



Review: 'Working Life' speaks to poet Eileen Myles' desires and literary lineage

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Though avant-garde poetry can be confounding, the payoff often comes in the form of a patiently waiting metaphor that feels like a punch in the chest. For the celebrated Eileen Myles, who once said “a poem is a statement of desire,” the reckoning has been happening since a 1974 move from Boston to New York City.

Since then, Myles has written over two dozen books, including novels, a memoir, and the libretto for an opera. The poetry collection “Working Life” finds Myles seeking revelation among the bouncing rhythms of people’s lives.

At 268 brisk pages, the subject matter is less working-class, and more “a blossoming.” In a recent YouTube reading, Myles reported coming

“WORKING LIFE”
By Eileen Myles
Grove Atlantic (\$26)

“full circle.... Having not written this book before, but I felt like I wrote it again.”

As a poetry icon, activist and one-time write-in presidential candidate, Myles is comfortable with their poetic voice and honest in observation of the human condition. It feels apt that the poems deal with ex-lovers, the state of the world and dogs in sometimes dreamy ways. So, what is it that these poems want? To be heard and felt, mostly.

In “September 7,” a poem culled from a dream journal, Myles begins with what feels like a mic-dropper: “The vagina of my life/ is so stretched/ out, I thought / where am i.”

While the poem can’t sustain that kind of rawness for long, it does capture the anxieties of existing and trying to teach during a pandemic.

“I’m responsible, that it’s/ a class, it’s not/ a reading. I’m not/ in charge. I said/ over there. Think/ Think, give them a pur-/ pose, why did you/ come here tonight, tell/ me what you see,/ tell me who we are/ what we want.”

While the poem’s surreal quality heads in every direction, moments like these feel like the existential prodding that happens in any good creative writing class.

It’s also important to contextualize Myles’ poetic lineage. Upon arrival in New York City in 1974, they fell in with the influential St. Mark’s Poetry Project, growing friendships with notable poets like Alice Notley and James Schuyler, generational members of the New York School of Poets whose most famous alumnus remains the inimitable Frank O’ Hara.

In an interview with *The White Review*, Myles recounts coming across O’ Hara’s “Selected Poems,” and thought, “He sounded just like the city. It was this kind of gay man talking immediately, and I wanted to be in that.” They go on to say that avant-gardism “is really a pastiche of other kinds of speech ... a vernacular ... a cobbling together of sounds.” This linguistic approach continues to serve Myles well in personal yet fragmented ways.

In “Lucky Kittens,” the poet confronts the death of their mother in ways that feel unexpected and at arm’s length:

“A world/ without mother/ is a world/ without/ meat. I’m not crying/ I’m flying/ Honestly/ I took/ my mother’s tear/ from the/ corner/ of her/ eye.

It happened/ when she/ died.// I took/ it on my/ finger/ and I wiped/ it on/ my jeans.”

It’s both a poignant moment and one that’s shared without sentimentality, as readers get little context. And maybe that’s the point as Myles’ approach to poetry is less solemn and pointed than what reader’s expectations of contemporary poetry might be.

In “For Charles,” Myles gives thanks for friendship in a way that might make O’ Hara proud:

“Once in Wellfleet/ we were/ standing/ up to our/ waists/ in water/ Susan/ was there/ inside/ the house/ Emma/ too.// Felix I think/ wasn’t there/ anyhow/ I remember/ then/ I felt our friendship/ begin.”

It’s a poem of the moment, where the aesthetic is less a baroque celebration of relationships and more of a moment passing between two people. Although the reader often feels left out of the particulars, Myles, here and elsewhere, includes enough for the work to be earthbound.

And perhaps, among the challenging playfulness of “Working Life,” answers can be found in its twisting perspective and funky line breaks, like those in “April 15,” where Myles writes, “the last two/ lovers/ I would/ have to say// were not/ interested/ in who I/ am// But/ what am / I// That’s the / puzzle.”

Fred Shaw is the author of the poetry collection “Scraping Away” (CavanKerry Press).

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