

## Work Cited

Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Gen. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 2038-56.

## The Music of Leaving: Poems

Tricia McCallum.  
Bradford, Ontario: Demeter Press, 2014.

REVIEWED BY ELIZABETH CUMMINS MUÑOZ

In *The Music of Leaving*, Tricia McCallum reminds us: "We are granted a finite amount / of absolutely / everything. / Listen for the unspoken." In this slim collection of poems that explore the tender losses of everyday life, the seasoned poet lays out a lifetime of listening for the unspoken and living in full awareness of the meaning of the moment. Throughout *The Music of Leaving*, McCallum's images and narratives bloom like wildflowers, untamed and fire-struck and destined to fade. Nuns dance alone in the afternoon light of an empty schoolroom, falcons perch fierce with sinew and flesh tucked into their talons, and empty swing sets tell the story of an absence forever present. McCallum's poetic wisdom shines in the transience of these images as she uses the nostalgia of felt remembering to reveal the true meaning of the lives she recounts. In these poems, to remember is to feel what remains of the past—a lover's gesture, a confrontation, an image captured by chance. In the poet's direct, intimate language, the feelings that remain are the essence of the thing itself, the music of leaving.

The first of the slim collection's three sections, "Everyone's Gone to the Moon," explores this music through the quotidian observations and mundane intimacies of the world outside our front door. In many of these poems, poetic exploration is a means of getting at the truth of a memory, regardless of its circumstance. The moments worth remembering are fleeting and only acquire substance in the nostalgic act. Hence, what is true and real of a sister's childhood love is contained in one moment on a brilliant July day, or in an "us" that persists in a cascade of summer images. "The Trouble with Science" calls out the truth of memory and meaning, explaining that "science falls short. It overlooks / the power of the human heart / which has a memory all its own, /... undefiled by time / or faulty synapse" (44). This poem and others

in the second section, “Impossible Gardens,” explore the longing inherent in remembering. If nostalgia is memory injected with longing and loss, some of the most poignant poems in this collection are those that intimate the quiet presence of absence: an empty slide “one year later,” an uprooted tree alone, a lonely woman’s broken shoes, or an island dog waiting for a forever home.

In the best of these poems, the elegant intimacy of the poetic voice earns our confidence and we believe fully in the truth of the memory. Through clear raw language and an aching vulnerability, McCallum’s verses bypass the traps of synapse and cynicism and get to the quick of emotion and sensation. Thematically, she exposes the deep wounds that may resonate with us all—the sleepover invitation we never got, the dance we showed up to in the wrong dress, the gripping insecurity of failure. This vulnerability becomes poignant in three poems exploring the loss of a child, the last of which reminds us, “We can never take enough care” (47).

In the last section, “Her Own Blues,” McCallum’s exploration of loss and personal pain take on an existential tone and a more explicit interaction with form. Several poems explore poetry’s unique capacity to communicate beyond words. In “How I Lose You,” the sensation of emotional gravity is enhanced when the pain of intimacy lost is called out in two quiet adverbs:

The way you get into bed at night,  
carefully.  
The way you ask if I want anything,  
politely. (88)

In “Legacy,” this awareness of the power of poetic form converges with the collection’s underlying exploration of the meaning of what is left behind, so that when the poet laments her inability to give her dying mother a poetic legacy, the mother reminds her, “*You are my poem / ... pausing between each word*” (92). In *The Music of Leaving*, then, poetry is not only a means through which to access the felt truth of what has been loss, but it also becomes that truth itself.