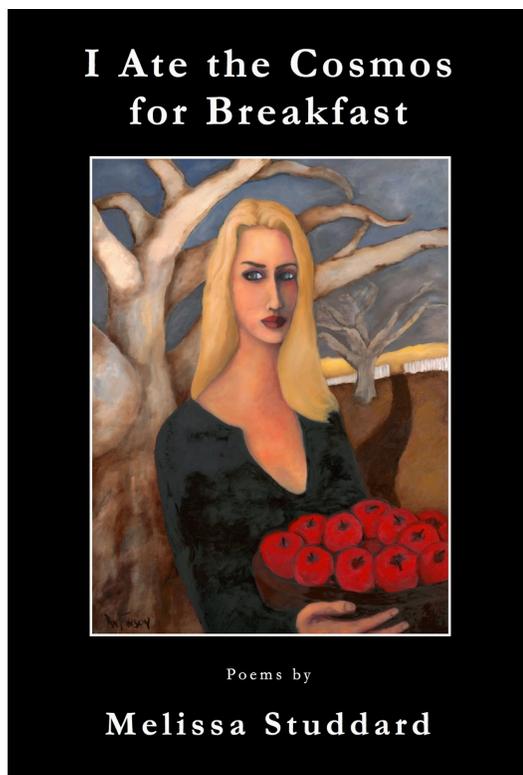


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A Review of  
*I Ate the Cosmos for Breakfast*



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A Kind of Deliciousness:  
Review of *I Ate the Cosmos for Breakfast* by Melissa Studdard

By Adele Kenny

Every now and then we have the delight of discovering a book that is completely unique and unexpected. From the cover image, a face that is hauntingly like the poet's (though not the poet's) to poem after poem graced with perfect syntax and rhythmic modulation, this collection by Melissa Studdard amazes with its rich content and the striking imagery.

What you mistook for a person  
is really a country  
with a dark and sacred history  
and no scholars to explain away the confusion.  
Just burn the archives down.  
Everything we have to know  
we learned from a picture of dreaming.  
Everything we need to remember  
can fit on a scrap of paper  
smaller than your hand. (5)

The tone is hungry and erotic, rich and filled with nuance and innuendo.

Sometimes  
I feel so hungry, so thirsty,  
I don't want to die.  
This desire to butter and eat the stars. (22)

These poems, which suggest the techniques of painting (and include some superb ekphrastic poems), are filled with references to the body and its hungers, its needs and satisfactions. There is a kind of metaphorical deliciousness that speaks to the reader's sense of what must be savored, as well as to the spiritual hungers we all experience.

Because the sun hangs in the sky like a small, folded hand,  
I count the brush strokes leading into evening. There are  
  
so many ways to bathe a night in darkness, to wrap the indigo  
of memory around a porch swing, to place a hound dog  
  
like a river of mercy at someone's feet. Because the dog's  
foot twitches when he is dreaming, I paint a chapel in the distance,  
  
and people spilling down a tulip-dotted hill. I paint  
their laughter, that forgiveness, into the flicker of a street lamp, (24)

These poems also contain elements of mystery or surprise—and Studdard leaves plenty of space for the reader to make personal connections and associations through wordless communication in the spaces between lines.

There are so many things you want  
to do. You're a bloom of bones  
and sacred blood. You're the one whose sleep  
throws itself into rivers  
waiting to be born,  
the one whose fear scales mountains  
when it could be picking locks.  
Inside you, there's a shipwreck  
and survivors  
swimming towards the shore.  
Inside you,  
a sleight of self  
still tries to open the doors. (27)

Studdard takes a risky plunge and succeeds because she dares to re-create the universe in her own terms—she “paints” a new picture of what we already know, takes on philosophical issues, speaks of God as a “trickster soul” and in the “feminine tense,” and engages the reader in a fresh look at the ordinary.

And in the other room—the clothes in the washer,  
round and round they went, a spinning universe,  
and next to them, a parallel world, the dryer,  
connected by the same outlet,  
humming away.  
This life is anything but ho-hum,  
with all this motion and noise.  
Hell, I can hardly hear over the buzz of my phone,  
which I have cursed for interference,  
which I have indignantly nicknamed,  
*that silver piece of shit*,  
which I have threatened to replace (like it cares),  
and which was really Om all along.  
Washing clothes, I've since learned, is an act of prayer. (28)

Studdard ramps up language's natural music with alliteration, assonance, consonance, and anaphora. Edgy and sometimes with a nod to the surreal, these poems are compressed and contain a lyrical quality in their movement away from the linear progression of narrative poetry.

Have some compassion.  
It's like a swamp in this desert.  
The caskets are at sea level  
and always rising. See—

there you go, floating by, mouth full  
of music and death.  
I guess this means they finally told you:  
You are the corpse in this off-key song.  
And my words are a pilgrimage  
bearing gifts. I brought you flowers.  
Is it too late? Are you hungry?  
I'm planting a casserole  
in the grass. (48)

These poems rest at the balance point of everyday life and the spiritual world. They are intensely focused poems of new life, rebirth, awareness, and realization.

... The Dogwood that fell—  
was it a fable? How the tree didn't understand endings?  
The rot and flourish? The procession  
of petal? The green dirge?  
I am that tree  
and something has burrowed inside my hollow.  
See how I love? Like a mother  
hosting the body that steals residence.  
Like a lover  
uprooted at the shore.  
I'll grab my mocking canoe and smartass  
oars and row. I'll lean my dead self to the ground  
and bloom. (58)

Studdard articulates the emotional and spiritual cornerstones of her life (cornerstones that many of us share in one way or another) to create a collection that is multidimensional and cohesive at the same time. Beginning with Studdard's dedication, "For Everyone Who Has Chosen Love Over Fear" to her last poem "The Soul is Swaddled in Body," there is a mystical quality in this collection—a sense of mystery, and a sense of the profoundly spiritual. Studdard's name is not new to poetry, and *I Ate the Cosmos for Breakfast* is a brilliant first collection of her work.