be damned)  
burst out

in bad cacophonies of  
brouhaha and borborygma—it's the  
stockbroker of mockeries, a trachea rake—  
the vent of rage and irony, and right  
there in the very  
shrine of signs. A laugh, I mean,  
is sorrow's

archery and signature,  
while flesh is being  
hoisted and arrayed

on roosts of skeleton.

III.

I saw what good

comes to; I saw the figure  
human being cuts, upon its frame.  
The laugh was a cry from my own

perscrewed, misnailed, cross-crafted  
armature. Despite

your consternations, oh you  
meekened warners and polite  
conventioners, the thieves were better  
served upon that day. For the heart

is a muscle, where cruelty's humored.  
The tooth of moral rectitude's  
a fang. What I gave

at the sight of him there

was up. What I got

of humanity there  
was the hang . . .

Heather McHugh

## **U-District Incident Report**

Apparently they want your body parts. They frisk you for  
Your handset, earbud, bluetooth, cellphone, iPad, thumb drive, memory stick  
And laptop. You won't need any of it soon. Give them  
The finger too.

Heather McHugh

## What He Thought

We were supposed to do a job in Italy  
and, full of our feeling for  
ourselves (our sense of being  
Poets from America) we went  
from Rome to Fano, met  
the Mayor, mulled a couple  
matters over. The Italian literati seemed  
bewildered by the language of America: they asked us  
what does "flat drink" mean? and the mysterious  
"cheap date" (no explanation lessened  
this one's mystery). Among Italian writers we

could recognize our counterparts: the academic,  
the apologist, the arrogant, the amorous,  
the brazen and the glib. And there was one  
administrator (The Conservative), in suit  
of regulation gray, who like a good tour guide  
with measured pace and uninflected tone  
narrated sights and histories  
the hired van hauled us past.  
Of all he was most politic--  
and least poetic-- so  
it seemed. Our last  
few days in Rome  
I found a book of poems this  
unprepossessing one had written: it was there  
in the pensione room (a room he'd recommended)  
where it must have been abandoned by  
the German visitor (was there a bus of them?) to whom  
he had inscribed and dated it a month before. I couldn't  
read Italian either, so I put the book  
back in the wardrobe's dark. We last Americans

were due to leave  
tomorrow. For our parting evening then  
our host chose something in a family restaurant,  
and there we sat and chatted, sat and chewed, till,  
sensible it was our last big chance to be Poetic, make  
our mark, one of us asked

"What's poetry?  
Is it the fruits and vegetables  
and marketplace at Campo dei Fiori

or the statue there?" Because I was  
the glib one, I identified the answer  
instantly, I didn't have to think-- "The truth  
is both, it's both!" I blurted out. But that  
was easy. That was easiest  
to say. What followed taught me something  
about difficulty,

for our underestimated host spoke out  
all of a sudden, with a rising passion, and he said:

The statue represents  
Giordano Bruno, brought  
to be burned in the public square  
because of his offence against authority, which was to say  
the Church. His crime was his belief  
the universe does not revolve around  
the human being: God is no  
fixed point or central government  
but rather is poured in waves, through  
all things: all things  
move. "If God is not the soul itself,  
he is the soul OF THE SOUL of the world." Such was  
his heresy. The day they brought him forth to die

they feared he might incite the crowd (the man  
was famous for his eloquence). And so his captors  
placed upon his face  
an iron mask  
in which he could not speak.

That is how they burned him.  
That is how he died,  
without a word,  
in front of everyone. And poetry--

(we'd all put down our forks by now, to listen to  
the man in gray; he went on softly)-- poetry

is what he thought, but did not say.

Heather McHugh

## **With Due Respect To Thor**

The dog has shrunk between the brake and clutch. His shaking shakes a two-ton truck.  
From a God

Heather McHugh